RESISTANCE AMONG ALIENATED ADULT STUDENTS IN KOREA
NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY: A CULTURAL-HISTORICAL ACTIVITY
THEORY ANALYSIS OF CONTRADICTIONS IN DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION

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by
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ABSTRACT

Drawing from Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, this research analyzed the structural contradictions existing in the variety of educational activities and resistance among a group of alienated adult students in Korea National Open University (KNOU). Despite KNOU’s quantitative development in student number, the students’ resistance shed light on how the institution’s top-down, bureaucratic pedagogical system collided with individual expectations and needs. As a ramification of their resistance, the students critically reflected upon their social position and the social status of the institution. In particular, their critical viewpoints demonstrate the incompatible roles that the distance higher education institution plays in Korean society. That is, while KNOU contributes to extending higher education opportunities for those who have unmet educational needs, the value of the KNOU degree has not been socially acknowledged since there is little, if any, competition in the entrance process.

This study also documents how these contradictions were culturally and historically embedded in the participants’ distance higher education activities. Given the persistent contradictions and the students’ resistance, the research findings illuminate that KNOU’s current distance higher education system has not effectively facilitated the students’ learning. Its efficiency-oriented model inevitably entails a compromise between a competitive, quality curriculum and the efficient extension of audiences. To better accommodate those students’ learning needs, this study suggests, KNOU should recommit to the Open University’s original mission of providing quality higher education to broader audiences.
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Coming to the Question & Positionality

I begin this research with a reflection on my own experience with adult students in Korea National Open University (KNOU), a national distance higher education institution in South Korea. As a teaching and research assistant from the beginning of 2006 to the middle of 2008, I met a variety of adult learners in KNOU who were attending the institution with various motivations and for different purposes. During that time, my experiences included teaching face-to-face classes, consulting with the distance students regarding the educational and learning issues that they faced, and participating in student events and activities with other program faculty members. These experiences as a teacher, a mentor, and a consultant were invaluable learning opportunities for me as a prospective adult education scholar. I gained an in-depth understanding of the diversity of students’ needs, different levels of engagement in learning, and numerous learning characteristics.

My inquiries about adult learning were, however, not limited to the individual level. I became intrigued by the impact that social, cultural, and institutional forces have upon the learning and lives of adult students enrolled in distance education programs. Since KNOU is a national higher educational institution, learners undergo a host of systematic processes imposed by the institution and the national government. How KNOU students, as adult learners, respond to these external educational forces is not only a personal but also a socio-cultural and institutional matter. Even individual pre-
institutional experiences that affect their educational participation are inextricably cultural and historical in nature. These factors led me to focus my dissertation research on various sociological, cultural, and political processes and outcomes of adult learning in the particular case of KNOU.

This research on adult learning in KNOU is based on highly interdisciplinary approach, requiring a heterogeneous body of literature that draws from distance education, higher education, and adult education. In considering the centralized system of KNOU as a national adult and distance higher education institution, I have witnessed two general research discrepancies throughout my graduate study. First, even though it is necessary to study the socio-cultural and political issues that affect adult learning, the existing distance education literature does not fully develop the critical discourse on this topic. The major, if not exclusive, focus of distance education research has been primarily on the functionalist approach to the distance educational system (e.g., the effectiveness of the system and the success of individual learning) (e.g., Beldarrain, 2006; Desai, Hart & Richards, 2008). However, distance education as a social institution engenders critical issues such as power, class, and ideology that need to be investigated from an emancipatory standpoint. In addition, as technological development enables more and more governments to build distance higher educational institutions, these critical issues become even more salient.

Second, there has not been sufficient research on the complicated relationships between institutional forces and individual learning experiences in adult and distance
higher education\(^1\). As a result, barriers between the distance higher educational system and adult learners have remained under-explored, which stifles our understanding of how micro-level individual learning engages with meta-level social, cultural, and political circumstances. Since educational institutions cannot be detached from the underlying social value system, individual learning occurring in a specific institutional and socio-cultural circumstance must be also thoroughly investigated. These research disparities sparked my initial interest in demystifying the complicated relation between institutional forces and individual learning experiences among KNOU students.

Of the various aspects of adult learning in KNOU, my major concerns lie in societal alienation, cultural discrimination, and resistance in education. I think that a critical approach to adult education and learning in distance higher education can shed light on complex underlying assumptions and mechanisms that profoundly impact educational structure and individual learning. As the primary purpose of the Open University model is to extend higher education opportunities to those who were deprived of educational opportunities for not only personal but also social and cultural reasons (Caswell, Henson, Jensen, & Wiley, 2008), it is worthwhile to investigate the variety of impediments that prevented them from accessing higher education as traditional college and university students.

In order to closely and critically examine their lives, motivations, and learning

\(^1\) Zawachi-Richter, Bäcker & Vogt (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of the articles published in five prominent distance education journals and concluded that “distance education research is strongly dominated by issues related to instructional design and individual learning processes” (p. 21).
experiences in this centralized adult and distance higher educational context, I opted to study a specific group of KNOU students who attend the institution without any other previous higher education experiences. As I will argue, this group of KNOU students had undergone cultural coercion and social alienation that deprived them of higher education opportunities as young adults. Their experience of and alienation in education represent socio-cultural and ideological discrimination of the South Korean society in terms of higher education. Alienation, discrimination, and inequality have long been significant topics of critical education research.

My experience in KNOU is, in many ways, sharply opposed to prevalent adult education theories and principles such as self-directed learning (Brookfield, 2009; Caffarella, 1993; Knowles, 1975) and transformative learning (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1991), which extol shining processes and outcomes of adult education and their positive effects on adults’ lives. I problematized this romanticized view of adults’ lives and learning. Cunningham’s (1992) observations, which accused adult education of excluding the cultural experiences of marginalized people by inflicting upon them the dominant paradigm and ideology, aligns with my own concerns.

To address this problem, I develop a comprehensive conceptual framework to examine critical dimensions of adult learning such as educational oppression that often result in a pattern of resistance among KNOU students. This resistance is deeply rooted in, or tied to, educational paradigms prevailing in adult and distance higher education. In addition, students’ resistance may be explicit, but is more frequently implicit and latent,
which makes researching this issue more challenging. Two books written by prominent critical education theorists, Paul Willis’ (1977) *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* and Henry A. Giroux’s (2001) *Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition*, played a foundational role as the cornerstones for my inquiry. Even though these eye-opening works on resistance in education are based exclusively on children’s education in school, their profound approaches to resistance to mainstream educational structure motivated me to apply the concept of oppression and resistance in the adult and distance higher education setting.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to differentiate resistance in education among adult students from that of children in school. Although it is debatable whether or not we can identify general characteristics of adult learners (Grace, 1996; Knowles 1977, 1980; Tennant, 1986), it seems legitimate to demonstrate that adults in any educational settings have more rich and complex lives and educational experiences than children. This complexity in adults’ life experiences makes it even more difficult to relate them to resistance in education. Nevertheless, my argument is that congruent results from a socio-cultural analysis of one’s previous and current life and educational experiences can yield in-depth insight into how to critically examine the adult and distance higher education system of KNOU and adult learners’ educational experiences in this institution. A socio-culturally grounded theory of activity is likely to unravel the social, cultural, historical, and ideological complexity that adult learners’ resistance implies.

To this end, it is noteworthy that even if the participation of KNOU students was
mostly open and voluntary, as the mission of the institution is to extend the learning opportunities of adult populations, the experience of being in educational activities was not always positive. Given the variety of students and their learning characteristics, making a generalization in characterizing their learning is hardly justifiable. However, I found that many students in the institution were experiencing frustrating moments and difficulties in their learning and life. Many of the students were highly motivated but passive rather than self-directed. That is, they appeared to need and want a strong controlling system directing their learning paces and tasks (Moore, 1998). Paradoxically, they often expressed difficulty in adapting themselves to the requirements of KNOU programs and balancing their educational engagement and other obligations outside of the institution.

I am currently responsible for online engineering program development and coordination at a branch campus of Penn State University. My current job experience allows me to further ruminate on the social and cultural dimensions of educational resistance among distance learners in the context of higher education. Even if some common characteristics of distance learners in higher education exist between KNOU students and Penn State students, their learning experiences noticeably differ due to the social and cultural bases on which each institution and their programs are constituted. The focus of this research is not to compare those two distance education institutions. Instead, this research focuses on examining the various aspects and origins of adult learners’ resistance, which is, I think, a prerequisite for comparing different groups of
students in two or more institutions.

In addition, my personal experiences in two different distance education institutions constructed on differentiated cultural bases have led me to realize that contextual factors such as culture, social value, and ideology play a determinant part in the educational experiences of adult learners in distance higher education. This raises the need for a more comprehensive lens directed toward adults’ resistance in education. In other words, their resistance needs to be viewed at multiple levels involving socio-political and cultural as well as psychological standpoints at both individual and social levels. I will critically revisit the issue of resistance that I witnessed in my interaction with numerous adult students on a more theoretical and empirical basis.

**Background of the Study**

More and more nations around the world have established national lifelong or adult education systems, which are understood as a means to expand people’s learning opportunities and as effective human resource development (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009; Bengtsson, 2009; Eurydice European Unit, 2006; Field, 2000; Jakobi & Rusconi, 2009; Joo, 2012; Tight, 1998; Tomlinson, 2005; UNESCO, 2009, 2011). These educational systems entail a variety of national initiatives supported by national education policy, which not only impact the development of adult education institutions but also influence the learning and the lives of those who attend the institutions. It is likewise a worldwide phenomenon that adult education needs to be addressed at the state or national level. The expansion of interest and investment in adult education within
national education policy results in numerous adult education institutions established by the state or national government (OECD, 2005; UNESCO, 2011).

The expansion of centralized adult education throughout the world has become a significant agenda in internationally prominent non-governmental organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning produces a global report on adult learning and education based on one hundred fifty four national reports submitted by UNESCO member states on the state of adult learning and education (UNESCO, 2009, 2011). This report provides an overview of trends in adult learning and education worldwide, and it was used as a reference document for the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) held in Brazil in 2009.

One of the three major goals of CONFINTEA VI was “to review political momentum and commitment and to develop the tools for implementation in order to move from rhetoric to action” (UNESCO, 2010, p. 5). Some institutionalized forms of adult education, such as national training programs for adult educators and open universities, were part of the primary discussion agenda of the conference. CONFINTEA VI (UNESCO, 2010) shows that more and more countries have made advances in adult education and lifelong learning by means of national or international initiatives along with other educational policies and systems. The issue of centralization of adult and lifelong education increasingly manifests itself in international collaboration and comparative perspectives.
The centralization of adult education began in the middle of the twentieth century. As early as in 1968, Coombs (1968) points to the social demand for non-formal education as an extensive educational innovation. As both the practical and academic fields of adult education have prospered, the development of the field has resulted in a vast number of adult education or related programs in higher education institutions and widespread adult education theories and principles applied to these practical areas (Joo, 2012). More importantly, Bock (1976) notes that educational development, regardless of its level, is closely related to other institutions such as polity, social organization, and the economy. Adult education has started to be conceived of as a driving force that leads to educational and socio-economic development at both individual and societal levels (Bock, 1976; Finger & Asún, 2001; Griffin, 2011; Hinzen & Knoll, 2010; Pöggeler, 1990).

In contrast to the more outdated connotations of adult education, which largely refer to programs dealing with hobbies and living skills, many governments around the world have initiated national adult (or lifelong) education system, establishing adult education policies and institutions (Hinzen & Knoll, 2010; UNESCO, 2011). Education programs designed for centralized adult education are remarkably varied, encompassing vocational education and academic disciplinary courses that used to be considered curricula in traditional tertiary education institutions (Kasworm, 2012; Pratt, 1998). They also include conventional adult education programs outside the realm of formal education systems such as programs focusing on adult literacy and living skills. The centralization of adult education, likewise, is one of the most notable implications for the contemporary
discourse of adult education and lifelong learning (Hinzen & Knoll, 2010; Jarvis, 2007).

Among the variety of national adult education institutions, distance higher education institutions are designed specifically for adult populations who want to extend their final educational degree and/or to satisfy their own learning needs for self-fulfillment (Visser, 2012). Such institutions are characterized as expanding open educational opportunities for citizens to attend accredited educational services provided by means of innovative pedagogical technologies (Beldarrain, 2006; Visser, 2012). Globally, the technological development has resulted in the increased number of mega-universities² built upon the principle of open and distance education (Bates, 1997; Dhanarajan, 2001; Jung, 2005). On the list of largest universities by enrollment (http://en.wikipedia.org), open and distance higher education institutions around the world comprise all top thirty ranks except the state systems of higher education in the United States of America. Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley (2009) state that:

Distance education represents an area of enormous potential for higher education systems around the world struggling to meet the needs of growing and changing student populations. The distance learning landscape has been transformed by ICTs, allowing for real growth in numbers and types of providers, curriculum developers, modes of delivery and pedagogical innovations. It is extremely difficult to calculate the numbers of students engaged in distance education worldwide but the existence of nearly 24 mega-universities, a number of which boast over one million students, speaks to a quantitatively significant

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² The term "mega-university" was coined by John Daniel (1997) to refer to universities with more than 100,000 students (http://portal.unesco.org).
phenomenon (p. xviii).

Those institutions of open and distance higher education have a long-standing commitment to extend participation in higher education because their “fundamental values and strategic priorities” have not changed much since the foundation of the prototypical British Open University in 1969 (Cooper, 2010, p. 70).

All in all, the modern practice of distance higher education has not only transformed the traditional notion of higher education but also broadened the scope of formal educational services available to untypical learners. In particular, among the variety of institutional forms of distance higher education, the Open University (OU) model is regarded as the most pervasive institutional system in the world (Tait, 2008). Investigating adult students’ learning experiences in an open university allows us to better understand how adult education has developed, expanded, and transformed in the institutionally centralized realm of the national education system. At the same time, the roles of distance higher education, for individuals and for a society, can be understood by examining adult learners’ life and education experiences in an open university.

**The Case of South Korea**

KNOU, as a mega-university, has enabled many Korean citizens to participate in higher education both flexibly and conveniently (KNOU, 2011a; Yoon, 2006). Over 170,000 students attended KNOU in 2010, and 508,835 people had graduated from the

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3 Given the fact that the South Korean population is approximately 55,000,000 (www.kostat.go.kr), the number of KNOU graduates is significant.
institution as of 2010 (http://ide.knou.ac.kr). Despite the positive impact of KNOU on the extension of higher education opportunity and participation (Lee, 2001), KNOU education has varying meanings and values for different individual adult students. As KNOU is by no means an ideologically and socio-culturally neutral institution, the variety of meanings and values of KNOU education has something to do with not only individual learners’ motivations and characteristics but also the Korean culture of higher education (Lee, 2001).

Among the complex socio-cultural circumstances of KNOU, I paid particular attention to the negative social recognition of KNOU among Korean people (see page 47). That is, KNOU education has tended to be devalued by the majority of Korean people. Given the general law of scarcity, this socially negative perception of KNOU may be due to the lack of competition to enter the institution and the proliferation of KNOU degrees in Korean society. Despite the absence of specific evidence that proves, rejects, or reflects this speculative phenomenon, there are two notable Korean socio-cultural factors that may have aggravated the negative social understanding of KNOU. First, the higher education entrance rate among Korean high school graduates has drastically increased during the last couple of decades as indicated in Figure 1-1 (OECD, 2011).
As the rate of higher education has increased in Korea, the social function of KNOU is no longer just a second-chance institution in Korea (McIntosh & Woodley, 1974); rather, many college or university graduates participate in KNOU to fulfill their lifelong learning needs (Lee, 2001; Yoon, 2006). According to the Lifelong Education Act (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, n.d.), KNOU has started to be regarded as an institution for not only higher education but also lifelong education. Even if this transformed position of KNOU does not have an exclusively negative influence on its social value, the role that KNOU plays in educating those who were alienated from higher education has faded.

Second, Korea is notorious for being a credential-oriented society, which highly values the final educational degree of a person, as opposed to a meritocracy (Choi, 2009). Scholars have argued that one’s place with the Korean social structure is heavily
influenced by academic credentials, or, in other words, so-called credentialism⁴ (Choi, 2007; Kim, 2003; Kim, 2004). Such social and cultural views by Koreans regarding higher education exacerbate the social discrimination and prejudice toward people with lower educational degrees (Kim, 2004; Lee, 1997).

In this social context, the participation in inexpensive and open education of KNOU, as opposed to traditional higher education, is less valued in society. However, neither Korean nor international research on open and distance higher education has provided relevant evidence to support or dispute the phenomenon of social biases against open and distance higher education. Although a number of studies have sought to critically examine distance education and learning (e.g., Bullen, 1998; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2003; Saba, 2005), macro-level issues surrounding an open and distance higher education institution such as ideology, culture, and politics have been mostly unexplored.

**Statement of the Problem**

As institutionalized national school systems at primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels have generated numerous issues to be examined from critical perspectives (Freire, 1985, 1998; Giroux, 1981, 1997, 2001; Hartmann, 2010), centralized adult education such as KNOU education requires critical approaches. I specifically chose two sociological concepts - alienation and resistance - to investigate

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⁴ Credentialism is the perceived over-emphasis on academic credentials when assigning social status (Collins, 1979).
the complex relation between individual students’ experience of the KNOU system and the social and cultural mechanism of KNOU. Those critical topics have been frequently employed in order to illuminate educational inequality in the context of children education, which consequently brings about social reproduction through schooling (e.g., McGrew, 2011; Mills, 2008). Although alienation and resistance in education has been discussed and theorized across an extensive body of research and policy (e.g., Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Giroux, 1984, 2001; Moss & Osborn, 2010; Suh & Suh, 2007; Willis, 1977), the subjects remain almost exclusively at the primary and secondary education levels (see page 56 & 67). In other words, those critical inquiries have been marginalized in the research fields of adult, distance, and higher education. However, as in schooling, the social and cultural structure upon which KNOU education has been built and operates is critical to understanding individual adult students’ learning and lives. Conversely, by approaching alienation and resistance among a socially subordinated group of KNOU students, we can critically examine institutional roles that KNOU play in the society.

Giroux (2002) defines resistance in education as that which “represents a problematic governed by assumptions that shift the analysis of oppositional behavior from the theoretical terrains of functionalism and mainstream educational psychology to those of political analysis” (p. 107). Accordingly, when accounting for adult learners’ resistance, it is questionable to consider it just as an individual cognitive reaction, such as in Taut & Brauns (2003) and Wedege & Evans (2006). The current research attempts to
scrutinize resistance in line with the structural contradictions that resulted from the incongruence between subjective perceptions shaped throughout their lives and the KNOU system, which forces many students to engage in externally imposed institutional and educational activities. In particular, previous personal education experiences play a critical part in our understanding of these contradictions because educational opportunities and experiences are socially and culturally contingent (Giroux, 2005; Rizvi & Lingard, 2005), which means that how much and what type of education a student can afford depends on various socio-cultural factors such as social and economic status and cultural conventions.

In analyzing the alienated KNOU students’ resistance, this study draws from Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as its theoretical framework. Some of the most influential adult learning and education theories and concepts [e.g., Houle’s (1984) and Tough’s (1967, 1979) self-directed learning, Knowles’ (1968, 1973, 1977, 1978, 1980) andragogy, and Mezirow’s (1989, 1991, 1994, 2000) transformative or transformational learning theory] do not provide a legitimate conceptual lens through which to examine critical aspects of the alienated group’s life and learning experiences in this centralized adult higher education context. Adults’ learning in a distance higher education institution reveals patterns that frequently contrast with what aforementioned adult education theories assume (Sawchuk, 2003). By contrast, CHAT enables us to contextualize the specific group’s resistance by concretizing key educational activities and identifying structural contradictions in/between them (Engeström, 2001; Sawchuk, 2003, 2006).
Thus, as opposed to distance education research focusing mostly on the efficiency and usefulness of open and distance higher education, the phenomenon of resistance among the alienated KNOU students highlights critical perspectives of KNOU’s educational mechanism of open and distance higher education and students’ learning experiences in the educational system. Cunningham (1993) argues that positive assumptions of adult education are uncritically accepted for its humanistic and empowering goals. Likewise, the reality of open and distance education practice must be confronted through critical lenses. This research highlights the demand of critical research on the social roles that distance higher education plays in different cultural and ideological contents.

The selected group of KNOU students who were alienated by higher education opportunities as young adults represents the social and cultural discrimination embedded in Korean society. Figure 1-2 illustrates how I problematized the state of distance higher education and posed critical research questions about the social, cultural, and ideological elements rooted in educational activities in KNOU and more broadly the South Korean society among the alienated group of KNOU students.

The top of Figure 1-2 describes how KNOU has been institutionalized in the global open and distance education context where many open universities have been established. On the other hand, the bottom of the figure depicts the socio-cultural context of Korean higher education as well as target phenomena of this research (i.e., contradictions of distance higher education and resistance among the alienated KNOU
students). I posed three main research questions in relation to alienation that a specific group of adult students in KNOU experienced, the socio-cultural context of Korean higher education, and the students’ resistance to the contradictions in KNOU education.

**Figure 1-2: The conceptual model of the study**

**Research Purpose & Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to illuminate the origins, patterns, and features of contradictions and resistance experienced by the alienated KNOU students. The foci of
investigation are 1) identifying structural contradictions in KNOU education as experienced and identified by KNOU students, and 2) unraveling the socio-cultural origins and patterns of resistance constructed throughout the students’ lives and education experiences.

In order to analyze systematic educational oppression, it is crucial to explore the ways in which the centralization and institutionalization of KNOU developed alongside the expanding global paradigm of Open University and South Korean socio-cultural idiosyncrasies. Both overt and covert aspects of the KNOU curriculum, the accreditation process and system, and various regulations and policies representing institutional mandates are identified and critically examined. In addition, the centralization that results in systematic educational oppression are analyzed and discussed in accordance with particular South Korean social and cultural circumstances.

Since individual students’ agency is fundamental to their resistance in an educational environment (Giroux, 2001, 2002), I attempt to scrutinize complex dimensions of the KNOU students’ pre-institutional life and education experiences. Both micro- and macro-level analyses help to uncover the socio-cultural and ideological meanings of educational resistance embodied in their experiences of KNOU education. More specifically, this investigation includes the analyses of students’ motivations for entering KNOU, their social experiences during their previous educational backgrounds, and the social and cultural discrimination that gave rise to their alienation from higher education. The eventual purpose is to identify the meanings and values of the KNOU
degree as recognized by the KNOU students themselves.

In doing so, this study closely looks into the KNOU system, including its rules, policies, regulations, and instructional strategies, and subsequently how they affect students’ experiences. This enables me to unfold the complex processes by which the alienated group of KNOU students experience structural forces of the institution. Finally, this study seeks to discern the comprehensive patterns and origins of their resistance expressed through and embodied in their experiences of educational activities in KNOU.

Given the research problem and purpose addressed above, the following questions inform this study.

Research question 1: What are the meanings and values of the KNOU degree for a alienated group of KNOU students?

- 1-1 How did the KNOU students experience the high value placed upon academic backgrounds by Korean society?

Research question 2: What socio-cultural factors prevented the KNOU students from accessing higher education as young adults?

Research question 3: How has the alienated group of KNOU students experienced systematic educational oppression structured by the institution?

- 3-1 What contradictions did the KNOU students experience while engaging in institutional processes?

- 3-2 How is their resistance expressed through and embodied in their experiences of the contradictions of KNOU education?
**Definition of Terms**

**Alienation**

Alienation in education stems from the Marxist understanding of alienated labor, which is a function of social-historical processes within capitalism (Miles, 1974). The concept of alienation is employed to determine the participant groups who were deprived of educational opportunities and discriminated against due to their socio-cultural circumstances. Their alienation in education resulted from lack of educational success or promotion as young students in the past. Furthermore, their alienation from educational opportunities barred them from pursuing better careers and social advancement (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003). By applying the concept of alienation to the socially subordinated group of KNOU students, I critique the uncritical discourse of open and distance higher education research.

**Socio-cultural**

The socio-cultural perspective of CHAT “theorizes persons continually shaping and being shaped by their social contexts that immediately problematize knowledge as something discrete or acquired by individual” (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 189). Socio-cultural approaches to education and learning draw on the tradition of Vygotsky, who stressed material and symbolic instruments that mediate subjects and objects in human activity (Cole, 1985; Hutchins, 1995; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Wertsch, 1998). Socio-cultural approaches commonly focus on learning as developing through social interaction (Farnsworth & Encinas, n.d.). Accordingly, this study is intended to illuminate not just
the personal and subjective but socio-cultural aspects of experiences of alienation and resistance among the KNOU students. In other words, the alienation and resistance experienced by the KNOU students is analyzed with the focus on their relationships and interactions with other social members and entities.

**Oppression**

The notion of oppression has been developed in radical pedagogy, referring to “the institutional constraints and larger social formations that bear down on forms of resistance” (Giroux, 2003, p. 8). Over the last couple of decades, the discourse of oppression in education has been widely discussed in an attempt to depict the mainstream and functionalist schooling system that gives rise to a certain form of student resistance (Giroux, 2002; McLaren, 1993; Willis, 1977). By drawing upon the concept of oppression, I strive to conceptualize the coercive and oppressive higher education culture and structure embedded in KNOU education.

**Contradiction**

The concept of contradiction is fundamental to the higher development and expansive transformation of human activity (Vygotsky, 1978). In CHAT, contradictions are neither mere problems nor conflicts; rather, they refer to “historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems” (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). Engeström (2001) conceptualizes four distinct levels of contradiction in activity systems. According to Engeström (2001), contradictions occur at an individual component (primary) and between the components (secondary) within each activity system, and
between two or more activities (tertiary and quaternary) in the activity network. This study identifies the contradictions as experienced by the alienated KNOU students while engaging in educational and institutional processes of KNOU. Those contradictions are re-illuminated within the emergent activity systems of the students within the CHAT framework for the purpose of contextualizing resistance among the KNOU students.

Resistance

According to Giroux (2001), resistance consists of acts of opposition to dominant cultures and institutions, and it contains a critique of domination and a struggle for self and social emancipation. The notion of resistance in education is based on the importance of human agency and the fact that individuals or groups are not simply passive recipients of education in the current social structure (Willis, 1977; Giroux, 2002). Thus, the theory of resistance assumes that people create their own meanings and values of education through negotiations with the dominant culture well as their oppositional behaviors or thoughts against the educational system and culture (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). This theory highlights the power of human agency to question and incorporate dominant ideologies and cultures by rejecting oppression and pursuing social justice (Giroux, 2001).

Organization of the Study

This study consists of seven chapters. Chapter 2 analyzes Korea National Open University (KNOU), which is the national distance higher education institution in South Korea. More specifically, the chapter illustrates the institutional development of KNOU
within the global extension of open universities and the particular social and cultural background of South Korea, as well as concrete educational organization and process. Chapter 3 reviews the literature on alienation and resistance, specifically focusing on their conceptual histories, key philosophical ideas, and application to educational research. In addition, it discusses Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as the theoretical frameworks of this study. Chapter 4 describes the research design, including a description of key informants, a rationale for the methodological framework, data collection/analysis, trustworthiness, and the limitations of the methods. Chapter 5 demonstrates research findings, specifically the discrimination and inequality experienced by the participants. This findings chapter describes the participants’ experiences of socio-cultural barriers to educational progress as well as societal and cultural discrimination and inequality as a result of the data analysis. Chapter 6 explores the phenomenon of resistance among the participants, identifying one central activity system, three neighboring activity systems, and contradictions existing in/between them. Finally, Chapter 7 is the recommendations and implications of this research for the understanding of adult learners’ resistance in distance higher education.
CHAPTER 2. OVERVIEW OF KOREA NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY

In this chapter, I outline the development of adult and distance higher education and Korea National Open University (KNOU) before exploring the research questions. First of all, educational paradigms that gave rise to open universities in the world including KNOU are illuminated. Subsequently, KNOU’s institutional and educational components are identified and discussed in comparison to the British Open University. Then I describe KNOU students, the institutional organization, and key educational processes in detail in order to understand the participants’ activities while engaging in KNOU education.

Development of Adult and Distance Higher Education (ADHE) & Open Universities

In this section, I highlight globalization, lifelong learning, and the development of distance education technology as three factors that have underpinned the extension of adult and distance higher education as well as open universities globally. The development of KNOU has occurred along with the widespread paradigm of adult and distance higher education (Desai, Hart & Richards, 2008; Nam, 2009; Schejbal, 2011).

About thirty years ago, Pöggeler (1990) claimed that adult education had begun to investigate the inquiry of how it is globalizing itself and how much it is involved in the globalization of individual and social life. Alongside the force of globalization, more and more countries have established adult education institutions by adapting the globalized model to their own circumstances (Alfred, 2011; Green, 2002). A number of researchers
have accordingly investigated and discussed the issue of globalization in the realm of adult education (e.g., Finger & Asún, 2001; Jarvis, 2007; Merriam, Cervero & Courtney, 2006; Walters, 2000).

The impact of globalization on adult education is particularly salient in open and distance higher education (Boubsil, Carabajal & Vidal, 2011; Davis, Nesler & Wiley, 2011; Kothari & Thomas, 2012). Given “the shifts in the demographic landscape of national states that are mirrored on the campuses of colleges and universities worldwide” (Alfred, 2011, p. 11), higher education systems have globally undergone enormous transformation “in the composition of the student body, types of higher education institutions, forms of provision and funding mechanisms” (Slowey & Schuetze, 2012, p. 3). In this paradigm, globalization as a worldwide phenomenon has a significant impact on each country’s adult and higher education policy and institutions (Finger, 2001; Walter, 2009).

As early as 1995, Evans (1995) noted that open and distance education illuminates “a significant force in late modernity” (p. 260). He specifically acknowledged the expansion of education whereby open and distance education may be used a means of accommodating the demands of globalism (Evans, 1995). In order to elucidate the demands of globalism, it is necessary to understand the multiple social changes that eventually led to the global development of adult and distance higher education. Politically, we have witnessed the collapse of communism and the end of apartheid around the world (Kwiek, 2008). Economically, capitalism has become entrenched in
education, strongly heightening the legitimacy given to private sectors (Harry & Perraton, 1999; Rovai & Downey, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The forces of globalization, along with those structural changes, have dissolved frontiers in education as well as in culture (Harry & Perraton, 1999), and correspondingly adult and distance higher education has developed alongside those paradigmatic changes in education worldwide.

In addition to the social changes that impacted globalization and ultimately resulted in the emergence of adult and distance higher education, a number of governments around the world have created these types of institutions to meet the individual learning and self-enriching needs of adult populations (Jarvis, 2012; Makoe, Richardson & Price, 2008). Kasworm (2012) points out that a variety of institutional forces affecting the transformation of individuals and societies have redefined the relationship between higher education, adult learners, and society. As the adult population has increasingly pursued further development during their lifespans, the increased governmental demand for lifelong learning needs to be dealt with at the national and institutional levels (Casey, 2012; Griffin, 2011). Therefore, state governments started accommodating their citizens’ individual learning needs in order to promote the welfare state as well as to advance national economic competitiveness (Jarvis, 2012; Sahlberg & Oldroyd, 2010).

While higher education used to be separated from the lifelong learning discourse, which focused mainly on the enrichment of life and vocational qualifications and skills, the recent paradigms of lifelong learning and higher education overlap in many functions
and roles (Knapper & Cropley, 2000; Knust & Hanft, 2009; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2012). A number of national governments began to reconsider the societal function of higher education as one of the most effective and efficient ways to accomplish national educational goals (Marginson, 2006). In the meantime, formal tertiary education has become the fundamental basis on which continuing higher education has been developed and established (Alfred, 2011; Donavant, 2009; Green, 2002; Johnston & Merrill, 2004). Adult and distance higher education has developed for the purpose of providing higher education to broader audiences to meet national, social, and individual needs for lifelong education and learning.

To achieve these ends, governmental, central, and public efforts have been exerted to establish adult and distance higher education for various reasons and purposes such as opening educational access, promoting equity, and responding to the demands of the labor market (Alfred, 2011; Kasworm, 2012). This paradigmatic shift occurred in part because of the prominence given to the concept of lifelong learning during the 1990s (Harry & Perraton, 1999; Knapper & Cropley, 2000; Verduin & Clark, 1991). It is not uncommon to find a specific commitment to develop lifelong learners in the mission statements of higher educational institutions (Shoemaker, 1998; Walters & Watters, 2001).

Lastly, as technological development has been so rapid that it has significantly reshaped education in numerous ways (Bonk, 2009), distance education has developed significantly, revealing its potential to exceed the limited capacity of traditional approaches to pedagogical methods and curricula (Gibson, Harris & Colaric, 2008;
Goodyear & Ellis, 2008; Olakulehin, 2008). Since the middle of the twentieth century, the development of distance education, which has become equipped with innovative pedagogical technologies, has significantly impacted the practice of higher education (Bates, 2005; Bates & Poole, 2005). Adult and distance higher education builds upon this distinctive potential of distance education, and consequently technology has been at the center in the discourse of adult and distance higher education (e.g., Beldarrain, 2006; Olakulehin, 2008).

Even through this study employs the term ‘adult and distance higher education’ to describe the research context, which has been extensively and diversely acknowledged in the research in associated fields (Gibson, 1998), the term’s primary connotation lies in an innovative form of higher education drawing from distance education principles and technologies for adults. Technological enhancement has enabled more national governments and organizations to establish affordable distance higher education systems at the national, regional, and organizational levels in an efficient way (Bates, 2005; Georgina & Olson, 2008).

To sum up, I argue that globalization, lifelong learning, and innovative pedagogical technology are three of the main driving paradigms behind the development and establishment of adult and distance higher education. The complex social and educational backgrounds have stimulated the expansion of open and distance higher education around the world. As new and updated models of adult and distance higher education incorporate a global character, KNOU and its institutional system should be
considered part of this trend in adult and distance higher education.

According to Wikieducator (www.wikieducator.org) and the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU, www.aaou.net), there are at least fifty-six open universities worldwide (APPENDIX A). The Open University model has notably expanded into many parts of the globe (Tait, 2008; www.wikieducator.org). China and India, the two most populated countries in the world, have several different open universities, most of which were established at the state level. In contrast, seven countries in the Middle East (i.e., Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Oman) share the same institutional system of Arab Open University for each country’s adult populations.

**OU & KNOU: Similar Beginnings, Different Status**

The prototypical model of open universities around the world is the Open University in the United Kingdom whose system has been borrowed and adapted by each local or national government along with domestic social, cultural and educational environments (Barr, 2009). That is, the British Open University (OU) has inspired educators and politicians in many other countries to establish similar models of distance and open educational systems (Bell & Tight, 1993). In this regard, it seems obvious that the OU sparked the development of open learning around the world. However, each of these open universities has chosen different paths and strategies to open the way for broader audiences (Barr, 2009).

In the same vein, the development of KNOU’s educational system has been impacted by South Korean socio-cultural circumstances as well as the global paradigm of
open and distance education (Nam, 2009; Nam & Shin, 2007). It is useful to take a comparative approach that allows me to identify KNOU’s institutional borrowing and divergence from the British OU. This comparative analysis also highlights the significant features of centralization and institutionalization of the KNOU system.

The OU and KNOU were established when the British and Korean societies started witnessing the learning needs of their citizens who had been precluded from achieving their educational aims through existing higher education institutions (Bell & Tight, 1993; Nam; 2007; Perry, 1977). In line with those educational needs, both British and Korean governments began to consider technologically innovative open and distance higher education at the national level in the 1960s and the early 1970s respectively. Their missions to meet the social need are straightforwardly described in governmental and institutional documents as below:

The [British] Government believes that by an imaginative use of new teaching techniques and teacher/student relationships, an open university providing degree courses as rigorous and demanding as those in existing universities can be established… The presentation of courses will variously involve a combination of television, radio, correspondence courses, programmed instruction, tutorials and practicals, short residential courses, and study and discussions at community viewing of study centre (Department of Education and Science, 1966, p. 3, 5-6).

Article 1. (Purpose) The university [Korean Air & Communication University] aims to provide the opportunity of higher education through broadcasting and corresponding
technologies to those who had been precluded for economic or any other reasons, which ultimately contributes to improving citizens’ educational levels and to training desirable human resources for national development (KACU, 1972, paragraph 250 in institutional regulations).

Likewise, both the OU and KNOU were designed to extend and achieve the openness and equality of access to higher education. In contrast to traditional higher education, which had focused on conventional, residential classes and activities, both institutions implemented innovative pedagogy using modern information and communication technologies for distance education.

However, despite the common mission and their overlapping pedagogical bases, the educational circumstances that facilitated the establishment of the two institutions are conceptually different in terms of the specific social and political situations at the time of each institution’s initiation. The emergence of the idea of OU in the United Kingdom resulted from the increased necessity of extending higher education, which had started from extension programs of the University of London (Harris, 1987; Perry, 1977). There was an emerging social need for higher education to open its door to broader audiences. Politically, the Labor Party had been soliciting public support regarding extending higher education for the purpose of resolving social inequality (Harris, 1987).

Meanwhile, KNOU was created for a more practical purpose. In 1968, the Ministry of Culture and Education in Korea introduced the preliminary examination for college entrance, which impacted a dramatic increase in the number of high school
graduates waiting for another chance to enter colleges (Nam & Shin, 2007). The Korean government, driven by military leaders, built KNOU as an educational remedy for this sudden educational problem. In this sense, Nam (2009) asserts that KNOU’s original mission was not necessarily equivalent to the ideal of the OU (i.e., opening higher education), but instead, it was a centralized national effort to alleviate the potential shock from the drastic changes influenced by the national educational reform.

Although the two universities proclaim openness in their admission procedures, their official admission policies also reveal a differentiated feature. Although open entry has been equally emphasized in both institutions, their admission policies are different in terms of the treatment of applicants exceeding the quota limits imposed by the institutions (KNOU, 2011a; www.open.ac.uk). The OU generally admits students on a first-come-first-served basis, regardless of their preliminary qualifications (www.open.ac.uk); KNOU selects students based on their pre-institutional academic qualifications in a quota system set alongside each program and region (www.knou.ac.kr). The difference of admission policies shows differentiated philosophies of the two open universities in accounting for the openness. Given the Korean educational culture, which manifests itself in highly competitive educational environments, the principle of openness has been applied to the admission process in a limited way, while the OU has attempted to apply it to its admission process as exhaustively as possible (Kim, 1989; Song; 1996).

In the distance educational environments of the OU and KNOU, the teaching and assessment systems significantly affect students’ learning experience and educational
quality (Meyer, 2002; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). The OU and KNOU have created distance education systems with remarkable advantages, especially in terms of cost. At the same time, there have been a number of challenges in managing effective teaching systems as the students’ needs and pedagogical techniques have rapidly changed (Cobb, 2009; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). From the offset of each institution, the contradiction between openness and excellence of education has been the primary educational issue (Parker, 2008). That is, the emergence of the Open University model raised the persistent problem of how to balance publicizing higher education and assuring educational quality (Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

Accordingly, a meaningful comparison between the OU and KNOU with regards to their teaching and assessment systems can be made by looking into the transformation of teaching materials and the types of assessments implemented in the two different open universities. First, both institutions reveal a similar pattern in the transformation of major teaching methods. In the early history of the institutions, the OU and KNOU used only correspondence education, mostly using printed learning materials (Harris, 1987; Sim, 1988). While a few broadcasts through the TV and radio were often used for distance education, the correspondence method (i.e., printed materials) had been the primary learning materials until the internet-based teaching system was built in late 1990s (Harris, 1987; Sim, 1988).

The overall structure of assessments in the OU and KNOU consists of formative (mid-term) and summative (final) assessments (Shin, Kim & Shin, 2005). However, the
specific evaluation formats for each of the assessments differ from one institution to the other. KNOU’s assessment system is composed of mid-term assessments (i.e., mid-term exams, homework reports, Chulsuk classes\(^5\), and exams) and final exams (KNOU, 2011a). Every course is assigned one of the three mid-term assessment types by the institution, and the final exam in each course has thirty-five multiple-choice questions (KNOU, 2011a).

In contrast, the OU has continuing assessments – a series of formative evaluations during the semester – and final exams (KNOU, 2011a; The Open University, 2011). The continuing assessments are divided into tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) and computer-marked assignments (CMAs) (The Open University, 2011). Most of the OU courses (more than 90%) assess student learning through TMAs. The most notable benefit of TMAs lies in educational feedbacks of the tutors with their notes on the students’ assignment. TMAs are conducted three to eight times depending on course characteristics (The Open University, 2011). Exams are also given in several different formats on the basis of course’s characteristics. Students are required to achieve at least a certain score in both continuing assessments and exams in order to complete the course (The Open University, 2011; www.open.ac.uk). This grading system is very different from the KNOU’s system. KNOU adds together mid-term and final assessments to evaluate students’ learning whereas the OU makes the guideline for each of the

\(^5\) Chulsuk class (출석수업) is the official term used to describe the mandatory face-to-face class to complete some courses in KNOU. Students are required to participate in Chulsuk classes typically for nine hours in a semester. However, for those who are not able to attend for personal reasons, KNOU allows them to take the alternative exam named ‘the Chulsuk-class-substitution exam (출석수업대체시험)’.
assessments for students to reach a certain level of learning.

Even though the teaching and assessment systems of the OU and KNOU are based on mass and distance education, the OU has a much more flexible educational system driven by customized assessments. Despite the institutional guidelines, details of the OU assessment have been determined largely by each course-team (The Open University, 2011). By contrast, given the uniform structure of the assessment system across different disciplines, KNOU’s system highlights efficiency for the management of academic affairs. Although the rigidly structured teaching and assessment system of KNOU has been critiqued (Nam & Shin, 2007), the school has not successfully found an optimal balance among the contradictory issues of mass education, distance educational quality, and the efficiency of academic affairs (Yoon, 2006). The more institutionalized and centralized features of KNOU education originate from that dilemma.

Lastly, the sources of educational funds of the OU and KNOU also contrast. While the OU has been supported through the government providing more than one-half of OU’s funding (www.open.ac.uk), KNOU’s budget depends much more on the students’ tuition (Nam, 2009; Yoon, 2006). KNOU’s high dependence on the students’ tuition has influenced the institution’s academic basis on which the curriculum structure is premised (Yoon, 2006). This budget structure demands the mass recruitment of students, which has made the academic curricula focus more on the popularity of courses. In addition, KNOU has faced the challenge of alternative and more flexible models of distance education and open learning in Korea (Lee, 2001; Yoon, 2006). An increasing number of existing higher
education institutions have also moved into the distance education market, which had been exclusively occupied by KNOU (Lee, 2001). As a result, various internal and external forces have fostered the marketization of higher education and commoditization of knowledge in KNOU education.

**Social Backgrounds of KNOU Development**

The Korean society experienced dramatic economic growth and demographic change from the late 1960s through the early 1970s. Korea has been renowned for its fast economic development and rapidly urbanizing society (Cho, 2004). In addition, the student population exploded (Sim, 1988; Lee, 2001). This significant increase in student numbers was the most serious problem in Korean education. Primary and secondary classrooms were so congested that many classes in big cities had two or three daily-school-shift systems, and the Korean government split large schools into several smaller units in order to address this students’ overload (Sim, 1988). As more and more students were unable to enter higher education due to space limitations, the overflowing student population demanded that the government provide more facilities for higher education. This dramatic social transformation has brought with it far reaching educational needs that have resulted in the significant expansion of higher education among adult populations. Distance education was introduced to Korea because of the growing need for tertiary education (Sim, 1988; Lee, 2001). When it was first introduced, distance education was considered a relatively novel and cost-effective method for many of Korean adults who sought to learn how to grapple with the changing workforce and with
their interrupted education at school.

KNOU was legally established by the Korean government in 1968, and subsequently the institution was founded in 1972 on the basis of a presidential decree proclaimed in 1971: “There are examples of installing open universities to offer learning opportunities to those who lost higher education opportunities such as employees, soldiers, or housewives…” (National Law Information Center, n.d.). In parallel with the swiftly increasing educational needs in the Korean society, the Korean constitution was amended in 1980 to promote national lifelong education for citizens (Sim, 1988). The constitution guaranteed every citizen’s right to pursue education according to his/her ability.

KNOU was the first lifelong education institution of the nation as a higher educational institution affiliated with the Seoul National University (KNOU, 2011a; www.knou.ac.kr). Seoul National University, the most prominent national university in Korea, was initially the parent organization of KNOU. However, as enrollment surged enormously around 1980, Seoul National University could not function in an administratively responsive way to manage distance education for such large numbers of students (Sim, 1988). Accordingly, KNOU was separated from the Seoul National University, transforming its system from a two-year college to a five-year baccalaureate institution in 1982 (KNOU, 2011a). Since then, it has no longer been attached to any existing university in Korea.

In sum, the Korean government transformed its view of education from a top-
down enterprise to the individual right of every citizen, not a few privileged groups, at the end of twentieth century. As a result, KNOU was built and promoted as a response to the rapid shift of educational paradigms by the national government.

**KNOU Students: Who Participates in the Institution?**

KNOU has conducted demographic surveys to examine the composition of students since 1984. In 2011, KNOU (2011b) published ‘The Survey of 2011 New and Transfer Students’ that indicates that 94,461 people applied for KNOU admission in that year. 40,153 people applied to become new students (42.5%), and 54,308 people applied for the transfer-student track (KNOU, 2011b). Figure 2-1 illustrates the chronological numbers of applicants from 1983 to 2011.

![Figure 2-1: 2011 student statistics [Adapted from KNOU (2011b, p. 15)]](image.png)

According to the survey report (KNOU, 2011b), 65.9% of the applicants are female, and only 34.1% students are male. 34.3% of the applicants are graduates from two-year colleges and 17.5% of them are graduates from vocational high schools. Most of the two-year college graduates applied as transfer students, whereas high school graduates had to
begin from freshmen (KNOU, 2011b). As Table 2.2 shows, the wide range of age groups participates in KNOU.

Table 2.1: The age distribution among first-year KNOU students in 2011 [Adapted from KNOU (2011b, p. 36)]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Student Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 20</td>
<td>864</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 – 25</td>
<td>7,856</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 – 30</td>
<td>14,376</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 – 35</td>
<td>12,817</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 – 40</td>
<td>11,704</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 – 45</td>
<td>9,817</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46 – 50</td>
<td>5,022</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 – 55</td>
<td>3,265</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56 – 60</td>
<td>1,529</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 61</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>67,980</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The age group containing the highest student numbers is 26-30 (21.1%), and subsequently the groups of 31-35 (18.9%), 36-40 (17.2%), and 41-45 (14.4%) involve respectively the second, third, and fourth highest number of students. 64% of all students are over the age of 31.

The report (KNOU, 2011b) also includes statistical information concerning

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6 This number indicates the actual participating students so that it is different from the number of applicants above.
students’ motivations to choose KNOU. The highest-rated motivation, according to the survey, is students’ ability to work and study simultaneously (33.9%). Gaining professional knowledge (14.3%), acquiring bachelor’s degree (13.2%), and low tuition (9.5%) are other major motivations for their KNOU participation (KNOU, 2011b).

**Organization of KNOU**

Since the onset of KNOU, the educational circumstance of Korea has changed significantly, and the institutional organization of KNOU has also evolved in order to accommodate fast-changing learners’ and communities’ needs (Lee, 2001). KNOU began by providing two-year college programs in five departments, and now there are twenty-two undergraduate programs (KNOU, 2011a; www.knou.ac.kr). The central organization consists of the twenty-two undergraduate programs, nine master’s programs, the Division of Academic Affairs, the Division of Student Affairs, the Division of Planning, and the Division of General Administration, which implements accounting, procurement, and maintenance (KNOU, 2011a; www.knou.ac.kr). Moreover, KNOU has several affiliated organizations: the library, the Distance Educational Research Center, the Digital Media Center, the Information Electronic Center, the University Newspaper Press, the KNOU Publishing Unit, the Funding Foundation for Development, the Humanity Education Center, the Lifelong Education Center, and various management committees (APPENDIX B). KNOU also has a network of thirteen branch campuses and thirty-two local learning centers around the country. The objectives are to provide convenient local facilities in each area and to engage them in student activities and events whose ultimate
purpose is to increase their commitment to learning (KNOU, 2011a).

The most essential function of KNOU’s organizations lies in enhancing the quality of distance higher education and in playing a bridging role between distance learners and educational resources (Lee, 2001; Yoon, 2006). Each branch campus invites regional specialists such as residential adjunct professors and teaching assistants to counsel students (Nam, 2009). In addition, a local campus unit organizes special, face-to-face lectures in order to consolidate students’ learning (Nam, 2009). Likewise, actual educational services are provided in a decentralized way to cope with the large number of students. However, the overall function of KNOU is set by national education law and by national education policies.

One significant organization is the KNOU Student Association, which is managed by student groups across the nation. The Student Association arranges a variety of academic and extra-curricular activities to enhance the sense of belonging among KNOU students. In addition to the main body located in Seoul, each area has a regional headquarters of the Student Association, which aims to organize various events and activities such as guest lectures, exhibitions, speech competitions, study groups, and sporting and artistic activities (KNOU, 2011a; www.knou.ac.kr).

The academic component consists of twenty-two undergraduate departments and nine graduate programs at the master’s level. The liberal arts include Korean, English, Chinese, and French languages and literature as well as Japanese studies. The social sciences comprise law, public administration, economics, management, trading, media
and broadcasting, and tourism. The natural sciences consist of agricultural studies, home studies, computer science, information and statistics, and nursing, while educational sciences include general education, youth and childhood education, and culture and humanity. There are both academic and practical courses as well as mixed curricula, which are designed according to the disciplinary characteristics (KNOU, 2011a; www.knou.ac.kr). Although the KNOU curricula are similar to ones in conventional higher education, teaching methods and learning characteristics significantly differ from ones in traditional universities (Lee, 2001; Nam, 2009).

While about 12,000 students registered in only five departments in 1972, there are more than 172,680 registrants in twenty two departments in 2011 (KNOU, 2011b), which shows the stunning quantitative growth in the number of students. Though there has been a slight decrease due to the variety of new competing distance higher educational institutions in the country, KNOU is still the largest institution of higher education and one of the biggest mega-universities in the world (Nam, 2009).

**Key Educational Processes**

KNOU as an institution of adult and distance higher education has a complex system involving various educational processes. In order to scrutinize the participants’ experiences of educational activities while students at KNOU, it is important to identify those key educational processes driven and guided by the various institutional components of the system. Therefore, by thoroughly reviewing institutional documents such as Handbook for New KNOU Students (KNOU, 2011a) and the university website
(www.knou.ac.kr), I elaborate upon several key educational processes (i.e., enrollment, delivery methods, Chulsuk classes, evaluation, and graduation) which the participants faced in the institutionalized system of KNOU education.

The enrollment system of KNOU is designed to reduce the adult students’ burden of selecting and registering for courses and to help instructors effectively guide students (KNOU, 2011a). Students are automatically enrolled in a series of courses based on what they have completed in the previous semester. However, students can always change the selection during the enrollment periods, which allows students to autonomously direct their study alongside individual plans and schedules (www.knou.ac.kr).

There are two regular semesters (i.e., spring and fall semesters) in a year, and students sign up for courses in the beginning of each semester. It is notable that the enrollment system allows a limited number of students from other programs to register in each course according to a course quota rule (KNOU, 2011a). Thus, once the designated seats are filled, students cannot register for the course that they want or need, which can be seen contradictory to the principles of open learning. A student can typically register for eighteen credits (six courses) a semester. Those who have completed at least eighteen credits and have earned a Grade Point Average (GPA) over 3.3 (B, 3.0=B-) in the last semester are able to register for one extra course (three credits) (www.knou.ac.kr). In addition, those students who have completed more than one hundred and two credits can retake a course in which they earned less than a C as a course grade. The institution limits retaking a course to students who have earned a C, D, or F for their final course grades.
In KNOU, students utilize various media to take their classes: television, audio, multimedia, and web lectures (www.knou.ac.kr). During the fall and spring semesters, freshmen, sophomores, and juniors are assigned three Chulsuk classes while seniors are required to take two Chulsuk classes (KNOU, 2011a). In order to promote students’ self-directedness, online supplementary lessons and face-to-face special lectures are provided for their use. Moreover, KNOU offers summer and winter courses for those students who need to retake courses in which they previously earned less than a C (KNOU, 2011a). They can register for a maximum of three courses (nine credits) in summer and winter semesters which are delivered in the same ways as regular courses but do not require Chulsuk classes. In order to support students’ learning, KNOU provides additional virtual lectures, and each regional campus opens supplementary special lectures during summer and winter semesters (KNOU, 2011a; www.knou.ac.kr).

An interesting feature of KNOU’s educational system is that the university created Chulsuk classes to overcome the limitations of solely learning online (KNOU, 2011a; Kwon, 2005; www.knou.ac.kr). In addition, another purpose of Chulsuk classes is to promote students’ sense of belonging by facilitating the relationship between students and instructors and among students (Kwon, 2005). Chulsuk classes occur in regional campuses or learning centers typically for three days. At the end of each Chulsuk class within the three days, students are required to take an examination set by the instructor. If a student is not able to attend the Chulsuk class, she/he has to take the multiple choice
exam substituting for the class. The result of the Chulsuk class or the substitute exam covers thirty percent of the entire course grade. Students who have to prove their leave of absence for a three-day Chulsuk class can get the certificate of Chulsuk class completion by request (KNOU, 2011a; www.knou.ac.kr).

The most significant institutional feature of KNOU education is its accreditation system. The evaluation and graduation systems of KNOU are of paramount importance in accrediting students’ learning. The evaluation system is largely divided into a mid-term evaluation (covering the thirty percent of the total course grade) and a final evaluation (covering the seventy percent). The mid-term evaluation involves Chulsuk classes and examinations, open-ended exams, or homework (i.e., reports of no more than five pages in length assigned by instructors); the final evaluation is most often a multiple-choice question, except in a few practice-based courses (KNOU, 2011a; www.knou.ac.kr). Summer and winter courses have only final examinations consisting of fifty multiple-choice questions. Students are given fifty minutes to answer open-ended mid-term exams held in regional campuses, learning centers, and affiliated educational institutions. Students are also required to attend final exams in all of their registered courses. A final exam typically contains thirty-five multiple-choice questions (each question is worth two points), generally occurring in the same places as the mid-term exams (KNOU, 2011a; www.knou.ac.kr).

Students’ learning is also evaluated by graduation requirements. In order to meet the qualifications of graduation, students have to complete no less than one hundred forty
credits, fifty-one of which must be earned in major areas (KNOU, 2011a; www.knou.ac.kr). Additionally, students need to submit either a thesis or alternative qualification certificates designed by each department. Faculty members assess students’ theses or alternative qualification certificates and determine if they are qualified. Students can also apply to postpone their graduation if they wish to take extra courses in order to attain any certificates available through KNOU or improve their GPA (KNOU, 2011a; www.knou.ac.kr).

**Social Recognition of KNOU**

KNOU, as a national distance higher education institution, has established a variety of institutional settings to accommodate as many adult learners as possible. Despite the huge number of students and graduates as well as the extensive educational resources, the social recognition of KNOU is not always positive. More specifically, due to the vast number of students, KNOU education frequently has been undervalued within the social context of Korea.

For example, a policy document in KNOU newspaper describes the discrimination against KNOU graduates. On May 23rd, 2011, the KNOU newspaper published an article titled ‘Discriminating against KNOU graduates by law?’ that reports how the bias against KNOU students has been formalized in national educational policy (Yang, 2011). The negative social understanding of KNOU education among other social members is illuminated in the law.

… A Congresswoman XXX submitted a law to halt the application of KNOU graduates
for the nutritionist certificate. KNOU graduates dreaming of becoming nutritionists may not even be eligible to take the national certificate test... On the 29th of the last month, a group of congressmen submitted the proposal for revising the “Civil Nutrition Management Act” and publicly announced it. The proposal includes the content of confining qualifications to graduates from regular higher education institutions… If this proposal is approved, KNOU graduates in the Food and Nutrition major will not be qualified to take the national certificate test even if they complete all the courses to graduate from KNOU. Critiques, overflowing across the university, argue that, “this is obviously illegal because it is against the educational right of citizens, which must be fair and equitable” (Yang, 2011).

Given the general law of supply and demand, this also implies that adult learners in distance higher education, whether they have developed high skills and professional knowledge through the education, can be socially discriminated in a credential-oriented society like Korea.

The lack of social recognition of KNOU is also found in some institutions considering KNOU graduates differently from other college graduates. That is, some institutions do not regard KNOU graduates as those who complete higher education. For instance, while The Japanese Embassy does not require a financial guarantee for Korean college graduates to attain a travel visa, the institution excludes KNOU graduates from their category of college graduates (Lee, 2003). This implies that KNOU’s open education opportunity has given rise to a socially entrenched negative connotation of
distance higher education, and consequently KNOU education is less valued within the Korean higher education context.
CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

In this chapter, I discuss three theories employed in this research. First, I review the literature concerning the notion of and the sociological development of alienation. I also outline how the concept has been examined in educational research. In the second section, I trace the history of the theoretical development of resistance in education and explore three versions of resistance theory. Then I illuminate how the concept of resistance has been theorized and employed in diverse areas of education. The third section examines Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). I demonstrate the rationale of employing CHAT and subsequently illustrate the generational development of the theory. In addition, the notion of contradiction in CHAT is elaborated as the main topic of this research concerns contradictions of KNOU education and the participant group’s resistance to them. Lastly, I conclude this chapter by discussing the limitations of CHAT.

Alienation

Notion of Alienation

The notion of alienation, a central theme in the works of Marx (1975), was developed in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Even though there is a lengthy philosophical history of alienation since Hegel’s phenomenology⁷ (Sayers, 2011), Marx was “the first theorist to link alienation explicitly to human productive

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⁷ Sayers (2003) asserts that “Marx is quite explicit about his debt to Hegel” (p. 107). Additionally, Williamson & Cullingford (1997) names Hegel “‘the ‘godfather’ of alienation” (p. 264). In Hegel, “the alienation of Spirit refers to the sense of distance or otherness from the material world which Spirit has created” (Fischer, 1976, p. 38).
activity” (Sidorkin, 2004, p. 252). On the basis of the conception of alienation, Marx (1975) developed his later political and economic theories. As Ollman (1977) argues, “Grasping ‘labor’ whenever it appears in his writings as ‘alienated labor’ in its full multidimensional sense is the key to understanding Marx’s economic theories” (p. 172). The concept of alienation is, likewise, essential to comprehend Marx’s work (Caoili, 2012).

Marx (1975) defines alienation as “the process whereby people become foreign to the world they are living in” (Marxists Internet Archive, n.d.). In the Manuscripts of 1844, Marx (1975) shows how alienation occurs in private labor and commodity production as below.

Presupposing private property, my work is an alienation of life, for I work in order to live, in order to obtain for myself the means of life. My work is not my life (Comment on James Mill, Marxists Internet Archive, n.d.).

Marx (1975) further claims that humans create both material and social products and conversely are made by them. Thus, he argues that productive activity is what links humans to their existence, as they exist only by creating themselves through the process of production (Brenkert, 1979; Sirdorkin, 2004).

Marx believes that this process of production based on a capitalist economic system inevitably begets alienated labor, which shapes and consolidates social class and hegemony (Kanungo, 1982). The central idea of Marx’s conception of alienation is that a person’s relationship with him/herself and other people is essentially mediated by productive activity that inescapably results in alienated labor. Under the condition of
alienation, a person’s labor, life, and activity become:

… external to the worker, i.e. does not belong to his essential being; that he therefore
does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels, miserable and not happy,
does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins
mind… His labour is not voluntary but forced (Marx, 1975, p. 326).

In Marx’s landmark work The Capital (Marx, 1867), the notion of alienation was
only the worker’s alienation from his products but also the alienation of the capitalist
from the worker and from his human essence” (p. 379). Marx (1867) discusses a specific
form of labor in capitalist society that corresponds to the most profound form of
alienation. This can be explained by his original conceptualization of the use and
exchange values. According to Marx (1867), the commodity always involves a complex
duality, as it is comprised of both use-value and exchange-value in nature. The use-value
and exchange-value of human labor inevitably give rise to alienation in capitalist society
because wage-workers sell their labor, which becomes not the person’s product but the
product of the capitalist (Marx, 1876). Marx (1975) considers that alienation can be
resolved only when human labor is not forced. Accordingly, Marx (1975) argues that the
resolution of alienation leads to “an actualization wherein humanity recognizes its true
potential and essence (gattungswesen)” (Williamson & Cullingford, 1997, p. 266)

However, Derrida (1994) insists that Marxian notion of alienation is confined to
neither capitalism nor material production; rather, it can be regarded as a universal human
phenomenon. Alienation as an ecumenical human phenomenon manifests itself in the concept of reification in which social relations are conceived as relations between things (Israel, 1976). Schweitzer (1992) says that, “alienation is a ubiquitous relational process and social phenomenon which pervades all spheres of human activity” (p. 29). Therefore, it is necessary to use a broader sociological lens through which we can investigate every sphere of human life and activity in an alienating world of domination and oppression.

**Sociological Development of the Concept**

The concept of alienation drew considerable attention among Western sociologists from the middle of the twentieth century (Israel, 1976; Williamson & Cullingford, 1997). Fischer (1976) claimed, “Alienation no doubt ranks as one of the most frequently used terms in sociology” (p. 35). The expanded usage of the term is grounded in multiple sociological facets of the philosophical meaning of alienation. Caoili (2012) articulates the philosophical meaning of alienation declared by Marx as follows.

As a philosophical concept, Marx uses alienation as a framework for viewing the totality of human relationships in its various aspects or manifestations – economic, political as well as moral. It becomes an analytic tool for examining the empirical world (p. 365).

Likewise, Marx’s concept of alienation has played a key role in neo-Marxist and American empiricists in analyses of specific sociopolitical and cultural milieus. By stressing the significance of the idea of ‘alienation’ for sociological studies, Kahler (1957) claims, “The history of man could very well be written as a history of the alienation of man” (p. 43). Furthermore, Seeman (1959) asserts that, “the idea of alienation is a
popular vehicle for virtually every kind of analysis” (p. 783).

Williamson & Cullingford (1997) categorizes two of the most influential schools of thought, psychoanalysis and existentialism, which regard alienation as one of their fundamental ideas in mid-twentieth century. Williamson & Cullingford (1997) discuss three prominent scholars and elaborate their theories of alienation to explicate the paradigmatic development of the concept. First, Fromm (1955) illuminates human frustration and unhappiness as a result of alienation from self, nature, and other, focusing specifically on negative aspects and consequences of alienation. However, Williamson & Cullingford (1997) critique Fromm’s application of the idea because of “its profound sense of ambiguity and imprecision” which make his work on alienation “scientifically unsatisfactory” (p. 267). Second, the existential philosopher Sartre (1956, 2004) draws upon the concept of Marx’s alienation in order to explicate individual experiences of oneself as alien and hostile through the process of self-objectification (Sartre, 2004).

Third, Marcuse (1964) combines Marx’s concept of alienation and psychoanalytic thinking. Marcuse (1964) specifically sheds light on alienation among minority groups outside the systems of production in order to claim the role of commodities and consumption in reproducing advanced capitalism. In a central passage, he argues:

The productive apparatus and the goods and services which it produces ’sell’ or impose the social system as a whole. The means of mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food, and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain
intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to
the producers and, through the latter, to the whole. The products indoctrinate and
manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood
(Marcuse 1964, p. 11-12).

Marcuse (1964) explicates the impact of alienation on a consciousness that made the
minority youth group accept and conforms to the system and thus systematically
oppressing the need for liberation and radical social change.

Along with such increased interest among neo-Marxists in the 1950s, many
sociologists have created “a valid paradigm for educational research around the concept”
(Williamson & Cullingford, 1997, p. 269). For example, in his famous work On the
Meaning of Alienation, Seeman (1959) attempted to articulate five principles of
alienation by reconsidering each category within a social learning model, which he
characterized as powerlessness, meaningless, normlessness, isolation, and self-
estrangement. Building upon Seeman’s (1959) influential work, a number of other
American sociologists and social psychologists continued to measure the constituent
features of alienation (Burbach, 1972; Dean (1961); Form, 1972; Jessor & Jessor, 1977;
example, Clark (1959) developed a measurement tool of alienation within a social system.
Additionally, Dean (1961) attempted to verify the relationships among factors of
alienation that had been identified by precedent researchers. Meanwhile, adolescents
were considered the primary subject of research among those researchers. In those studies,
the Marxian notion of alienation was redefined to measure “an objective lack of skill, responsibility and autonomy in a particular occupation in addition to individual members’ subjective beliefs and feeling about their work” (Archibald, 2009, p. 151).

However, the term has recently been used less among sociologists due to “its semantic confusion, questionable validity and reliability as a measurable construct and lack of conceptual credibility” (Williamson & Cullingford, 1997, p. 263). Moreover, given the downturn of logical positivism and empiricism (Friedman, 1991), the positivistic verification of conceptual constituents of alienation and their application to empirical settings, which undergirded the proliferation of the topic in sociology over the last several decades, appear criticized by sociologists (Archibald, 2009; Williamson & Cullingford, 1997).

**Alienation in Educational Research**

According to Miles (1974), alienation in education stems from the Marxist understanding of alienated labor, which is a function of social-historical processes within capitalism. Even though Marx (1884) did not explicitly address education, his philosophical underpinnings in regards to alienation have great implications for education (Sirdorkin, 2004; Pacheco, 1978). Sirdorkin (2004) outlines the implications of Marx’s insight into alienation for education as follows:

The appeal of Marx’s insight is obvious: it allows us to place students’ activity at the conceptual center of education instead of falling into the traditional concentration on the interaction between teachers and students (p. 252).
Sirdorkin (2004) further argues that one of the most conspicuous implications of Marx’s productive activity for education is that students should develop their own essential humanity, which is only feasible by focusing on students’ activity rather than the traditional pedagogical process. Case (2008) notes that, “student alienation arose as a particular focus in response to the student movement of the late 1960s” (p. 324). Along with a renewed interest in the work of Marx and the social problems experienced in the complexity of the contemporary world and post-modernism, the concept emerged as central in the educational discourse from the mid twentieth century (Geyer, 2001).

From microscopic and psychological perspectives, educational alienation can be defined as the lack of a sense of belonging and feeling cut off from educational environments, especially during adolescence (Schulz & Rubel, 2011). Considerable evidence shows that the inability to connect meaningfully with other people and to engage in the educational system usually results in negative behaviors such as academic failure, violence, and truancy (e.g., Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Suh & Suh, 2007). Those studies have illuminated that feelings of isolation and disconnection are impacted by not only individual but also social or cultural factors including family circumstances, lack of social acceptance, academic underachievement, and oppressive or inequitable practices (Schulz & Rubel, 2011).

The problem of social alienation in education is relevant to the welfare of society from a broader sociological point of view. Numerous studies in education have explored how disadvantaged students undergo oppressing social and cultural circumstances which
limit their educational engagement and achievement (e.g., Becker & Luthar, 2002; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Larsson, 2008; Lee & Bryk, 1989). Those studies shed light on alienation taking place when socially disadvantaged students have less access to educational opportunity due to their subordinate positions in the division of labor and the social relation (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Hickerson, 1966).

The alienation from educational opportunities in turn reduces people’s ability to rise to better social positions (Lin, Ensel, & Vaughn, 1981; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969). Even more seriously, this relation between low educational attainment and lower social status can be reproduced over generations, which consolidates the current state of social relations (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; Sullivan & Kelly, 2001). Barry (2002) claims:

Lack of job opportunities among the adults in an area tends to depress scholastic motivation and thus contributes to poor educational outcomes that condemn the next generation to extremely limited job opportunities in turn. Even if it were said that truancy or lack of effort are ‘chosen’ by children, the environment in which such choices are made is far too compromised for them to be assimilated to the choice of the leisure-loving lawyer. Rather they are themselves part of a self-reproducing process of unequal opportunity (p. 20).

In short, these studies demonstrate that social alienation in education results in significant educational inequality and discrimination that are more likely to persist for generations. They argue that alienation in education, therefore, ultimately undermines social justice.
Ameliorating social alienation in relation to education is thus a matter of providing an equitable chance to participate in key activities of the society, which determines the level of justice and welfare of the society (Gewirtz, 1998).

The application of alienation to educational settings, as Pacheco (1978) suggests, leads us to the critical examination of knowledge by means of the renunciation of neutrality claims. Sirdorkin (2004) argues, “The subject of how humans produced their own essential humanity has a rightful place in educational discourse” (p. 252). However, as discussed in Chapter 1, alienation in education has been discussed mostly in the realm of primary and secondary school education, with only a few exceptions investigating alienation among adult learners (e.g., Barr & Birke, 1994; Brooksfield, 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Clark, 2006).

In those studies that examine adults’ alienation, the concept has been largely explored in relation to other socially constructed categories such as race, gender, and disability, which have been frequently used for critical research. For example, Barr & Birke (1994) examined women’s ways of knowing in relation to science. They explored the possibility of developing a more feminist approach to science and science education for adult students. As a result, their study highlights a more democratic science education, including excluded others such as women. Clark (2006) proposes to investigate the disability experience within the adult learning context by promoting the idea of an interdisciplinary relationship between adult education and disability studies. She explores how adult education has excluded the experiences of those students who have disabilities
(Clark, 2006). Brookfield (2002) argues that learning “to penetrate ideological obfuscation, and thereby overcome the alienation this obfuscation induced” (p. 96) is an important learning task of adulthood. He argues that adult education as a force for resistance can make people realize ideological manipulation and educate adults for participatory democracy (Brookfield, 2003a, 2003b). Social alienation in terms of race is fundamental in his problematization and argument.

To this end, most studies dealing with social alienation in adult education focus on the current status of the society as well as educational processes and outcomes. The histories that individual students bring to the educational contexts have been excluded in the discourse. I argue that alienation in adult education can be examined in two distinct ways. On the one hand, like the majority of current adult education studies, how the society or the educational system alienates a certain social group from participation is a significant research inquiry. On the other hand, it is also important to posit adults’ past experiences of social alienation in terms of educational opportunities as an important research topic. Since adults participating in any types of education bring rich life experiences with them into the classroom, the previous alienation experienced by the group of KNOU students illuminate critical dimensions of adult learning in this specific adult and distance higher education context.
Resistance Theory

History of Theoretical Development

During the 1970s, there were a number of studies attempting to unravel the role of educational institutions in exacerbating social inequality by attesting privileged cultural norms (Burnett, 2004). Many critical theorists in education strove to interrogate how certain groups of people were subordinated by given cultural norms and knowledge (Apple, 1979, 1985; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bernstein, 1971, 1975; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Young, 1971). McGrew (2011) outlines the variety of traditions of contemporary critical theories as follows:

Among the traditions that contributed to contemporary critical theory are Marxism; neo-Marxist theories such as those emerging with the Frankfurt School and the London Institute of Education; the focus on culture, relative autonomy, and hidden forms of power emerging with the Birmingham School and the New Sociology of School Knowledge; critical pedagogy; critical theories of race and gender; and, as I argue, the largely unacknowledged contributions of the Chicago School of subcultural theory in the United States along with the U.K. Manchester studies… Most of these traditions, however, do share a common ancestry to Karl Marx (p. 235).

This radical paradigm in education was succeed by pedagogical deconstruction (e.g., Bates, 1978; Giroux 1983), and consequently emerged as the revolutionary discourse of resistance and emancipation in combination with critical philosophy derived from the Frankfurt school (Burnett, 2004).
The initial body of resistance theory is that of social reproduction represented by the French structuralist Althusser (1971) and American political economists Bowles & Gintis (1976). In contrast to Gramsci (1971), who portrays ideology as permeating though structures and processes of individual and social practices, theorists of social reproduction approached ideology by considering it as the self-evident and inevitable driver to “[transform] individuals into subjects, by presenting them with particular positions or signs of a possible future that serve the dominant interests in a society” (Hamilton & McWilliam, 2001, p. 25). Those theorists’ conceptualization was the first attempt to link ideology to social institutions that were then implicated in the process of integrating individuals into capitalist society (Bernett, 2004).

Around the same period of time in the 1970s, the theory of cultural reproduction was also developed by some other critical scholars such as Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) and Bernstein (1975) whose argument accentuates the cultural aspects of production and schooling in relation to specific forms of culture and knowledge that legitimize the ruling relations. In particular, Bourdieu (1977) stresses institutions as social sites where conflict and resistance take place, establishing the link between ‘symbolic violence’ and the ‘mediation and reproduction’ of social sites in all capitalist societies.

Willis (1977, 1981) is a key scholar who theorized resistance in education by ethnographically investigating the academic failure of working-class youth and their inability to improve their low social positions. Since his influential work Learning to Labor (Willis, 1977), scholars working on theories of resistance have grouped together
“under the heading of resistance used contestation and counter-hegemonic discourse as a foundation of an analysis of Western educational institutions’ relationship with capital society” (Bernett, 2004, electronic article accessed at http://sociology.org/content/2004/tier1/burnett.html). Willis’ (1977) work emphasizes the significance of human agency and critical theory by illuminating everyday lives and cultural processes of the group of working-class youth.

Criticizing the previous literature’s overemphasis on political interpretation of oppositional acts, Giroux (1983, 2001) argues that emancipation be regarded as the guiding interest of resistant acts. Giroux (2001) states that:

… resistance must have a revealing function, one that contains a critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and for struggle in the interest of self-emancipation and social emancipation (p. 109).

In a similar vein, Anderson (1989), Atkins (1992), and Ellsworth (1989) also denounce neo-Marxist accounts of resistance for ignoring subtle, implicit, and unconscious forms of resistance. Their argument is based on the potential of latent resistance that is silently subversive in the most immediate sense, but that would be politically progressive in the long run (Giroux, 1983). More recently, Haenfler (2004, p. 408) ethnographically examines the subcultural resistance among the members of “the Straight Edge movement,” stressing the demand for understanding “resistance that accounts for members’ individualistic orientation”. By criticizing the neo-Marxist conceptualization of resistance, which mainly focuses on the political or economic structure, she argues that “resistance is
contextual and many layered rather than static and uniform” (Haenfler, 2004, p. 409).

To sum up, since the prevailing Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions in education developed in the 1960s and the 1970s, resistance theory has been employed and developed in a wide range of research and literature in sociological studies. In contrast to the structural Marxist accounts of cultural reproduction (Bernstein, 1975; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), Willis’ (1977, 1981) bridged the gap in many of the perceived educational problems that had been unresolved exclusively by the cultural approach to reproduction (Aronowitz, 2004; Carspecken, 1996; Cole, 2008). Since Learning to Labor (Willis, 1977), the theory of resistance has been constantly evolving and reassessed by contemporary critical educational scholars (e.g., Abowitz, 2000; Burnett, 2004; Giroux, 2002; McGrew, 2011).

**Three Versions of Resistance Theory**

Contemplating Marxism, Holloway (2005) notes that the critical tradition’s starting point is “opposition, negativity, and struggle” (p. 15). Despite the critique of its loose definitions (Weitz, 2001), the concept of resistance has been included in the critical discourse of education in the last several decades along with the increasing interest in issues ranging from social control and social structure to agency (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Gordon (1993) claims, “To resist is to experience autonomy, to experience oneself as planning against one’s [opponent], and to interpret the [situation] as avoidable or controllable” (p. 142). Resistance theorists have thus attempted to “explain why opposition of some groups against others is politically and morally necessary in social
institutions where mainstream ideologies dominate to discipline participants and social norms” (Abowitz, 2000, p. 878).

In the field of education, the notion of resistance has been widely theorized and employed since Willis (1977) first investigated resistance and reproduction along with the academic failure of working-class youth in Britain. Willis (1977) introduced human agency to “broader process of economic and social reproduction, suggesting that in advanced capitalist societies individuals must be understood as agents who collude in systems of domination, thereby helping to produce their own continued marginalization” (Weis, Jenkins, & Stich, 2009, p. 919). By reviewing the extensive literature drawing from Willis’ (1977, 1981) theory of resistance, McGrew (2011) synthesizes three notions of resistance attributed to Willis (1977, 1981).

First, most authors examining educational resistance attribute a conscious notion of resistance to Willis (e.g., Aronowitz, 2004; Bourgois, 2003; Carspecken, 1996; Stack & Kelly, 2006; Valli, 1983; Welsh, 2001). For example, MacLeod (1995) describes the thought process of his informants, “Refusing to risk hope… [they] adjust their occupational goals to the only jobs that they perceive to be available – unskilled manual work …” (p. 68). Abowitz (2000) argues that “North American theorists emphasized that acts of resistance are performed with at least some degree of intentionality, by actors who are conscious of a public problem as they perceive and experience it, and who express helplessness, despair, or rage through oppositional behavior” (p. 890). Likewise, those critical researchers investigate resistance in education, assuming that explicit oppositional
behaviors and attitudes derive from the conscious objection to the dominant or mainstream culture and oppression.

Second, there have been a few studies taking Willis’ (1977, 1981) resistance among the working-class youth as an unconscious position (McGrew, 2011). Those studies highlight the indirect or implicit nature of resistance. For example, Akom (2003) argues that the youth “were blind to the connection between schooling and mobility” (p. 318). Additionally, Davies (1995) critiques, “Willis and his adherents do not claim that these youth consciously articulate this resistance” (p. 665). Nonetheless, most authors arguing the unconscious position of resistance also simultaneously acknowledge conscious aspects of resistance. For example, McLaren (1985) separates two distinct forms of resistance – active-conscious and passive-unconscious.

Third, McGrew (2011) adds a third position “beyond the binary opposition of conscious and unconscious resistance” (p. 254), which is relative autonomy described by Willis (1977, 1981). With the conception of relative autonomy, Willis (1977, 1981) strives to explicate distinctive culture of the working-class youth, not the youth themselves, which is engaging in efficiency-based analysis of their social identity. Willis (1997) argues:

We must distinguish between the level of the cultural and the level of practical consciousness in our specification of creativity and rationality. . . . The argument is not that insights are made consciously in any one mind or even in the same mind or groups of minds over time—although the spoken everyday word might illuminate aspects of it
variably and in contradiction with itself or perhaps unconsciously. Direct and explicit consciousness may in some sense be our poorest and least rational guide (p. 122).

Willis (1981) argues that *Learning to Labor* is not just an empirical work delving into a new-Marxist reproduction, but an example of cultural production. Accordingly, relative autonomy underscores the importance of the group’s culture (e.g., the working-class youth’s counter-school culture) in understanding their resistance and opposition to the educational system which inflates “the currency of qualifications and legitimize middle-class privilege” (Willis, 2004, p. 173).

In summary, resistance in education is generally defined as “opposition with a social and political purpose” (Abowitz, 2000, p. 878). The notion of resistance is employed in educational research to explicate the ways in which marginalized groups of students object to the norms and authority of schools that operate against their perceived interests (Abowitz, 2000; Giroux, 2001, 2002; Willis, 1977, 1981). As McGrew (2011) lays out three versions of resistance theory attributed to the foundational work of Willis (1977), the wide range of theoretical and empirical application of the concept highlights the conceptual significance of resistance as an educational phenomenon, problem, and idea.

**Resistance in Educational Research**

In a practical sense, resistance theory, as a social and educational theory, enables researchers to illuminate resistant acts or behaviors of individuals or groups confronting established norms and systems embedded in educational institutions. Beyond putting this
issue into the superficial category of mere individuals’ or groups’ opposition to dominant norms, critical education researchers have attempted to extend the theoretical formation of resistance into theories of societal reproduction and alienation by oppressive structures and relations (Walker, 1985).

A number of educational researchers have drawn from resistance theory in a way that unveils cultural reproduction and social inequality within schooling processes and oppressive situations and structural ideologies rooted in schooling since Willis’ (1977) *Learning to Labor* (e.g., Akom, 2003; Arnot, 2004; Davies, 1995; Fine, 1991; Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Hartman, 2006; Hebdige, 1979; Kingston, 1986; MacLeod, 1995; McFadden, 1995; McLaren, 1999; Noguera & Cannella, 2006; Solomon, 1992; Welsh, 2001). Those studies underpin the critical perspective on incorporating students "into the capitalist economic order by tailoring their attitudes through the daily experience of classroom authority relations to the requirements of the workplace" (Hargreaves, 1982, p. 107). For example, Munns & McFadden (2000) use the conditions of resistance identified by Willis (1977) in order to explain students’ responses to education in an inner-city primary school and a ‘second chance’ program that aims at providing access to tertiary education. They draw upon five key conditions of resistance: powerlessness, feeling powerless, school is not working for me, rejection of an unequal educational experience, and cultural support (Munns & McFadden, 2000).

As is Munns & McFadden’s (2000) research, most of the studies investigating student resistance have been conducted in schooling contexts at the primary and
secondary education levels with a few exceptions: Bowl (2011), Sandlin (2007), Sheared & Sissel (2001), Tisdell (1993), Wedege & Evans (2006), and Willett & Jeannot (1993). In those studies, educational resistance is examined in the context of adult or higher education. Some authors such as Wedege & Evans (2006) regard resistance in adult education as just a psychosomatic phenomenon represented by mental uneasiness and refusal to accept the given knowledge whereas others delve into socio-cultural, racial, and ideological dimensions of the educational oppression and adult students’ resistance.

**Cultural-Historical Activity Theory**

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is employed as a means to examine the contradictions of KNOU education and attendant participants’ resistance while engaging in their KNOU educations. Sawchuk (2003) notes, “Several of the keys to addressing power issues, especially ‘political-economic’ dimensions of activity, are already embedded in CHAT itself” (p. 239). CHAT can lead to both systemically and systematically approaching contradictions and attendant resistance represented through and embodied in cultural and historical activities of KNOU education while also acknowledging socio-cultural and ideological influences. In this chapter, I discuss 1) the rationale of theoretical choice, 2) generational development of CHAT, 3) contradiction as a key conception, and 4) limitations.

**Rationale of Employing CHAT**

In understanding what adult learners do and how they learn in an educational
setting, their actions and learning can never be reduced to individual responses to formal systems (Dewey, 1916; Lindeman, 1926), nor should they be understood just as outcomes of psychological, mental processes (Cole, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978). In this respect, investigating the participants’ experiences of the KNOU education system requires a critical theoretical lens through which to analyze the complex interaction between the alienated adult students and the KNOU system of distance higher education. Moreover, the theoretical framework requires a socio-culturally sensitive and politically coherent means to elucidate both the resistance and the learning that occur among the group of KNOU students (Sawchuk, 2003).

In order to evaluate the sensitivity to and the criticality of the cultural-historical and political-economic facets of adult learning theory, I reviewed the current literature of several prevalent adult learning theories: andragogy (Knowles, 1977, 1980), self-directed learning (Tough, 1967, 1979), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 1994), conscientization (Freire, 1970, 1985) and situated learning (Lave, 1988, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The goal of this review is to illuminate how the majority of adult learning theories obscure, rather than articulate, class-sensitive dimensions of human development and learning. Thus, I question the lack of critical consideration in the dominant themes of those theories, which were built largely upon individualist, cognitive, generalized, and formalized learning characteristics and contexts (Sawchuk, 2003).

First, the works of Knowles (1977, 1980) that define andragogy as “the science and art of helping adults to learn” have been considered seminal (p. 43). He argues that
adults are autonomous, and so their learning occurs in fundamentally different social and developmental contexts from those of children (Knowles, 1977, 1980). The notion of andragogy accentuates the facilitating role of instructor instead of the active, knowledge-delivering and educating role of traditional teachers in children education (Knowles, 1977, 1980). Although Knowles’s work has played a pivotal role in the development of adult education, adult education researchers have critiqued his as dependent on humanist psychological and formal educational foundations (e.g., Collins, 1995; Garrick, 1996). For example, Tennant (1986) demonstrates three “myths” of adult learning theorized by Knowles (1977, 1980) as follows.

… the myth that our need for self-direction is rooted in our constitutional make-up; the myth that self-development is a process of change towards higher levels of existence; and the myth that adult learning is fundamentally (and necessarily) different from child learning” (Tennant, 1986, p. 121).

In particular, the absence of social standpoints that permit researchers to differentiate diverse social groups’ learning and development obfuscates the social divisions interlocked with adult learning (Grace, 1996; Sawchuk, 2003).

Second, another influential adult learning theory is self-directed learning developed by Allen Tough (1967, 1979). In his empirical research, Tough (1979) examined how adults sought to create some lasting changes by engaging in deliberate self-directed learning projects. In consequence, Tough (1967) discovered the substantial extent to which adults learn outside formal educational settings in self-directed ways.
Although Tough (1967, 1979), in part, overcame the exclusively formalized educational setting by illuminating the everyday lives of the adult learners, his research still failed to include the important standpoints of social relation and power structure that underlie adult learning. Learning, when defined as a self-directed process, is insufficient to explain how a specific group of adults shapes its own discourse and culture, which in turn fundamentally determine their social identity and learning.

Third, Mezirow’s (1984, 1991, 1994, 2000) transformative learning theory has been more pervasively employed and discussed in contemporary adult education research. Drawing from Harbermas (1984), Mezirow (1991) developed his theory of transformative learning based upon universal rationality and critical reflectivity as opposed to the polemic between “social cognitivists” and “postmodernists” claiming the society’s corrupted power and influence (p. 171). Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) work in adult education provides an explanation of how adults come to change their understanding and/or worldview as they reflect upon self and society. Despite the extensive acceptance of his theory in the field of adult education, it has been also denounced due to Mezirow’s eclectic application of Junger Harbermas’ (1984) original perspective on the fundamental distinction between instrumental and communicative learning (Sawchuk, 2003). The relations of communicative actions that Mezirow (1991, 1994) emphasizes as the key to elucidating learning remains silent in addressing social and material contexts that have a fundamental impact on adult learning among different social groups (Newman, 1994). Newman (2012) has questioned whether transformative learning is a basically different
type of learning from other learning or whether it is just an aspect of adult learning. The
generalized process of communication and high abstraction premised by Mezirow (1991)
leaves us with little evidence with regards to actual, concrete social and cultural
circumstances where learning among a specific group of adult learners such as the
alienated group of KNOU students occurs (Hart, 1990).

Fourth, the work of Freire (1970, 1985, 1998), especially his notion of
conscientization, offers a much more relevant lens through which to delve into a
subordinated group’s learning. By conceptualizing the pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire,
1970), he theorized conscientization (emancipation and empowerment) based upon
relations of learning from the standpoints of the oppressed, which allowed researchers to
critique the current structure of education and social life. His theory leads to a critical
understanding of adults’ learning tied to action (praxis) in their lives (Freire, 1970). His
conceptualization of conscientization originated from the Marxist tradition of
revolutionary praxis that enables us to understand learning grounded in social practice in
actual contexts (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Furthermore, with his notion of
conscientization, Freire (1970, 1985) problematizes the ways in which forms of
consciousness are reproduced by the hegemonic discourse of education. Nonetheless,
Freire’s theory does not successfully articulate the social production of knowledge and
culture. Additionally, the notion of conscientization is confined to pedagogical processes
and consequently excludes everyday circumstances that shape adult learning
Fifth, legitimate peripheral participation and situated learning as developed by Lave & Wenger (1991) have contributed to grounding the social nature of learning in the discourse of adult education. They underscore the critical dimension of social practice in learning through the variety of their ethnographic studies (e.g., Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991) where learning is defined as a collective practice through which novices may develop their participation in support of experts within a community of practice. Even though Lave and Wenger’s theory of situated learning goes beyond formalized educational settings and individualist viewpoints in conceptualizing learning, the developmental process from peripheral to central participation relies on the biased presumption that experts’ perspectives and knowledge are superior and central. This presumption may hinder researchers from fully understanding the agencies and subjective perspectives of a subordinated group. Furthermore, indicating one-way movement within a bounded community of practice, situated learning theory does not capture heterogeneous types, directions, and dimensions of learning (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999).

To this end, I argue that CHAT is a legitimate alternative to the dominant adult learning theories above, for it can comprehensively and systematically contextualize the subordinated group’s resistance and learning that are deeply grounded in socio-cultural and political-economic contexts. In contrast to the traditional, cognitivist approach that was built on psychological behaviorism and positivist philosophy, CHAT has developed alongside efforts by researchers to overcome the dualism that is commonly perceived in
human activity between subject and object (Cole, 1988; Engeström, 2001). As CHAT provides an alternative lens through which we can understand the mediated nature of social, cultural, and historical human experience that constitutes activity systems of learning and development (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; Greeno, 1997; Kirshner & Whitson, 1997; Wertsch, 1985), it enables us to overcome “the predominately asocial, individualistic conceptions of learning and [thus to] move toward distinguishing the ways in which learning and cognition are culturally constituted through tool-mediated activity and socially structured relations of power” (Niewolny & Wilson, 2009, p. 27). Therefore, this theory manifest itself in unraveling the heterogeneity of human activity by means of viewing an activity system as a unit of analysis, which allows a critical investigation of class standpoints by “an analysis of the processes of social differentiation within the learning process” (Sawchuk, 2003, p. 43).

**Generational Development of CHAT**

According to Lompscher (2006), CHAT positions itself “in the framework of German idealism further developed by Marx in a materialist sense” (p. 35). Despite the fundamental influences of German and Marxist philosophies on the development of CHAT, Vygotsky, Leont’ev, and Luria are generally regarded as the CHAT founders (Engeström, 1999; Lompscher, 2006) because these three scholars first integrated ideas and philosophies of German idealism from Goethe to Hegel into their cultural-historical tradition and approach to human development. More specifically, it was the cultural-historical tradition initiated by Lev Vygotsky that enabled CHAT to grow as a theory of
human development and social practice differentiating itself from other individualized, cognitivist, and behaviorist models of human learning. CHAT has undergone several generational phases in its historical development (Daniels, 2004; Engeström, 1996; Sawchuk, 2003).

A. First Generation: Cultural-historically Mediated Human Action

The first generation is associated with the original work of Vygotsky (1978, 1994), who theorized the culturally mediated human action, learning, and development. Vygotsky (1978) promoted the idea of mediation in order to concretize the socio-cultural complexity of human learning and development. With the notion of cultural mediation, Vygotsky argues that humans do not directly act on the world; rather, human action is always mediated by material artifacts and by social-semiotic tools (e.g., language, numeracy, concepts, etc.) (Engeström, 2001). The well-known triangular model represents the culturally mediating tool as a component of human actions (see Figure 3-1). Vygotsky claims that higher-level human mental activities are always mediated by culturally constructed means (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In this sense, human development and learning should be understood as not an individual achievement but as social and cultural forms of behavior and collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978). The culturally constructed means can be also construed only along with the activity that involves subject, object, and mediating artifact or cultural concepts. Figure 3-1 illustrates the fundamental model of mediated act and common reformation argued by Vygotsky (1978).
Mediation refers to the process through which humans deploy culturally constructed artifacts and concepts to engage in activity (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Mediation plays a central role in social practice and culturally constructed human thinking (Cole, 1988; Engeström, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Culturally mediated tools involve historically cumulative meanings and values in nature (Vygotsky, 1978). Hence, a fundamental feature of cultural-historical approaches is that our higher mental transformation at a moment emerges from “the interplay of different developmental domains including cultural history, ontogeny, and microgenesis” (Cole, Engeström & Vasquez, 1997, p. 20). Historical aspects of mediation implicate not only the evolution of artifacts or concepts over a period of time but also the power and authority embedded in societal structures (Scollon, 2001). Accordingly, the historicity of human action means that as humans use meditational tools or artifacts over time, newer or more complex functions that relate those means to societal values open up.

In a nutshell, meditation contains both a historical component as well as cultural and social attributes. By connecting subjects’ agency to goal-oriented objects, mediation illustrates how human actions are socially, historically, and culturally formed. By the
inclusion of cultural artifacts in human actions, the basis unit of analysis could overcome
the dichotomous relationship between the agency of individuals and the societal structure
(Engeström, 2001).

B. Second Generation: Social Participation & Collective Activity

Leont’ev’s contribution to the development of CHAT was notable because he
integrated activity theoretical domains, which had been developed by German and Soviet
Union scholars, along with the Vygotskyan cultural-historical lineage (Engeström, 2001;
Sawchuk, 2003). Leont’ev, however, disagreed with Vygotsky’s idea in terms of viewing
an individual tool-mediated action as a unit of psychological analysis, claiming that the
individual action remains senseless without a consideration of the overall collective
activity (Engeström, 1987). Due to this distinction, Leont’ev’s contribution is considered
the second generation in CHAT’s theoretical development (Engeström, 1999, 2003).

Leont’ev (1978) defined ‘activity’ as:

The minimal meaningful context for understanding individual actions… In all its varied
forms, the activity of the human individual is a system set within a system of social
relations…. The activity of individual people thus depends on their social position, the
conditions that fall to their lot, and an accumulation of idiosyncratic, individual factors…

[1]n a society a person does not simply find external conditions to which he must adapt
his activity, but, rather, these very social conditions bear within themselves the motives
and goals of his activity, its means and modes (Leont’ev, 1978, p. 10).

In other words, Leont’ev (1978) conceptualized multiple layers that differentiate distinct
levels of activity. In his much cited example of the ‘primeval collective hunt’, Leont’ev (1981) differentiates different roles and goal-oriented actions between catchers and beaters from the larger system of the hunting activity driven by fundamental human needs – foods and clothes. Through this example, Leont’ev (1981) distinguishes the individual actions/operations from the collective activity (See Table 3.1 below). Leont’ev’s (1981) taxonomy of activity types or levels helps to identify and systematically analyze everyday learning “with or without reference to conscious reflection, as something more than simply a shapeless flow of experience” (Sawchuk, 2003, p. 41).

Table 3.1: Hierarchy of activity (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 217)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Everyday description</th>
<th>AT unit of analysis</th>
<th>Oriented toward</th>
<th>Carried out by</th>
<th>Time frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why something takes place</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Motive, transformation of object</td>
<td>Community and/or society</td>
<td>Recurrent cyclic, iterative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is being done</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Goal</td>
<td>Individual or group</td>
<td>Linear, finite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The actual doing</td>
<td>Operation</td>
<td>Condition(s)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Present moment, process ontology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leont’ev (1972) differentiated an action from an activity by defining it as “a process that is structured by a mental representation of the result to be achieved, i.e., a process structured by a conscious goal” (p. 23). At the individual and conscious levels, actions are goal-directed processes, whereas an activity is constituted by actions and guided by the higher-level motive.

What connects individual actions to the collective activity is the notion of “object”
that gives a specific direction (Engeström, 1999). An object in CHAT is defined as a “problem space” or “raw material” (Engeström, 1993, p. 67) at which an activity is directed and which is formed and transformed into outcomes with the support of instrumental tools. In this sense, the motive for an activity is determined by an object, toward which goal-oriented actions are guided. According to Leont’ev (1978), the object of activity is situated in its independent existence, subordinating to itself and transforming the activity of the subject. In addition, activity is seen as an image of the object and as a product of its property of psychological reflection. In other words, the object of activity projects subjective experiences and phenomena into the objective arena; at the same time, it enables us to project the objective world onto our subjective minds. An object itself, furthermore, is not static, and so it cannot be adequately conceptualized without considering the evolving and dynamic character of objects in the CHAT framework. The conceptual formation of object is a dialectical process between subjectivity and objectivity as well as material and social construction.

Lantolf & Thorne (2006) notes, “[T]he higher level of activity is universally collective and takes its specific form from the historical structuring of social practice as ‘the ensemble of social relations’” (p. 217). Thus, the particular forms of social organization can be more analytically approached through the hierarchy of activity (Sawchuk, 2003; Wells, 1999).

C. Third Generation: Activity Systems & Network

The collective contribution by contemporary CHAT scholars to the development
of CHAT theory is regarded as the third generation of CHAT. In particular, Engeström (1987, 1993, 1999, 2001), one of the most influential contemporary CHAT scholars, has contributed to the further development of activity theory in terms of the methodological usefulness of the theory. His theory of expansive learning advances the concrete understanding of human change and development by addressing contradictions as the driving force, which was initially elaborated upon by Ilyenkov (1977). Engeström (1987, 1999, 2001, 2003) acknowledges that while the object and motive give actions coherence and continuity, by virtue of being internally contradictory, they also keep the activity system in constant instability. Engeström’s theoretical framework has been employed in a number of empirical studies probing educational issues, especially networks of groups or organizations (Miettinen, 1999; Scanlon & Issroff, 2005; Toiviainen, 2007).

Engeström (1987) developed the notion of activity system by combining the system’s theoretical principles with CHAT. It starts from the Vygotskian concept of subject-object relation mediated by tools or instruments. However, this initial formulation of activity fails to include critical societal dynamics such as communities, the rules, and the continuously negotiated distribution of tasks, powers, and responsibilities among the components of the system (Cole & Engeström, 1993). Therefore, Vygotsky’s model was revisited and expanded in a way to which collective human activity can be more inclusively depicted by the complex interrelations between the individual or group subject and the community throughout the following generations of CHAT (Daniels, 2004). The idea of the activity system incorporates these societal and contextual factors
influencing and encompassing human activity into the basic model of Vygotsky (Engeström, 2001). Figure 3-2 describes the structure of a human activity system designed by Engeström (1987).

![Diagram of a human activity system](image)

**Figure 3-2:** The structure of a human activity system (Engeström, 1987, p 78)

Through the model of the activity system, CHAT has the ability to perform systemic and systematic investigations of complicated mechanism of human activities and social and cultural phenomena (Daniels, 2004). The model above illustrates the central conceptual components of the general activity system. A subject is an individual or group whose perspective or point of view is driven by a subjective agency, and objects are things or concepts motivated and eventually transformed into an outcome or result. According to Engeström (1987), the community is the group of participants who hold or share the same object, and the division of labor refers to the horizontal actions and interactions among the members of the community as well as “to the vertical division of power and status” (Engeström, 1991, p. 67). A division of labor involves both rules and regulatory norms that allow or constrain the dynamical activity process in a functional
activity system (Thorne, 2000).

Differentiating relatively short-term goal-directed actions from durable object-oriented activity systems (Engeström, 2001), the activity system involves several significant attributes that contribute to analyzing the complexity of activity. First, keys to conceptualizing activity systems include multi-voicedness among multiple constituents within an activity system as well as collectivity among its network relations to other activity systems at macro-level (Engeström, 2001). These two distinctive natures help legitimate a conceptual framework to elucidate how humans’ engagement in activity takes place in a specific context by taking multiple facets of activity into account. Secondly, activity from a CHAT perspective is viewed as a historically developed phenomenon. The historicity of activity is based on culturally mediated tools and objects that represent social norms and are considered as central constituents of activity systems.

Contradiction in CHAT

Most importantly, activity systems are built on the basis of constant internal and external contradictions (Daniels, 2004; Engeström, 2001). CHAT considers contradictions existing in/between human activities as the key to understanding human learning and development (Engeström, 2001). The third generation of the theory establishes the feasibility of accounting for “social differentiation within the learning process” based upon the particular standpoints of different social groups (Sawchuk, 2003, p. 43). Contradictions as a result of tensions in/between activities enable us to understand the ways in which relations among different activity components become legitimized or
conflict in the course of social participation and practice (Sawchuk, 2003).

It is important to note that contradictions be differentiated from mere problems or disorienting dilemmas from the subject-only perspective (Engeström, 2001). Rather, they exist in human activities because each of their constituents has structural conditions that result from tensions (Lord, 2009). These tensions can be conceptualized, along with historical and dialectical understandings of the activities. In addition, contradictions are also to be captured between those components and in relation to other juxtaposed activities (Engeström, 2001). It is these contradictions that cause transformation of a certain activity and consequently lead to learning and to the development of humans. This transformation, which takes place in/between activity systems involving contradiction, is central to understanding resistance and learning among the alienated group of the KNOU students in this research, since their resistance is understood a result of contradictions existing in institutional and educational activities of adult education in KNOU.

Based on the original insights of Marx, the concept of contradiction was introduced and integrated to CHAT by Leont’ev (1981) and Ilyenkov (1982). Engeström (2001) characterized contradiction as “ambiguity, surprise, interpretation, sense-making, and potential for change” (p. 134). Contradictions are rooted in activity, but they are more likely to be seen at the action level of individuals. Activity systems involve various contradictions that may or may not be resolved, which, in both of the cases, result in transformation. Engeström (2001) acknowledged that this transformation reveals an expansive cycle of growth and developed the theory of expansive learning.
Engeström (1987, 2001) argues that there are four distinct levels of contradictions. The primary contradictions can be grasped in each element of the activity system (i.e., subject, object, mediation, community, rules, and division of labor). He particularly underscores a capitalist socio-economic circumstance that accompanies the use and exchange values of the constituents of the activity (Engeström, 1987, 2001). For example, knowledge and information delivered through education can be pursued as objects in exchange for grades or for meaningful use in real life. Furthermore, rules oriented toward the exchange value in an educational setting may give rise to competition; these same rules can encourage risk-taking, and so they can also be oriented toward the use value. A student as a subject of the educational activity may be seen as either a grade-maker from an exchange-value standpoint or a sense-maker seeking the use value of the object.

Secondary contradictions take place between the constituents of an activity system. For example, in his study of physicians’ practices, Engeström (1987, 2001) shows secondary and tertiary contradictions of a doctor’s activity. Traditional instruments used in biomedicine (mediation) may be inadequate for diagnosing and curing the patients with complex diseases (object). This secondary contradiction between mediation and object leads to transformation in the doctor’s medical activity. The tertiary contradictions arise when a culturally more advanced activity introduces a more advanced motive-driven object. In his example, when a clinic administration introduced new methods of diagnoses, this introduction may give rise to contradiction to the traditions of some doctors in that clinic. Finally, the quaternary contradictions arise
between the central activity system and the juxtaposed ones that can be related to activity systems of each element of the central activity system. The multi-layer contradictions in human activity are illustrated in Figure 3-3 where each number signifies the level of contradiction. In his example of clinic activity, Engeström (1987) identified diagnosing and treating patients as an activity system of an object; the clinic administration as a rule-producing activity system; medical schools that prepare doctors and nurses as a subject-producing activity system; and a company that provides drugs and other medical instruments as an instrument-producing activity system. He argued that contradictions existing between the central activity system and those outside activity systems are the sources for transformation and expansion of the activity.

![Figure 3-3: Four levels of contradiction within the human activity systems (Engeström, 1987, Figure 2-7 in Chapter 2, http://lchc.ucsd.edu/mca/Paper/Engestrom/expanding/ch2.htm).](http://lchc.ucsd.edu/mca/Paper/Engestrom/expanding/ch2.htm)
By emphasizing the contradictions in activity systems, CHAT can approach the complexity of reality through a balanced, systemic, and sophisticated analysis (Daniels, 2004; Sawchuk, 2003). This study draws from the CHAT’s conceptualization of contradictions in order to examine resistance rooted in participants’ activities in KNOU by mapping various levels of actions indicating specific contradictions and innovations out to the level of activity systems. This methodological application of CHAT aligns specifically with the research purpose, that is, to identify social and cultural relations affecting individuals’ ways of acting. Moreover, given that contradictions embedded in/between activities are dialectical and historical in nature (Engeström, 1987), data collected using the phenomenological approach are beneficial in applications of CHAT for relating both previous and current experiences to the phenomenon of resistance among them. Ultimately, finding contradictions in this research enables me to analyze the complex ideological influences on educational activities and the resistant experiences of the participants by delving into how individual participants perceive the current system and the potential value of their KNOU education, as well as what they learn through those experiences.

Limitations of CHAT

Given the deep philosophical roots and underlying theories of activity, CHAT has the potential to explicate resistance among the alienated KNOU students, illuminating various key phenomena in KNOU education through its critical and systematic lens. The participants’ resistance can be systematically analyzed in the CHAT framework where
contradictions and human learning are regarded as social, cultural, and historical forms of activities with an explicit concern for the problematic among the participant group. This CHAT investigation entails a sequence of micro-analyses of the students’ experiences of structural contradictions that resulted in their resistance to the KNOU system.

However, as one theory is by no means able to exhaustively explicate a social phenomenon (Illeris, 2003; Jarvis, 2012), CHAT also has limitations, especially in relating macroscopic cultural and political issues to individual human actions. Although CHAT enables us to conduct a micro-level investigation of contingent patterns of activity and to uncover cultural components surrounding the activity, systematic analyses based upon the Engeström’s (1987) triangular model inevitably entail a limitation in grasping the macroscopic discourse underlying the society and culture due to the model’s somewhat static characteristic. This critique corresponds to Sawchuk’s (2003) observation that regards CHAT as a middle-range theory of learning and social action. Due to the microscopic epistemology that underlies CHAT’s explicit model of activity, the system may not fit into the macro-level analysis of social and cultural paradigms and discourses (Sawchuk, 2003). In order to bridge this gap, I elaborate upon the social and educational culture of Korea in a separate chapter before the CHAT analysis.

The absence of a well-articulated critical perspective in systemizing human activities is another widely recognized problem of CHAT (Niewolny & Wilson, 2009). However, I argue that the critique is based not upon the theory itself, but upon the misled discourse of CHAT as, according to Niewolny & Wilson (2009), “the apolitical
conceptualization of socio-cultural adult learning” (p. 37). This is paradoxical because Marx (1867), whose analysis is centered on the class struggle determined by the capital, significantly influenced Vygotsky, who was the pioneer of CHAT. Even though Vygotsky (1978) did not explicitly address politicized social issues such as social class and alienation in his original conceptualization of cultural historical psychology, the influence of critical traditions, which stemmed from the German and Marxist philosophies, on the development of CHAT should not be neglected (Sawchuk, 2003). Sawchuk & Stetsenko (2008) note that Marxist ideology must not be automatically dismissed in the adult education discourse because of its failed economic principle. The political discourse of CHAT needs to be recovered by recounting the dialectical aspects of activity. I specifically focus on the relational aspects of intra- and inter-activities along with the multiple levels of contradiction in order to examine understand activity in context (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999), the so-called totality of human praxis (Bødker, 1991).

A distinctive approach of CHAT to institutional and political issues in the educational context pertains to its analytical ability to connect education systems and subjective activities. For instance, Elkonin (1972) regarded institutional practice as the main source of psychic development. The variety of institutions such as home, school, and organization are filled with different activities (Hedegaard, Chaiklin & Jenson, 1999). Various dominating or leading activities exist during different periods of a person’s life, which signifies the importance of historicity and context of activity rather than the general characteristics of human development. Namely, the practice tradition in societal
institutions considerably affects human activities in diverse ways. Thus, when we see distance higher education as an educational and social institution, resistance conceptualized as a phenomenon can be analyzed in line with various salient or leading activities that permeate adult students’ experiences of contradiction.
CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, I outline how I designed and conducted the research in order to examine heterogeneous aspects of ideology, culture, human experience, and the complex relationships among them. I built an integrated methodological framework to investigate the KNOU students’ pre-institutional experiences of alienation in education and discrimination in society, as well as the phenomenon of their resistance during their KNOU educations.

I begin this chapter with describing the rationale of the integrated methodological framework that is built upon two distinct qualitative approaches: ethnography and phenomenology. In the following sections, I elaborate the data collection and analysis processes. Finally, I conclude this chapter by conceiving of some limitations of the methods.

Ethnography & Phenomenology: Rationale for Integrated Methodological Framework

Since this study aims to unveil the origins and representations of resistance experienced by the alienated group of KNOU students, the research design requires complex epistemological bases to which several distinct qualitative techniques are applied in an integrative manner. According to Plowright (2011), researchers “combine and structure the different elements of the process into a unified, coherent whole” in a methodological process of integration (p. 3-4). Given the substantive and epistemic
interests addressed by this research project, ethnography and phenomenology are combined in the methodological framework.

I conducted a series of individual/focus group interviews and observations as well as collected documents during the research process. Table 4.1 below illustrates how different research inquiries were sought using different approaches and techniques.

Table 4.1: Methodological approaches and analysis foci

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnographic investigation</th>
<th>Techniques</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Analysis Foci</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual/focus group interviews, observations, document analysis</td>
<td>KNOU students, textual materials</td>
<td>Socio-cultural barriers that impacted alienation of the KNOU students, Discourse and paradigms of Korean higher education, Predominant culture in terms of academic credentials in Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenological analysis</td>
<td>Techniques</td>
<td>Data Sources</td>
<td>Analysis Foci</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual interviews</td>
<td>KNOU students</td>
<td>Current experiences of oppression, contradictions, opposition, and resistance in KNOU education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First of all, I draw from an ethnographic approach to the cultural productions and patterns of a group of people (e.g., Atherton, 1999; Burnett, 2004; Munns & McFadden, 2000; Moss & Osborn, 2010; Willis, 1977). In particular, I focus on critical aspects of the ethnographic approach in refining the methodological framework. When educational researchers use ethnography from a critical perspective, they strive to explicate the cultural processes through which unequal social order and relationships are reproduced in
institutions such as school (Anderson, 1989; Carspecken, 1996; Thomas, 1992).

Moreover, these critical ethnographers problematize reproduction, proving that subordinated social groups create cultural forms that resist ideological domination (Pole & Morrison, 2003; Willis, 1977, 1981). Willis (1977, 1981) argues that working-class boys shaped their lives in school and resisted the school’s oppressive structure by constituting their own cultural forms. He claims that the students’ agencies should be considered “not passive bearers of ideology, but active appropriators who reproduce existing structures only through struggle, contestation and a partial penetration of those structures” (Willis, 1981, p. 175).

In a similar vein, Korean society and KNOU as a cultural institution impose distinct forms of learning, curricula, and pedagogy. Thus, an ethnographic approach can provide insights into how the group of KNOU students experienced alienation and resisted the preset educational structure of KNOU. As the KNOU students continuously create and exert learning capacities outside the dominant class forms of knowledge (Powell, 2006), the dominant culture becomes a source of “oppression, discrimination, and exclusion” (Guy, 1999, p. 11). In this regard, the emphasis of this ethnographic investigation is on finding not just individual, subjective responses to the preset problem, but on the dominant culture that defines the KNOU students’ identity and their abilities to critically recognize the social, structural and, political systems that may result in oppression, discrimination, and resistance. In doing so, the main goal is to illuminate an ongoing social process which does not just take place independently, but enters into
complex relations with the process of the social and cultural reproduction of adult education (Levinson & Holland, 1996).

Secondly, the other main methodological approach that incorporates the integrative research design is phenomenology. The crux of phenomenology as a research method for micro-sociological and cultural-historical analysis lies in a reiterating process that enables the researcher to reflect on the life-world of participants, which ultimately offers a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; van Manen, 1990). In this research, a phenomenological approach to the informants’ lived experiences is intended to extend my understanding of the major topic: the alienated group’s opposition and resistance to the educational structure of KNOU.

The phenomenological approach, in contrast to ethnography, emphasizes the individual and subjective recognition of the oppressive educational experiences imposed by KNOU. As a consequence, the phenomenological investigation can produce human-agency-centered outcomes in relation to the group’s resistance. The collected data is analyzed through the process of both phenomenological reduction - from descriptive transcendental perspectives (Moustakas, 1994; Schmitt, 1959; Welton, 2000) and interpretation – and from hermeneutical perspectives (Annells, 2006; Benner, 1994; Leonard, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). I finally develop a description that all individual participants shared as the essence of their experiences about the phenomenon of resistance. In other words, the phenomenological analysis is adopted to delve into the essence of the participants’ lived-experience of resistance while engaging in KNOU’s
educational processes.

**Data Collection**

A series of different data collection techniques were considered to gather both the culturally manifest and implicit aspects of their lives and education experiences. In addition to the participants’ life stories regarding social alienation and discrimination, the collected data indicates core elements of their educational activities in KNOU and their experiences of some explicit contradictions of their KNOU educations. As this research was conducted in Korea, Korean is the language used for data collection and analysis, and the data is translated into English. I drew upon a couple of qualitative research techniques to collect the data relevant to each theme as depicted in Figure 4-1 below.

I collected documents indicating the evidence of alienation, discrimination, and inequality in Korean education and society. Furthermore, textual materials that inform problems of KNOU’s distance higher education were also the target of document analysis (APPENDIX C). In the individual and focus group interviews, I asked the participants’ experience of contradictions in KNOU education as well as their pre-institutional experiences of alienation in education and at work. A couple of observations were additionally conducted to capture implicit aspects of educational contradictions in KNOU and the participants’ resistance.
Research Sites & Time Period

The research occurred at Korea National Open University (KNOU). Its main campus is located in Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, and KNOU also has thirteen branch campuses across the country (www.knou.ac.kr). From early May in 2011, I traveled around the country for approximately three months to meet selected groups and individuals for interviews and observation. Research sites included Seoul, Incheon, Taegu, Pusan, and Kwangju (Figure 4-2). Even though this study does not specifically account for regional differences in terms of the educational system and students’ experiences among those different areas, I took into consideration the variety of localities in sampling, which may have affected the educational culture and institutional development of regional campuses.
Purposeful Sampling

The sampling of this research is purposeful. A rationale for adopting purposeful sampling is grounded in the assumption that the researcher aims to choose a sample from which he/she can learn the most (Merriam, 2002). Through a purposeful sampling, I strove to find KNOU students representing social and cultural alienation in terms of higher education. Specific groups and individuals were selected among KNOU students who had failed to become traditional college students when they were young.

There were two persons who closely collaborated with me in recruiting the
informants. The first one was the dean of student affairs/associate professor in youth education. He and I developed a close working relationship, both academically and personally, since I started working in KNOU as a teaching assistant in 2006. Before the data collection, we discussed how best to conduct confidential and secure research. Additionally, he granted his official approval for me to contact KNOU students in the course of the KNOU Institutional Research Board. The second one was the head of the KNOU student body. She played a useful role as a key informant for the research by helping to organize the interviews and observations.

To recruit individual interview participants, the head of the KNOU student body initially connected me to other student leaders at local campuses. When I first called the student leaders, I explained my research purpose and process as concretely as possible. Subsequently, I asked them to recommend the interviewees along with two criteria based upon which they had to select the participants. The first criterion limited participants to those students who had no higher education experience other than the current KNOU participation. Thus, transfer students and new students who had experienced any other higher education institutions were excluded. The second criterion limited participants to students who have at least two-year of working experience after high (or lower-level) school graduation, as I considered that their social experiences with lower credentials have shaped their identities and ways of thinking of life (Collins, 1979). The student leaders discussed the potential participants regarding this research, and subsequently I was given the contact information for those who agreed upon the participation in the
For the individual interviews, given the various ages, genders, majors, professional backgrounds, and reasons for attending the institution (KNOU) among the target group of KNOU students, it was necessary to maximize the range of information pertinent to the research topic (i.e., structural oppression and students’ resistance) by using a stratified sample group (Merriam, 2002). In addition to the variations of regions, ages, genders, majors, and professional backgrounds, I also considered the grades of participants in sampling. Since participants had to experience the KNOU system for a certain amount of time, I excluded freshmen from the sample.

Sites for observations were determined during a series of discussions between the Dean of Student Affairs, the Head of Student Body, and me. The Dean suggested observing a Chulsuk class to capture the pedagogical context and the ways in which the instructor and students interacted with each other. He also provided the contact information of a student who could guide me to a student group meeting. The head of student body introduced the student leader of the Business and Administration Department in Incheon so that I could attend their student council meeting that took place at the end of that semester (2011 Spring Semester).

I determined the sample size during the research, considering the extent to which data had been saturated. Morse (1994) asserted that sufficient data needed to be collected until “saturation occurs and variation is both accounted for and understood” (p. 23). Accordingly, he proposed that qualitative researchers sample until repetition from
multiple sources was obtained (Morse, 1994). The legitimacy of data saturation is to be assessed not by the quantity of participants but by the repletion of data that represents as many aspects of life under examination as possible. In this sense, the current research began with an unfixed number of participants, and was continued until the data involved sufficient aspects of the education and life experiences of the alienated KNOU students.

**Description of Key Informants**

Describing the participants’ personal backgrounds helps to create an understanding of the characteristics of the research participant group. However, given the number of the participants (see page 106), it is not feasible to outline every participant’s detailed individual information. I selected the six key informants whose interview descriptions were most used in the process of data analysis.

A. Jeong-yeon (ISI1)

Jeong-yeon is a senior in youth education. She told me that she graduated from a commercial high school approximately thirty years ago and had been living as a full-time housewife. She said that her father worked as a public officer when she was young. She was raised with four other brothers and sisters. She noted that she had been implicitly forced to give up a college education because she was the third child and a daughter. In particular, she revealed that her elder brother spent so delinquent an adolescence that her parents paid too much attention to him, which excluded the other children from their parents’ attention. She confessed the fact that she had hidden her application for KNOU because KNOU is not an acknowledgeable institution in her mind. She has been working
for multiple non-profit organizations as a volunteer. Even in those organizations, Jeong-yeon realized that she should expose her final academic degree. She described that moment as embarrassing and frustrating. She said that she was originally interested just in attaining the bachelor’s degree through KNOU. However, as she had noticed the possibility of obtaining other certificates by taking some more courses, she was trying to gain other certificates as well.

B. Eun-joo (ISI3, FGI1)

Eun-joo is in her late thirties and has two children and a husband. She graduated from a vocational high school about twenty years ago. She noted that she was very delinquent during her adolescence, particularly disobeying her parents. She specifically pointed out that she had been really rebellious against her conservative, strict father who had urged her to go to college. She did not even take the national college entrance exam (similar to the SAT) despite her father’s expectation and insistence. After she graduated from high school, she said, she worked as a factory worker in a food-making company. She was working for a construction company union as a temporary worker at the time of the interview. She stated that she was unsatisfied with the discriminatory salary system based on people’s final educational degrees. She thought that she worked more than the college graduates and had a more important role in the organization, although she received much less financial reward from her job due to her low academic credentials. She particularly expressed concern about the negative influence of her low academic credentials on her children’s reputations in school.
C. Sung-geun (ISI5)

Sung-geun is in his mid-sixties and the father of two children who had already graduated from universities at the time of the interview. He was attending KNOU as a full-time student. He said that he went to a technical high school almost fifty years ago. He said that he had worked as a mechanical engineer after graduating from the high school for a long time and became well known in the field. He ran his own business and succeeded for a while, but his business eventually became bankrupt and he lost most of his assets. He noted that he did not plan to rebuild his career through KNOU given the fact that he is an older adult learner. However, he said that his regret for not attending college led him to participate in KNOU at his old age.

D. Eun-ok (ISI11)

Eun-ok is a senior in youth education. She is a housewife in her late forties and a part-time photographer in her husband’s photo shop. In the interview, she shared a detailed story of her unfortunate childhood. She could not attend formal education due to her family’s economic hardship. She said that, right after she finished a middle-school-level night program, she started working as a factory worker in Incheon. She described how the everyday salary from the factories made her parents happy, and that was the only consolation in her childhood. After she got married, she participated in a national distance high school education program and finished her secondary education there. She continuously said throughout the interview that she was always behind others in terms of knowledge and cognitive ability because she lacked a timely formal education. She
frequently indicated her low self-esteem and self-confidence in the interview.

E. Sun-hee (ISI13)

Sun-hee is a senior in KNOU’s Department of Media & Image. She was in her late forties at the time of the interview, with two children and a husband. She was working at a public gas-providing corporation in Pusan where her major task was to gauge the usages of residences by visiting local families. She told me that she went to a commercial high school in Pusan about thirty years ago. She noted that she could not go to college because of her family’s impoverished status even though she had really wished to go to college. After she graduated from the commercial high school, she had been working for a local newspaper publishing company as a clerk but quit her job when she got married. Since then, she had been mostly raising her children at home. She attended KNOU because her husband, who had not attended higher education either, suggested entering KNOU together. In particular, she said that they were attracted to KNOU’s flexible learning schedules and methods. She was actively engaging in various departmental activities as a student leader of her department.

F. Young-chul (ISI26)

Young-chul, who is in his late thirties and runs a cocktail bar in Seoul, is a junior in tourism. He told me that he used to be a soccer player in high school but his soccer career ended due to a serious injury. Young-chul also explained that a gang had recruited him when he was going to high school because of his large size. However, once he recognized the violent reality of the group, he escaped and hid for a couple of years.
When he went back to his hometown, he was no longer welcome by anybody. Feeling aliened, he decided to join the Army. After his completion of the mandatory military service, he worked as an exercise trainer and as a designer in a small costume-making company. He waits to run a tourist business after he graduates from KNOU. Young-chul was actively participating in several student groups and associations in Seoul.

**In-Depth Semi-Structured Individual Interview**

I prepared a semi-structured individual interview guide including both scheduled and unscheduled interview questions (Berg, 2001). The scheduled probe comprises preset questions, whereas the unscheduled one was considered in order “to elicit more information about whatever the respondent has already said in response to a question” (Berg, 2001, p.76). The original version of the interview guide consists of thirty-six questions asking about the participants’ experiences of alienation in education and discrimination in the society due to their low academic credentials as well as their concrete educational experiences in KNOU. The interview guide was designed to keep the focus of the interview on the research questions and to avoid missing crucial information regarding the participants’ experiences and perceptions.

Before the actual interviews occurred, one professor (not on dissertation committee members) and two other graduate students in adult education reviewed the interview guide. Their feedback encouraged me to revise the questions using more natural rather than scholarly language. Moreover, they helped me to make abstract questions more specific and relevant to actual students’ lives (See APPENDIX D). The interview
guide was tested in simulation with two KNOU students before the actual interviews. Through the simulation, several prompts were revised because they did not elicit thick descriptions of the participants’ experiences. Those limiting prompts were questions about 1) their feelings and thoughts and 2) contradictions of KNOU education. Even though I considered the participants’ self-reflection of their own experiences to be an important part of the research, those questions forced the interviewees to speak about their subjective interpretations before sufficiently describing what they had actually experienced. Thus questions starting from “what do you think or feel” were changed to “how did you experience”. Furthermore, when the interviewees were asked what contradictions they encountered during their KNOU education, they could not easily come up with contradictory moments they had confronted. Accordingly, instead of using the term ‘contradiction’, I asked them to depict any difficulties while engaging in KNOU education. Thereafter, I guided them to describe more details of structural contradictions of KNOU education from their experiences and perspectives. The final interview guide consists of nine categories, twenty themes, and fifty-four questions (APPENDIX D).

I conducted individual interviews with twenty-six students in five regions of Korea. The individual interview durations were between forty and one hundred twenty minutes. Each interview was conducted either in a classroom on a KNOU campus or in a nearby coffee shop by appointment. Table 4.2 lays out the profile of individual interviewees.
Table 4.2: Profile of individual interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Major / Grade</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Label</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>05-11-11</td>
<td>Jeong-yeon</td>
<td>Seoul 2</td>
<td>Youth Education/ Senior</td>
<td>56 - 60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>ISI1</td>
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<tr>
<td>05-13-11</td>
<td>Jae-hee</td>
<td>Seoul 2</td>
<td>Youth Education/ Senior</td>
<td>41 - 45</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>ISI2</td>
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<td>05-17-11</td>
<td>Eun-joo</td>
<td>Seoul 2</td>
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<td>36 - 40</td>
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<td>05-25-11</td>
<td>Eun-sung</td>
<td>Seoul 1</td>
<td>Youth Education/ Junior</td>
<td>41 - 45</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>ISI4</td>
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<td>05-27-11</td>
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<td>Youth Education/ Senior</td>
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<td>05-30-11</td>
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<td>Education/ Senior</td>
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<td>Education/ Senior</td>
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<td>Youth Education/ Senior</td>
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<td>06-08-11</td>
<td>Yong-sung</td>
<td>Pusan</td>
<td>Media &amp; Image/ Junior</td>
<td>25 - 30</td>
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<tr>
<td>06-09-11</td>
<td>Sun-hee</td>
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<td>Media &amp; Image/ Senior</td>
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<td>07-14-11</td>
<td>Soon-bok</td>
<td>Kwangju</td>
<td>Environment &amp; Health/ Junior</td>
<td>36 - 40</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>ISI24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During the interviews, I was trying to focus on the participants’ past and current experiences of life, society, and educational systems. However, my experience of KNOU was used as a point of reference and encouragement to enhance the rapport between the participant and myself. Madison (2005) argues that “the interviewee is not an object, but a subject with agency, history, and his or her own idiosyncratic command of a story” (p. 25). Accordingly, I strove to drive the interviewees to discuss their own lived experiences of alienation, discrimination, and resistance, as well as the ways in which those experiences impacted their educational participation in KNOU. Although the semi-structured interview guide was regarded as the anchor of the interviews, the constant negotiation between the participants and me was a dynamic process.

While there was some variation in terms of commitment and openness of attitude among the twenty-six participants, all participants shared with me detailed stories and provided their own reflections on their experiences. I specifically asked every participant to describe his/her life journey to KNOU, whereby I could understand their motives and the socio-cultural influences on their decisions. The participants also explained various challenging moments while they were engaging in their KNOU educations. They shared their lived experiences and perspectives of specific educational activities and/or elements in their KNOU education. Meanwhile, information about the contradictions of KNOU education was also collected. If the information was relevant to the research topics,
regardless of the degree of pertinence, I asked them to elaborate upon their experiences and ideas about the expressed issues. The compiled descriptions of their experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding their life histories and KNOU education comprise a thick data set.

With the consent of the interviewees, I digitally recorded the interviews using a voice recorder, and transcribed verbatim in Korean. This transcription processes helped me to become deeply familiar with the data (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002). The interview transcripts were assigned the labels of ISI1, ISI2,…, ISI26 (ISI: Individual Student Interview) for the analysis in NVivo 9.

Focus Group Interview

Two focus-group interviews (FGIs) were conducted as individual interviews were progressing. The purpose of these FGIs was to understand “conscious, semi-conscious and unconscious psychological and socio-cultural characteristics and processes” among the participant group (Basch, 1987, p. 411). Moreover, the FGIs permitted me to grasp the range of ideas and feelings that the participants have about the issues of contradictions of their KNOU education and their attendant resistance by illuminating the similarities and differences in perspective between the FGI participants (Rabiee, 2004). The rationale of the FGIs is thus that “group processes can help [me] to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to one interview” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299).

The participants of FGIs were arranged by two of the individual interviewees. As
Krueger (1994) suggests that participants should share similar characteristics, I requested those two students to recruit a homogenous group of FGI participants in terms of their educational background and motivation to attend KNOU. Eun-joo (ISI3) introduced three other study group members who had not experienced higher education aside from KNOU. Eun-joo defined their group as similar adult learners in terms of educational motivation because their primary purpose for attending KNOU is to gain bachelor’s degrees. In a similar way, Jung-sook (ISI7) recruited four colleague students who had taken the same face-to-face classes. Table 4.3 outlines the summary of two focus-group interviews. All of the FGI participants were high school graduates, sharing the common goal of completing higher education through KNOU.

Table 4.3: Focus-group interview summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Group Members</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Label</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>06-25-11</td>
<td>Eun-joo and three colleague students</td>
<td>Their study room in an office building near the main campus</td>
<td>50 minutes</td>
<td>FGI1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07-21-11</td>
<td>Jung-sook and four colleague students</td>
<td>A Classroom on Seoul Campus</td>
<td>65 minutes</td>
<td>FGI2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the FGIs, the participants and I discussed their experiences, feelings, and opinions of contradictions of KNOU education and attendant resistance. I played the moderator role by outlining the topics and questions, by allocating the opportunities of speech, and by encouraging every participant to share their ideas and experiences. I specifically kept in my mind not to become judgmental throughout the FGIs (Basch,
Those group interviews were focused on generating evidence based on the synergy of the group interaction (Green, Draper & Dowler, 2003). Thus, subjective ideas and personal stories were shared in orientation to illuminate the cultural manifestations of alienation and resistance as experienced by the group of KNOU students (refer to FGI transcript on page 153 in Chapter 6 for example).

The discussions in the FGIs were also recorded by a digital voice-recorder after I obtained the consent of the participants. Subsequently, the recorded data was transcribed into Korean in the same way as the preliminary data analysis process of the individual interviews. The translated data was put into NVivo 9 for analysis and labeled FGI1 and FGI2.

**Observation**

As ethnographic research seeks “a deeper immersion in others’ world in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important” (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995, p. 2), the research process also involved participation in a Chulsuk class and observation of two meetings among the alienated group of KNOU students. The main purpose of those observations was to enrich my understanding of 1) how formal educational activities in KNOU were operated and 2) how the KNOU students socialized in their interaction and communication. In addition to the general understanding of educational situations in KNOU, I particularly attempted to find any specific instances indicating students’ resistance by observing their behaviors and activities from my own viewpoint (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Tedlock, 2000).
Table 4.4: Observation summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Context Depiction</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>05-26-11</td>
<td>Instructor &amp; 36 juniors in childhood education</td>
<td>A classroom in Seoul campus</td>
<td>A Classroom on Seoul Campus</td>
<td>90 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06-15-11</td>
<td>13 study group members in youth education</td>
<td>A study room in an office building</td>
<td>Study group meeting to prepare for the final exam</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07-25-11</td>
<td>25 student representatives in business administration</td>
<td>A meeting room near Incheon campus</td>
<td>Student council meeting to wrap up the semester</td>
<td>50 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.4 above describes three observations conducted in the research. The first observation took place by attending a Chulsuk class for juniors in childhood education. After obtaining permission from the dean of student affairs, I participated in the Chulsuk class held on the Seoul campus on May 26th in 2011. Given the major (childhood education), there were thirty-six female students whose average age appeared relatively young (predominantly 20s – 30s). My observation focused specifically on how the class was operated in general and what kind of communication and interaction between the instructor and students or among the student themselves happened during the class. I made a field note to record the particularities in the pedagogical process and the interaction, using the observation notes template (APPENDIX E).

The other two observations were conducted in student meetings. I contacted one individual in each group and arranged to be an observation in their meeting. The observations aimed at becoming familiar with situational and interactional circumstances
among the group of KNOU students. The students briefly introduced me in the beginning of the meetings. But aside from that, I was rarely involved in their meeting processes. Through these observations, I was able to understand how the students communicated with another, the reasons they opened the meeting, and how they reached agreement on the meeting agendas. I also took field notes that focused on their discussion and interaction. These field notes were entered in NVivo 9 and used as means to compare data to interview data in analysis.

The observations enabled me to explore what themes emerged in regards to their experiences of institutionally designed educational activities such as examinations, Chulsuk class, pedagogical technology, graduation processes, and so forth as illustrated in the detailed notes of their conversations and educational situations concerning any institutional matters. The observations helped to make sense of their shared ideas about the social and cultural coercions that the institution deliberately or unintentionally imposed on the participants, which, after a more thorough analysis, made it possible for me to grasp the social and cultural dimensions of their resistance occurring when they participated in institutional activities of KNOU.

Textual Materials

Another data source was comprised of textual materials indicating the specific Korean culture’s relation to higher education, academic credentials, and subordinated groups’ alienation and resistance in education. According to Marshall & Rossman (2010), we can attain valuable information and knowledge of the history and context surrounding
a specific setting by reviewing documents. Similarly, Rossman & Rallis (2003) claims, “Journals, diaries, minutes of meetings, policy statements, letters, and announcements are all examples of material culture that researcher gather and analyze to better understand the social worlds they study” (p. 198).

Because of this, I paid special attention to media reports about academic credentials during my research, compiling eight electronic articles from diverse Korean media organizations. These articles involve findings from research studies, editorial columns, and anecdotal comments written by expert professionals in the fields of sociology, education, journalism and politics. Although the epistemic and ideological stances of the articles vary, the majority focuses on the negative impact of credentialism on the Korean society. Through these documents, I could better understand the general discourse and social problem of credentialism in Korea, the educational system of KNOU, and the concerns and apprehension that KNOU students shared online. Moreover, I searched for more diverse institutional documents such as the policy booklets and newsletters of KNOU, institutional documents, recruiting documents, and various online websites. Consequently, those materials can be indirect, but valuable, indicators of the evolving facets of social inequality, educational oppression, and the participants’ resistance. The entire set of textual materials was used to determine the interview and observation foci.

Data Analysis

Since this study investigates two discrete phenomena experienced by the group of
KNOU students, it is necessary to rearrange the entire data set on the basis of those two categories: alienation and resistance. Once all the data was put in NVivo 9, I quickly scanned the entire interview transcripts, field notes, and other textual materials for the purpose of grasping overall themes and organizations of the descriptions. Meanwhile, I wrote memos and notes that illustrate my earlier thoughts on specific data units. This procedure enabled me to have a general sense of data characteristics and to contemplate the a priori classification originally conceptualized through the preliminary research processes. Once the data set was realigned with the two overarching phenomena, I intensively analyzed and refined the entire data set as elaborated in three steps below.

**Developing Initial Meaning Units & Open Coding**

According to Glaser & Strauss (1967), a qualitative researcher seeks what the data indicates by reducing and integrating data to elucidate a phenomenon. Accordingly, in the first phase of data analysis, I broke down the data into discrete incidents, events, perceptions and acts based upon the objective features of the data without interpretation. I highlighted every single data pointing to a certain meaning or meanings describing each phenomenon and put a representative conceptual name on each object (Moustakas, 1994). The names labeled to an object stand for its attributes or the context in which the object was located (Strauss & Cobin, 1998). Subsequently, similar objects were grouped into a common concept – a meaning unit (Strauss & Cobin, 1998). This process is called ‘open coding’ and involves selective analysis and initial coding work (Charmaz, 2006). This open coding process of developing initial meaning units is described in Table 4.5 below.
Table 4.5: Examples of open coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Data descriptions</th>
<th>Initial meaning units</th>
<th>Open codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ISI21</td>
<td>… I admit that the major subjects cannot but contain some academically sophisticated languages. But I don’t understand why areas of cultural studies have so much jargon. They were just twisted and complicated expressions that could have been written in more readable ways… I just think that the author would like to look smarter.</td>
<td>• I don’t understand why areas of cultural studies have so much jargon • The author would like to look smarter</td>
<td>• Jargons in curriculum • Author’s pretention to look smarter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISI25</td>
<td>Yes. In my case, I had to go to the factory because I am the eldest among the six children. The youngest was born posthumously, so I had to take care of him. Anyway, I thought I should finish my high school education. Yes… that was my goal at that time. But I didn’t have good learning conditions when I was going to elementary and middle school.</td>
<td>• I had to go to the factory because I am the eldest among the six children • I should finish my high school education…that was my goal at that time • But I didn’t have good learning conditions when I was going to elementary and middle school.</td>
<td>• Family obligation • Educational motivation • Economic difficulty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGI1</td>
<td>… I don’t think that KNOU graduates are not highly recognized in our society because of the ineffective education system. People may think that I am a hard-working person if I complete KNOU education, but they would never see me as a capable person.</td>
<td>• I don’t think that KNOU graduates are not highly recognized in our society • because of the ineffective education system • they would never see me as a capable person</td>
<td>• Abasement of School Level • Criticizing education system • Dissatisfaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Forty-seven open codes were originally created, which became the source of the next analytical step: categorizing (Table 4.6).
Categorizing

The next phase was categorizing the open codes. As ‘category’ in qualitative analysis mainly refers to a descriptive level of context and to an expression of the manifest content of the text, open codes having similar patterns and relations among themselves were grouped into a category (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The combination of different codes into a meaning-laden category does not necessarily rely on frequency measures; rather, the grouping is based on the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initially identified categories comprised a smaller number of more overarching themes. I reviewed the themes, categories, and attendant open codes alongside a priori conceptions that were explicated in the previous chapters. Through this process, the open codes and categories were revised and rearranged in the line with their corresponding a priori conceptions by reflecting the patterns, relations, similarities and differences among them. As illustrated in Table 4.6, four themes emerged: socio-cultural barriers to educational progress, credentialism, contradictions of KNOU education, and expressions and representations of resistance.

Table 4.6: Codes, categories and themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Family obligations</td>
<td>1) Family backgrounds</td>
<td>Socio-cultural barriers to Educational Progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Economic difficulty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Poverty)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Gender discrimination</td>
<td>2) Social conditions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Reputations among friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Locality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Personal choice</td>
<td>3) Unsupportive educational</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Educational motivation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Delinquency in childhood</td>
<td>- Disadvantages in career development</td>
<td>1) Discrimination in job &amp; career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Discrimination at work</td>
<td>- Bad reputations</td>
<td>2) Others’ Biases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Prejudice of other people</td>
<td>- Family perceptions</td>
<td>Credentialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sense of Shame &amp; Inferiority</td>
<td>- Regret</td>
<td>3) Self-recognitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Low self-confidence</td>
<td>- Inappropriate exams and assignment questions</td>
<td>1) Assessment &amp; evaluation system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Cheating on exams</td>
<td>- Misguiding evaluation structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Dated learning materials</td>
<td>- Superficial knowledge</td>
<td>2) Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Monotonous information</td>
<td>- Jargons in curriculum</td>
<td>Contradictions of KNOU education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Market-oriented curriculum</td>
<td>- Overly theoretical curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Lack of information</td>
<td>- Pitfalls of mass education</td>
<td>3) Technology-driven mass education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Technological problems</td>
<td>- Disadvantages of online lectures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Low self-confidence due to aging</td>
<td>- Multiple obligations</td>
<td>4) Adult learners’ characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Bossy (Authoritative) instructor</td>
<td>- Anger</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Frustration</td>
<td>- Dissatisfaction</td>
<td>1) Frustration &amp; anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Low self-esteem</td>
<td>- Stress</td>
<td>Expressions and representations of resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Abasement of university level</td>
<td>- Criticizing education system</td>
<td>2) Devaluing KNOU Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Derision
- Self-condemnation
- Self-justification

- Compliance
- Indifference
- Enervation
- Reservation

The purpose of grouping the codes is “to link the underlying meanings together in categories” in order to illuminate the recurring patterns embedded in the data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, p. 107). To examine if a group of codes shape a coherent pattern, I checked the validity of individual categories and themes as well as their pertinence to the research topics by constantly revisiting collated data extracts for each category and theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Refining Themes**

The final analytical phase was to elicit and refine the final themes for research questions in the dialectical process of exhaustively reviewing the descriptions pointed to by the emergent codes and categories. In particular, when revisiting the participants’ institutional experiences of KNOU education, I took into consideration the key elements (subject, object, mediation, community, division of labor, and rule) of the activity system in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (e.g., Engeström, 1987). Furthermore, other central principles of CHAT such as contradictions, historicity, and multi-voicedness were used for revising the categories and themes. As Merriam (1998) argues that devising categories is informed by research purpose and the investigator’s orientation and
knowledge, CHAT provides an analytical lens through which I could systematically refine the complex facets of the participants’ experiences embodied in the data.

Once the themes were identified, I used the Moustakas’ (1994) textual-structural synthesis to integrate each participant’s experiences and the underlying dynamics of the experience in order to illuminate a unified statement of the essence\(^8\) of the participants’ lived experiences of the contradictions. According to Moustakas (1994), the textual-structural synthesis is intended to create a vivid account of the range of experiences as a whole. This process allowed me to approach the essence of the lived experience of contradictions among the participants following an imaginative and reflective study of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Consequently, within the CHAT framework, I make an argument in relation to research questions by using the narrative extracts that represent the meaning, structure, and essences of the lived experience for the group of KNOU students experiencing the phenomenon of resistance (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2002).

**Trustworthiness**

To maintain the trustworthiness of this study, I drew upon methodological triangulation by employing two distinct approaches to discrete epistemological features of the research questions as well as gathering data through individual and focus group discussions.

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\(^8\) Essence in phenomenology means what makes a thing what is, that is, without which it would not be what it is (van Manen, 1990). In the analysis of this research, I draw specifically on Moustakas’s (1994) conception of *epoche* that refers to refraining from judgment and commonplace way of perceiving things in order to illuminate the emerged essence of the participants’ lived-experiences of KNOU education (Moustakas, 1994).
interviews, observations, and document analyses. In addition, I considered theoretical triangulation by examining the literature on alienation, resistance, distance higher education, KNOU and CHAT as thoroughly as possible, referring to them when I delineate the research findings. By outlining the rationale for the methodological and theoretical choices, I described why the heterogeneous research inquiries require multiple approaches and techniques and how CHAT provides a congruent analytical model for examining the phenomenon of resistance among the alienated adult students in KNOU.

**Limitations of Methods**

The purely anthropological point of view inherent in ethnography as a research method might increase my pre-existing bias, which comes from my own experience working for KNOU. In fact, some might argue that my pre-existing bias can interrupt the genuine ethnographic and phenomenological research processes. In the introduction of his book *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*, Walcott (2008) takes a different perspective on this common issue in ethnographic research by posing a question: “Can one do ethnography among one’s own people, among a group in which one already plays other roles, and perhaps even do ethnography on oneself?” (Walcott, 2008, p. 2). By articulating a cultural influence on subjective perspective, it is possible to distinguish fact from opinion in ethnographic research (Walcott, 2008). Thus, Walcott (2008) affirms that ethnographic researchers can conduct research in their own cultures.

Despite the dilemmas that I encountered in the course of this research, I strove to resolve them by contemplating my own subjectivity and its effects upon the research
context (Walcott, 2008). I regarded my own experience as a pivotal source of information thus allowing me to distinguish my own opinions from the facts that I observed and collected via the research.

Another methodical issue is relevant to the ways in which I used NVivo 9 for data analysis. I appreciated and utilized the useful data arrangement power of NVivo but did not use its automated functions of generating codes and queries. My reluctance is due to NVivo’s frequency-based approach to determine which data is significant. I strongly think that the most frequent theme in data sets may lead to misinterpretation if the data collection was poorly performed. A small part of the description can contain more meaningful evidence that could facilitate relevant interpretation. To this end, I relied on NVivo in arranging various sets of data, finding codes and themes, and identifying emergent meanings and patterns, but I avoided its technically automatic functions for data analysis and interpretation.
CHAPTER 5. DISCRIMINATION & INEQUALITY EXPERIENCED BY THE KNOU STUDENTS

In this chapter, I discuss the findings with regards to alienation as experienced by the participants in the past and their perspectives on these alienated experiences in terms of educational opportunity and achievement. As each individual interacts with a given configuration of the KNOU system in a distinct way and with his/her own motivation (Cremin, 1976), it is crucial to concretize their life contexts in order to understand their resistance to the KNOU education system. Therefore, identifying pre-institutional experiences of the participants can explicate the complex relation between their past individual experiences and the representations of resistance embodied in the current educational experiences of KNOU.

The first part of this chapter illustrates the findings concerning socio-cultural impediments to the participants’ educational progress, and the second part examines participants’ social experiences with low academic credentials. The following discussion sheds light on various aspects of participants’ experiences and perceptions regarding the first and the second research questions: 1) What are the meanings and values of the KNOU degree for the alienated KNOU students, and 2) what socio-cultural factors prevented the KNOU students from accessing higher education as young adults? The findings indicate why and how resistance, which has been impacted by fundamental social-individual conflicts, may affect the mediated experience of adult education in KNOU.
Socio-cultural Barriers to Educational Progress

The participants’ accounts of social and cultural barriers impacting their alienation in education are again categorized into three specific codes: family background, gender discrimination, and economic hardship. Since the number of female participants expressed gender discrimination within their families, the codes of family background and gender discrimination are not clearly separable. Although the three codes are complexly tied to one another, each code illuminates how the Korean society and its socio-cultural structure deprive this social group of educational opportunities. Given the variety of contents in different participants, those three codes play a touchstone role in looking into the details of personal stories regarding alienated experiences.

First, when asked to depict educational circumstances in childhood, eighteen individual interview participants pointed out that their alienation was related to family-associated factors. For example, the stories of Jeong-yeon and Mi-pan, a senior and a junior in youth education respectively, represent how decisions to send children to formal education were made by parents in traditional Korean families. In the beginning of the interview with Jeong-yeon, I asked about her educational background, especially her school years.

When I went to the elementary school, my family couldn’t afford to send me to college.

My dad was a public officer with five children. Of course, if I kept arguing to go to a college, my dad may have allowed me to go, but I didn’t argue and I timidly followed his opinion… I am the third child out of five. I have an older brother and sister and a younger
brother and sister. I am in the middle. My older brother was a delinquent adolescent. So my mom was always concerned about him. In the meantime, I was left out of our parents’ attention. My sisters and I went to commercial high schools. But my two brothers went to colleges in Pusan. (ISI1, Page1-2, Line15-21)

Joeng-yun says that she was an obedient child in her family. As she reflected upon her youth in the interview, she found herself having the will to continue her education, but her father made this decision, implicitly but forcefully. Given the Confucian culture widely rooted in many traditional Korean families (Cho, 1998), she recalled that she had to follow her father’s decision. Her father’s authority was firm. She also reflected that her compliance with her father’s authority led her to go to a commercial high school\(^9\), although she recognized this decision neither critically nor seriously at that time.

Mi-pan’s story also illuminates how a traditional Korean family deprived her of educational opportunities she wanted. In a similar way, she was asked about her childhood in the interview.

I really wished to go to a college-bound high school, but the family status was so bad at that time. I looked for some college-bound schools, but I couldn’t get into one because I was from the countryside. That was a big, big problem. So I had to go to a commercial high school at night in Seoul… I am the seventh child out of eight. The message I got

\(^9\) Commercial high school is a type of vocational high schools built to prepare students not for higher education but for the workforce in Korea. In commercial high schools, students are taught basic knowledge and skills about business and trade in order to join the workforce right after they graduate. Most commercial high schools train female students only; male students are typically trained in other types of non-college-bound high schools such as technical high schools.
while I was growing up is that I am “useless”. That kind of bias still persists in my mind even now. Our family didn’t support my study, but I tried to study further. I was curious what college education is like. Hm… yes, I wanted to know what’s going on there. But I couldn’t afford to enter a college. It was like a dream. So I enrolled in a lifelong education program at a university lifelong education center. (ISI10, P2, L6-13)

In this period of fast industrial growth, Korea had a significant social problem with respect to its demographic structure. While Korea started to become more industrialized in the 1970s, many middle- and lower-income families produced many children. The government even promoted the birth control movement called “Let’s deliver two babies and raise them well” during the late 1970s (Park, 1978). The overpopulation was partly because Korean society used to be an agricultural society valuing more children, which means more manpower for farming (Cho, 2004). Most parents with many children could not afford to get all of them formal education due to their limited economic capacities (Yoon, 2010). In those families, educating children was a matter of prioritizing. Like Jeong-yeon and Mi-pan, an individual child’s will and intent to obtain an education were likely to be ignored due to the parents’ prioritizing other children.

Ji-bok’s story also shows how the Confucian Korean tradition alienated some children in Korean families in the past. He grew up in a rural community in the province of Kyoungbuk. In his agricultural family, he realized that his rural community did not value education as much as in urban communities. He thought he wanted to do something else than farming, but his father did not allow him to do so.
R: My hometown is Eui-sung. At that time, there were so many children in each family. Our family had eight children, only a few of whom studied. I went to an agricultural high school in my hometown. My father forced me to do farming but I resisted his order. I wanted to do something else. So I ran away from my father. I learned engineering skills and worked as an engineer for my life before I started this business.

I: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

R: There are three sons and five daughters. The eldest son went to a college, but the others didn’t. In the 1970s and 80s, especially in rural communities, there were not that many people entering colleges, or even high schools. In cities, people studied more because that was the only way to succeed. But rural people didn’t think of the life in that way.

I: How was it possible that your oldest brother went to a college?

R: That was my father’s decision. He thought that it is enough to educate only one son in the family. But I didn’t think I should follow my father. I wished to do something else. So I ran away and went to the city [Taegu]. There I learned the skills to become an electronic technician.

I: What made you want to do something other than farming?

R: Just… I thought I didn’t want to have a life like my father’s. (ISI19, P2, L9-22) Interestingly enough, his father envisioned the potential of higher education, but at the same time, he thought that his other children should farm. Ji-bok was alienated from educational opportunities because he was not the first son in his family. In many Korean
families, likewise, parents’ prioritization for children education typically subordinated female and younger children.

Additionally, parents’ expectations led some participants to give up their education. Eun-ok’s story describes how as a child she took for granted her experience of alienation because her parents did not encourage her to succeed.

R: I didn’t go to a high school, but took the Gumjeonggosi [similar to GED] later in my life. I have mom and dad and four sisters and one brother. I am the fourth child in our family. By accident, I went to three different elementary schools. I went to S elementary school in Incheon. Because there were so many students in the school, it was divided into two different schools. I had to move to one of them. I don’t even have an alumni meeting because I moved a lot. I went to a Christian middle school that was a night school (she was crying and silent for a moment). I went to S women’s middle school, but it was not a regular program. There were three programs during the day, at night, and in the afternoon. I went to the afternoon program that didn’t have as much studying time as the other two programs. I had to work to make money for my family, so I couldn’t learn much. I know I have little knowledge, relatively very little. Right after I graduated from the middle school, I went to a factory to work. Even if I had to work all the time, I was thinking I had to study. Even vaguely, I was feeling a need to study. I was always behind in learning.

I: Didn’t you think that it is unfair that you were not able to get formal education?

R: No, no. Not at all, at that time. I took it for granted since I have a younger brother.

I: Does that mean you thought that you couldn’t go to high school because you are a
daughter?

R: That was really common. I was not interested in studying. I was not mature in nature.

If I made a little money, that made my mom happy. I just took it for granted.

I: When do you think you need to study again?

R: I did not go to school seriously. So I realized I know so little even though I graduated from a middle school. Right after I graduated, I went to a factory close to our house to work. I had to work all the time, but I had some aspiration to study because I knew so little. Because I realized my knowledge was little, I was less confident. But I couldn’t find any better life at that time. (ISP11, P2-3, L21-25,1-7)

Her account, “that was really common” indicates the prevalent Korean culture in the past. Even though she did not realize the need for education at that time, she, as most other lower class and female children in Korean families underwent cultural coercion in attending formal education. She expressed her low self-confidence by repeating such words as “I know so little” and “my knowledge was little.” She thought that her failure of educational achievement was due to her lack of knowledge. However, her life story tells us why she has low self-esteem. Her family backgrounds and the socially prevailing discrimination stigmatized her identity as a lower-class youth factory worker. It was pretty late in her life when she realized her enthusiasm to learn. KNOU, in a way, gave her the learning opportunity that was unmet in her early life.

Students’ stories above affirm that educational alienation in Korea was highly affected by their families’ backgrounds. In fact, family background is the most
conspicuous social and cultural barrier to which many participants attributed their alienation in education. Their accounts represent what particular cultural norms prevailed in many traditional Korean families, especially lower class families, in the past. In addition, their life stories enable us to understand how the cultural norms prevented them from having educational opportunities.

Second, even though the aforementioned cases are partly related to the issue of gender in their families, some participants addressed gender discrimination more directly in relation to their alienation in education. Since one of the important missions of KNOU is to provide equitable learning opportunities regardless of gender (KNOU, 2011a; The President Decree, 1971), many women who could not accomplish their desired education in the past choose KNOU as an alternative (KNOU, 2011b). A discrete focus on the code ‘gender discrimination’ leads to a reformulation of the female participants’ experiences in order to relate the gender relationship in family to alienation in education.

Mi-jung is a senior in youth education in her late thirties. In the interview, she noted that she had wished to go to a college, but her father did not allow her to go there because she was the eldest daughter. She was asked to go to a commercial high school and to make money for her family as soon as possible.

My father was a taxi-driver. Our family had a hard time surviving with the little money he made by driving a taxi. My father was not a flexible person, and so he couldn’t earn a lot of money. He didn’t think that he could educate all six children. So he asked me to go to a commercial high school because I was the eldest daughter. I argued, “if you send me
to a college, I will take care of the other expenses such as tuition and living expenses by myself.” But he didn’t allow me that option. So I went to a commercial high school and got a job even before I graduated to make money as early as possible. (ISI5, P2, L6-13)

Yeon-sook, another senior in environment and health, directly pointed out the social conditions that discriminated against women in terms of educational opportunity.

There were social conditions that blocked women’s educational participation. I think this was for cultural reasons. I grew up in a rural community. I even fed cows… (laughing).

My father believed that women shouldn’t study too much. And also I was the eldest child.

As the eldest child and a daughter, I thought it is natural to give up education… I have one younger brother and one younger sister. Only the brother went to a college. I think the difference between urban and rural areas also existed. In the country areas, the Confucian culture affected our lives so much. (ISI22, P2-3, L27-28,1-3)

Both Mi-jung and Yeon-sook’s experiences show how the Confucian culture’s valuing of sons over daughters used to be rooted in the Korean society (Park, 1978). These two women had conservative fathers, and their fathers did not allow them an education because they were girls.

Third, aside from the cultural factors highlighted by the two codes above, many interview cases directly illuminate participants’ alienation in relation to the economic hardship of their families. The participants’ accounts of the relationship between their economic adversity and alienation in education shed light on how educational opportunities were determined by the economic status in a capitalist society such as
Kyoung-yeol is a senior in the department of Chinese Language and Literature. He reflected that he could not continue his education because he witnessed his mother’s economic difficulty. Instead of choosing higher education, he decided to get vocational training to become an engineering technician when he was young.

I: So was your father enthusiastic about his children’s education?

R: My father passed away in 2002. He didn’t have passion for children’s education. I thought he had a less-than-average mentality in terms of children’s education, even if he didn’t have any difficulty doing OK in his routine life. He did wrong in not only education but also with the family economy… My mother took responsibility for feeding the family. I realized this situation at a young age. I realized that I shouldn’t go to school. If I had lived in Taegu, a big city, I might have thought that I should study. But in my hometown, a rural community, I didn’t even try to study.

I: What, do you think, made you give up education?

R: Poverty… because we were extremely poor… because I saw my mother was suffering from it… When we went to high school, the tuition was not that high. It was about thirty thousand won, which is the same as three hundred thousand [about $300] in the present currency, but my mother had hard time paying it. I observed it several times. She also had to take care of my other two brothers’ tuition. I decided not to burden my mother and stopped going to the school. (ISI21, P3, L3-19)

Even though Kyoung-yeol decided to become a technician by himself, his case reveals
how individual impoverishment limited educational participation in Korea.

Ki-soon similarly described her family’s poverty and its effect on her education during her school years. She failed to attend formal education in a normal way due to the economic responsibility given to her.

In my case, I had to go to factory because I am the eldest among the six children. The youngest was born posthumously, so I had to take care of him. Anyway, I thought I should finish my high school education. Yes… that was my goal at that time. But I didn’t have good learning conditions when I was going to elementary and middle schools. Whenever I asked my mom to do something for me, the answer was “no”. She always said she had nothing. Because I was an adolescent, I got so frustrated. But I couldn’t express it, and just had to be patient. My dissatisfaction was piled in my mind. I didn’t want to go to school because I didn’t have anything, so I stopped. But whenever I saw friends wearing the school uniform, I wanted to go back to school. So I told my mom I should go to a night-time school. My mom let me go, so when I was fourteen years old, I went to a night-time school and worked in a factory during the day time. (ISI25, P2, L2-8)

Korea is recognized a society that highly values education (Seth, 2002). Leaders of developed countries extol Korean education, which, they believe, was the primary driver behind Korea’s current economic success (Kwon & Yi, 2009). Despite the widespread acknowledgement of the value of education, impoverished and rural families could not give all of their children the opportunity of formal education. Kyoung-yeol and Ki-soon’s stories sound personal, but they attest that alienation in education is highly
associated with the capitalist organization of Korean society. That is, the lower socioeconomic status of their families restricted the choice of education, and consequently alienated them.

The participants’ life stories illuminate how Korean social and cultural barriers played out in preventing them from accessing educational opportunity. On the one hand, each story contains the actual phenomenon of alienation in education within the participant’s life-history at the individual level. On the other hand, by looking into the alienation that each participant experienced in his/her life, we can extend our analysis to how the inequitable social structure and discriminating culture of Korea resulted in alienation in education. In addition, the participants’ alienated experiences in the past and unmet educational needs enable us to recount their social contexts and perspectives.

**Korean Society Highly Valuing Academic Credentials**

There are three emergent major codes – family backgrounds, social conditions, unsupportive educational environments – that indicate the contexts where the participants experienced social discrimination and inequality in relation to academic credentials. These contexts encompass their social lives as well as power relationships in the workplace and Korean society in a broader sense. Contradictions in their socio-cultural understanding of academic credentials emerged in an explicit form when they began to speak of concrete practices along with their unmet educational needs.

I use part of the data under the first and second open codes, ‘family perceptions’ and ‘social reputations’ respectively, to explicate the alienated students’ perspectives on
the meaning and value of academic credentials in Korea. The data allowed me to discern how academic credentials play out in their everyday family and social lives. Additionally, it points to the participants’ standpoint with respect to academic credentials. On the other hand, the data regarding the second and third codes is used to analyze social relations where they experienced discrimination and inequality due to their low academic credentials in Korean society.

Understanding the Standpoint of Alienated KNOU Students

To begin with, six individual interview participants described a sense of shame when they had been asked to complete demographic surveys by their children’s schools. For example, Eun-joo said:

Whenever I had to complete a demographic survey for my kids, I felt a shame for my final education. I was really sorry for my kids. I was concerned about the confidentiality of my record because I thought, if it’s open, that may negatively affect my children’s reputations. (ISI 3 P4 L2-4)

Although three participants noted that they could overcome their low academic credentials in their professional lives, they confessed their emotions of shame and apology to their children when they had to reveal their low academic credentials to their children’s teachers and schools.

This phenomenon can be better explained once we understand two peculiar cultural factors of the Korean society. First, the traditional culture of Korea regards the origins of people as important (Deuchler, 1992). In a culture where people’s reputations
are determined by their family’s social class, many Korean parents, including the participants, speculate that their low social and educational statuses may have a negative influence on their children’s reputations at school. Second, the participants were concerned about a determinant influence of academic credentials on social positions in Korea. In other words, they believed that their low academic credentials might have negatively affected not only their own social positions but also other people’s impressions of their children. The participants who expressed this concern in the interviews considered their low academic credentials as a stigmatized label. Sun-hee shared her thoughts about Korean society’s excessive recognition of academic credentials.

Our society is credential-oriented. Particularly, academic credentials are so important in the evaluation of a person. That kind of culture is prevalent and deeply rooted everywhere in the society. Our children also wish us to have higher academic credentials to make more money. My daughter asked me one day, “Why do you live like that, although both of you [parents] study that hard?” (laughing) I think that, with the expression ‘like that’, she meant why we don’t make much money. They think if you study hard, you can make a lot of money, which is not true in our case. (ISI13, P4, L5-10)

Sun-hee explained that when she witnessed the negative perception of her daughter, her low academic credentials left a scar. Even if other family members do not see their low academic credentials as a pitfall, the alienated students tended to develop inferiority. They attributed this self-condemnation to experiences of discrimination because of their lack of academic credentials. Since they had recognized the powerful
impact of academic credentials on the reputations of people through their social
experiences, their low academic credentials had a detrimental effect on their self-esteem.

Part of the data under the second code ‘social reputations’ illuminates the
alienated students’ perspectives on the impact of academic credentials on social and
ruling relations in Korea. For example, Kyoung-yeol indicated that his lowered self-
esteeom was due to his low academic credentials, and he presented his perspective on the
credentialism characteristic of Korean culture.

Because I didn’t have higher education, I have low self-esteem and less self-confidence. I
sometimes see myself miserably. In our culture, one’s academic credentials determine
how others see you. For example, people would think that you graduated from a great
school if you drive a nice car. That kind of stereotype makes me feel miserable. (ISI21,
P3, L9-13)

He had formed a negative self-image due to his low academic credentials through his
social experiences of other people’s biases for higher academic credentials.

The discrimination and inequality that the alienated students experienced in
Korean society made them feel inferior due to their low academic credentials. This, if not
exhaustively, indicates that the participants view of Korean society as unjust and
inequitable in terms of academic credentials. In addition, the negative perspective of their
own academic credentials sometimes resulted in lowered self-esteem and self-confidence.
They realized the necessity of education, which was expressed through their regret for not
attaining higher education when they faced social discrimination and biases. The
participants’ accounts of their lived experiences of family and social prejudice due to their low academic credentials reflect their motivations to attend KNOU and to obtain higher education later in life.

Making Invisible Social Discrimination & Inequality Visible

In addition to providing a deeper understanding of the participants’ perspectives, it is important to understand how the social and institutional mechanisms in relation to academic credentials have given rise to discrimination and inequality in Korean society. Social discrimination and inequality based on academic credentials becomes visible when we analyze the participants’ experiences of alienation in their social lives. In particular, the institutional structure of Korean organizations reinforces a status quo in which the participants with low academic credentials experience discrimination and inequality. The following discussion is grounded in four participants’ concrete cases of discrimination in their jobs and workplaces, with the specific focus on not personal experiences but institutional contexts that brought about the discrimination.

Jeong-yeon realized that her low academic credentials could prevent her from pursuing desirable careers and thus have a negative impact on her employability. The excerpt with Jeong-yeon below provides an important clue as to how the dominant culture valuing high academic credentials are prevalent in the Korean labor market and infused into her common sense.

Whenever I heard, “you graduated from a commercial high school,” I hated myself, who didn’t go to a college. I’ve heard so many times this kind of people’s preoccupation.
When I did my volunteer service, I had to submit my resume. Also, when I was working for the welfare center, I had to write down my final education. Wherever I work, I have to submit my resume… I realized I have to improve my educational preparation. (ISII, P2-3, L30-32, 1-2)

In her case, we can observe the negative connotation of commercial high school among Korean people because graduates from those schools are expected to get lower-class jobs. Considering the widely persistent prejudice against commercial high schools, she expressed her feeling of shame whenever she had to reveal her educational preparation for jobs. Thus we can reaffirm the socially entrenched stigma of low academic credentials in her accounts. Jung-yeon further described her experiences of the inequitable social relation persisting in the labor market. She stated:

Whenever you apply for a job, you have to fill in your education. Peoples’ academic credentials are really important in the selection process. Many companies don’t even consider factors other than academic credentials. One of my friends told me that her company reviewed resumes of only those who graduated from a few top schools. (ISII, P3, L7-11)

Hee-jung also shared her experience of discrimination in relation to her academic credential in the job application process.

I was the only one working with a high school diploma in my first workplace. There was no problem at that time. But when I had to move to another job, I faced a big barrier due to my low academic credentials. I’m confident that I can work better than others. But I
The job experiences of Jung-yeon and Hee-jung show how academic credentials determine, or at least significantly influence, the social structure of Korea. Irrespective of their ability, they found themselves being discriminated against due to their low academic credentials. After experiencing barriers and limits, they realized that discrimination against those with low academic credentials exists throughout Korean society. As opposed to a meritocracy, which is built on the social agreement that a person must be evaluated on merit rather than by academic credentials alone, the tenacious prejudice in favor of high academic credentials in Korean society has alienated those who have low academic credentials but high abilities. This socio-cultural bias has engendered victims like Hee-jung, who had capability and high self-confidence in her field.

Yong-sung experienced more formal discrimination due to his low academic credentials in preparation for his career. When he applied for a scholarship to go to Japan, he learned that a bachelor’s degree is one of the requirements for the scholarship. He could not proceed with his application and accordingly decided to enter KNOU to complete his higher education.

At that time I was not that interested (in getting a higher educational credential). But when I faced the barrier to apply for the scholarship, I started to look for a college. In the meantime, I found KNOU, but it was four years of courses. I would like to go to a two-year college, but… (ISI12, P10, L16-19)

In addition to Yong-sung, nine other participants noted that they had faced
institutionalized barriers for having low academic credentials. They shared their experiences of the limits institutionally imposed upon them such as the impossibility of opening private educational institutions and applying for middle-class jobs, etc. Their experiences represent how academic credentials have been institutionalized and thus deeply rooted in the society. Even though it is a general phenomenon in every society where academic credentials have been formalized and institutionalized, the participants viewed this as a serious problem in terms of social justice because they believed that the elite groups continue to maintain and consolidate the discriminating and inequitable social relation on the basis of academic credentials.

Furthermore, the participants underwent social discrimination and inequality in terms of job or work opportunities. Eun-sook’s case points to the underlying culture of Korea that determines people’s social positions according to academic credentials.

When I worked at a restaurant, I felt ignored by others. They didn’t even have the least respect for human beings. So I thought I should learn and get a better job. Those laboring jobs were most of the time part-time work. When I came to a new workplace, they didn’t even greet to me but just gave me a duster and a broom right away. They were absolutely the scum of the earth. (ISI14, P6, L5-9)

Eun-sook said that she could have only laboring jobs because of her low academic credentials. By depicting how other people ignored her in her workplaces, she explained that she realized the necessity of education in those moments. As other examples have also demonstrated, her experience represents the social barriers and discrimination faced
by those with low academic credentials. In particular, the discrimination according to academic credentials refers to devalued or alienated labor in the Korean society. The extent to which a society alienates human labor is equivalent to how social injustice is widely and deeply established in the Korean society. Eun-sook’s experience implies that the Korean society typically alienates lower-class labor and thus has an unjust labor structure in many organizations. In addition, her case shows that her alienation in education evolved into her alienated labor in the unjust social relation.

Regardless of the kind of jobs the participants held, the alienated students experienced social relations that forcefully discriminated against and alienated them in various social contexts of Korea. In particular, given the capitalist nature of Korea, they recognized that capital was distribution based upon this inequitable social relation. The participants realized that the gaps of income and the possibility for professional advancement between high school and college graduates are reinforced and are conversely consolidated by the inequitable social structure organized alongside the level of academic credentials. For example, in the first focus group interview, the participants shared their experiences of discrimination in the workplace.

I: So did you experience any limits or difficulties in the workplace? Please share your experiences.

R1: Most of all, academic credentials determine performance rating and promotion. To get promoted to the chief staff, it generally took five years for those with high school degrees. But it took only three years for those holding college degrees. Also other people
see you differently depending on your final degree.

R2: That’s right. When I was working as an accounting secretary, I actually did other jobs too. But, you know, because of the bias against high school graduates, my opinions were not reflected in the decision making process. My salary was the least as well. So I felt like being ignored even though I worked the most in the organization.

I: I see. The discrimination worse in the past, wasn’t it?

R3: Obviously, there was a big difference in salaries between college and high school graduates. But, at that time, it was taken for granted that women quit working when they got married, regardless of their academic credentials. This kind of gender discrimination still persists, but it was even worse in the past.

R4: I also started working right after graduating from a commercial high school. It was a trading company where I worked as an accounting secretary. But I quit the job after two years because the primary jobs were making copies and coffee (all laughing). So I stopped and decided to go to college. (FGI1, P7-8, L29-32, 1-12)

Through the experiences of the alienated students, the influence of the institutional organizations on the specific experiences of individual students became more understandable. The discrimination and inequality that they confronted in their social experiences are also textually represented. For example, the social understanding and discourse of academic credentials has been shaped through the media. Texts in the media can be posited as an analytical target to advance our understanding of the institutional order in regard to academic credentials in Korean society.
A typical example of a text in the media is an opinion article published by the Seoul Economy newspaper on June 20th in 2010. The author outlined the social problems that resulted from credentialism.

… Which school a person graduates from determines his/her social class, and the power and wealth of our society seem to be monopolized by those who graduated from top universities. Companies consider academic credentials as the most crucial factor for employment, and young people take a look at a partner’s academic credentials first. Thus, if one has high academic credentials, people see the person as capable; if not, they ignore him/her (Cho, 2010).

The article confirms the problematic phenomenon that this research explored in-depth in experiences. The newspaper article particularly emphasizes the many detrimental effects that credentialism has upon Korean society. Those effects resulted from the inequitable social structure of Korea. The relationship between education and the inequitable social structure has been pointed out in many other newspaper articles. For instance, CNews published the results of a national report containing the level of justice of Korean society in 2012. As a result, the article (Kwon, 2012) illustrates a variety of indicators of the inequitable Korean society, one of which was the fairness among those who have earned different academic credentials. Likewise, the media has played a role in forming the discourse regarding the meaning and value of academic credentials, and most media stories conform to the pathological social problem depicted in the participants’ experiences.
Conclusion

The findings of this chapter indicate that the participants’ pre-institutional experiences of alienation are embodied in their social experiences of discrimination and inequality in relation to education. The participants’ experiences imply that academic credentials in Korea are an important factor that determines the ruling and governed classes. The determination of social position by academic credentials has been justified continuously, if silently, by the governing elite of Korean society. In the meantime, those who hold low academic credentials such as the participants have been constantly excluded, alienated, and discriminated against.

Vygotsky (1978), the pioneer of socio-cultural theory, acknowledges that a certain form of human learning and development is only possible through socio-cultural engagement. In the same vein, the participants’ resistance and learning in the specific context of their alienated lives can be differentiated from other social groups. I consider the alienated group of KNOU students (i.e., adult learners without higher education degrees) as a social group categorized by educational opportunity and social class. As each social group has a distinct living context, their experiences of alienation in education involve differentiable characters and patterns from other groups’ experiences. These distinguishable facets emerged when I looked into their understanding of and responses to the social structure.

As adult learners come to educational situations with their own temperaments, histories, and purposes, which affect their learning experiences (Cremin, 1976), one of
the important objectives of this research is to illuminate the meanings of the educational experiences of this specific group of adult learners (i.e., KNOU students who had been alienated from higher educational opportunities). Since they had lived through a period of deprivation of higher educational opportunities, the students’ past experiences as children or young adults point to the cultural and structural impediments of Korean society for those with low academic achievement. This social phenomenon can be theoretically grounded in Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of different forms of capital. He notes that not only economic but also social, cultural, and political capitals affect the range of life options from which an individual can choose (Bourdieu, 1986). Particularly, his conception of cultural capital allows us to view their alienation in education as an issue that transcends individual and economic matters. From a critical standpoint, there must be personal, social, political, and cultural barriers that the Korean society imposed upon this group of students who live without higher education credentials.

Even though the ways in which individual participants experience the prevailing culture and ideology of Korean society varies with respect to academic credentials, it is evident that the participants had been, if unconsciously, influenced by the socially entrenched norms with regard to higher education. Since Korea is notorious for overemphasizing academic credentials, or so-called credentialism (Choi, 2009), their experiences with low academic credentials point to the pervasive discrimination and inequality of Korean society, which affected their motivation to enter KNOU and their experiences of KNOU education. In addition, because the institutional circumstances of
their workplaces and organizations (such as organizational and bureaucratic structures, roles, and relationships) had a significant impact on the participants’ social experiences and career paths (Huberman, 1993), their working experiences also points to the credentialism extensively and deeply rooted in Korean society.
CHAPTER 6. CONTRADICTIONS OF KNOU EDUCATION & RESISTANCE AMONG THE ALIENATED STUDENTS

In this chapter, I employ Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to analyze the contradictions of KNOU education and the alienated students’ resistance during their KNOU education. The chapter consists of five sections.

First, using the categories and codes under the themes ‘contradictions of KNOU education’ and ‘expressions and representations of resistance’ (refer to Table 4-6 on page 116-118), I design the general activity system of KNOU education by contextualizing the key components of KNOU students’ activity. This CHAT system clarifies the principal components of KNOU education and the relations among those key educational elements from the students’ perspective. Second, building upon the general activity system, I identify three sub-activity systems in which I concretize the students’ actions and the problems of KNOU education in line with specific events, sequences, and ideas.

Third, I examine the representations of resistance among the participants by describing how they experienced and perceived the problems. Fourth, I then identify and discuss the contradictions of KNOU education and the resistance among the participants within the CHAT framework. In particular, I examine their resistance to the different levels of contradictions existing in/between the identified activity systems. Through this CHAT analysis, contradictions and resistance are analyzed as cultural and historical forms representing an explicit concern for the problematic among the participant group.

Fifth, the conclusion of this chapter summarizes the results of the analysis by outlining
the contradictions of KNOU education and the resistance among the participants in a table (Table 6.2). I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the variety of social, cultural, and historical attributes of contradictions and resistance among the alienated KNOU students in order to elucidate how their resistance was translated into their awareness of social position and reality.

**The General Activity System of KNOU Education**

Given the variety of KNOU’s educational organizations and processes as well as the participants’ descriptions of their KNOU educations, the general activity system of KNOU education is represented by Figure 6-1.

![Diagram of the general activity system of KNOU education]

Figure 6-1: The general activity system of KNOU education

The community in this activity system is comprised of KNOU students and
staff/faculty members. They share distance higher education at KNOU as the common objective. This community is conceptually distinguished from communities of other higher educational institutions and/or other social groups in Korea, as well as different open and distance higher education institutions worldwide. The division of labor refers to both the horizontal division of tasks and the vertical division of power and status in the community (Engeström, 1987). To achieve the motive/object, each member in the community holds different responsibilities. For example, teaching tasks are given to instructors, and most administrative work is assigned to the staff members. Students study, learn, and participate in various formal and informal educational activities. Both the community of KNOU and the division of labor among the community members have evolved alongside the cultural and historical traditions of adult, distance, and higher education in Korea. Those traditions, such as the relationship between teachers and students in the Confucian culture and social expectations for each role in education, were rooted in the participants’ activities, and they became the sources for analysis of the contradictions and resistance in the ensuing discussion.

This triangular activity system represents the interplay of complex elements that constitutes the activity of KNOU education. Although diverse individuals and groups must perform different actions and operations within this central activity system, the KNOU students are the subject group for this central activity system. It is important to note that this model is conceptualized to describe the students’ activity during their KNOU education in general. In order to specifically analyze the research participants’
activity, the general model needs to be reconsidered in line with their particular contexts, experiences, and perspectives.

As the participants were alienated from the mainstream educational system, their agency is adopted as the main perspective from which I revisit this general activity system and discuss their concrete actions and sub-activities later. As elaborated in Chapter 5, their experiences of social discrimination and inequality due to their low academic credentials led to convergent motivations to attend KNOU and shaped their perspectives on the value of higher education. The participants’ perspectives provide a directional force whereby their specific activity systems and attendant actions and operations are understood.

The motive/object is the KNOU education pursued by the subject group. The object entails a variety of goal-oriented actions such as registering for courses, taking exams, attending face-to-face classes, and organizing study groups. Various motives, which are both material and ideal in nature, lead students to take part in the activity system (Engeström, 1999). The completion of their KNOU education can result not only in gaining the actual college diploma but also in increased knowledge and enhanced educational status. The general object ‘KNOU education’ also involves diverse motives among different groups of KNOU students. In particular, the meanings of KNOU education to the research participants themselves, who attend KNOU mainly to accomplish their previously unmet educational needs, should be differentiated from those of students attending KNOU merely to enjoy learning or to socialize with others.
The participants emphasized the motive to increase their employability and self-esteem through KNOU education. For example, Kyoung-ae used the simile of a stepping-stone to describe the meaning of KNOU education for her.

To me, getting a higher educational credential means a lot. I have faced so many moments when I couldn’t develop my career due to my final educational level. I think that, with the KNOU certificate, I will be able to have many more possibilities to try what I wanted to do before. So KNOU may be foundational, like a stepping-stone for my career. (ISI6, P5, L4-9)

Kyoung-ae hopefully expressed her thoughts about KNOU education by reflecting upon her experiences of discrimination and inequality due to her lack of higher educational credentials. Even though she understood that the value of KNOU education might not be highly recognized in society, she envisioned the possible extension of her employability with the bachelor’s degree given through her graduation from KNOU. Similarly, Jung-nam stated her opinion of the KNOU degree as follows.

I know that our society looks favorably upon high academic credentials, and graduation from KNOU is not regarded as a respectable accomplishment. But I can’t ignore the fact that my final educational level will be changed from high school to college graduate. Whether other people regard it as important or not, obtaining a bachelor’s degree sets me apart. KNOU is a 4-year national higher educational institution. If I complete the courses, I would be proud of myself. (ISI8, P7, L11-17)

As these examples demonstrate, completing one’s KNOU education in order to increase
one’s employability and self-esteem in Korean society, which are clearly emphasized as the primary objects of the KNOU education activity among the participants. In other words, the object ‘KNOU education’ is built upon the motives of advanced careers, improved self-recognitions, and compensation for unmet educational need of the participants. The object can be transformed into the completion of the degree as an expected outcome or dropout as an unexpected one.

The motive/object of KNOU education involves a variety of cultural and historical particularities that explain the motivations of the alienated KNOU students and the social contexts of the institution. For instance, since KNOU functions as compensation for those who did not accomplish their goals of higher education, the distance higher education provided by KNOU serves as a stepping stone upon which the participants could improve their career prospects in Korea. At the same time, the social position and status of the institution are also embedded in the object – KNOU education. The participants’ critical reflection of the social position of the institution indicates how KNOU education entails negative meanings and values among the participants. In their pessimistic understandings of KNOU education, it remains just an easy and inexpensive alternative to traditional higher education. Jung-sook stated:

I think that KNOU education doesn’t mean that much because I used to work with elite people. I don’t think that I will be taking much advantage of the KNOU degree for my career. KNOU education is not rewarding, as everyone can attend it. It simply means that I may be able to have more chances to apply for jobs requiring the bachelor’s degree.
She underscored that KNOU stood for cheap higher education in Korea. In a focused-group interview, the participants’ critical perspective on the value of KNOU education appeared more straightforward.

R1: Many KNOU students don’t expose their participation in KNOU to others. They feel shame for attending this school. For example, my friend said I have to go to a master’s program of another higher educational institution… Whenever I heard those kinds of comments, I asked myself, ‘what am I doing here?’

R2: Right, the disregard of KNOU is not an individual problem. It is deeply embedded in our society. To be honest, I don’t want to let my children go to KNOU because our society doesn’t accept the value [of KNOU education]. Even beyond that, our society is oriented toward academic credentials. Particularly, gender, academic credentials, and regionalism should not be underestimated. This is beyond an individual matter. (FGI1, P13, L15-27)

The participants’ negative perceptions of KNOU’s social position, as described above, indicate that they themselves were not free from the social prejudice and biases against distance higher education.

The contrasting viewpoints of KNOU education above illuminate the incompatibility between the advantages and the disadvantages of open and distance higher education in the capitalist, academic-credential-oriented society of Korea. The participants who were attending KNOU internalized those incompatible values of KNOU
education. In that sense, the participation in KNOU for the KNOU students was both rewarding and stigmatizing. The students’ alienated experiences played a mediating role between the particular socio-cultural circumstances of Korea and their perceptions of KNOU education.

The participants’ experiences of the KNOU education system are categorized into three overarching concepts: assessment, curriculum, and technology. These educational elements are regarded as the key components of the general activity system of a KNOU education. Even if there are a number of mediated instruments which enable the subject (i.e., the alienated KNOU students) to accomplish the object (i.e., KNOU education), I specifically consider the curriculum of KNOU and the technology of distance education as two pivotal mediations for distance higher education of KNOU, because the participants pointed out those two concepts as essential to achieving their educational goals in KNOU.

Like the object, those mediations also involve both material artifacts and symbolic signs and have been socially, culturally, and historically developed in the particular context of KNOU. The KNOU curriculum has been adjusted to cater to national human resource development, which was oriented toward extending educational opportunities via mass education, as well as individual adult students’ needs to consolidate high-level knowledge and skills. These two contrasting objectives were also evident in the participants’ educational experiences of KNOU. Moreover, the highly developed technological infrastructure of Korea has enabled KNOU to establish and implement
distance higher education more efficiently and has allowed the students to attend the institution more conveniently.

Meanwhile, assessment and evaluation processes are posited as major rules to accredit students’ learning in KNOU education. As the rule in an activity system regulates how the subject and other community members interact with each other to accomplish the object, KNOU students follow institutional policies – more specifically, the university regulations set for accrediting distance higher education such as evaluation and graduation policies – as the rule of the general activity system in order to accomplish their higher education through KNOU.

To this end, the essence of this CHAT analysis is to consider the systemic formation rather than separate connections. By identifying the general model and contextualizing each constituent in the system, we can project the holistic mechanism where the general processes and outcomes of KNOU education were designed and implemented in the complex social, cultural, and institutional settings. Overall, the general activity system of KNOU education enabled me to conceptualize the totality of complex educational components playing out in and for KNOU education from the students’ perspective.

**KNOU Students’ Actions in Sub-Activities**

Although the general activity system in Figure 6-1 is designed to illustrate systemically the central educational elements of KNOU education, it is necessary to identify concrete actions of the specific group of KNOU students so as to understand
particular features and/or phenomena of their learning experience in KNOU. Additionally, as human activity neither exists in a vacuum nor remains static (Engeström, 2001), the variety of actions performed by the participants need be considered in relation to various tensions or contradictions grounded in the major sub-activities. As three educational realms (higher education curriculum, distance education technology, and educational accreditation by assessment) emerged as important facets of KNOU’s distance higher education, the participants’ sub-activities in light of those three criteria are considered as Figure 6-2 below. In each sub-activity system, a number of contradictions are illuminated along with the problematic situations experienced by the participants.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 6-2:** Three sub-activity systems of the alienated KNOU students

These three sub-activity systems constantly negotiate with each node of the
central activity system (Engeström, 1987, 2001). For example, the evaluation activity system’s object and outcomes are transformed into a part of rules in the central activity system. That is, how students in KNOU participate in evaluation activities impacts the ways in which the rules are ratified and rectified and subsequently play out in the central activity system. More specifically, if KNOU students found any problems with the evaluation system of KNOU, those problems can become an agenda for policy amendments and revisions of the rules of the central activity system. Conversely, the rules of the central activity system influence the evaluation activity whose specific object is the evaluation of student learning.

Since the activity changes constantly, every element of the central and sub-activity systems continuously move. This movement leads to the transformation of nodes across different activity systems. Engeström (1996) argues that what initially appears as an object may be transformed into an outcome, then turned into an instrument, and possibly into a rule later. In Figure 6-2, the objects of technology-learning and curriculum-understanding activity systems are transformed into certain outcomes, which have been turned into the mediations of the central activity system. However, as the double-sided arrows indicate, the mutual relationship between the general activity system and the interacting activity systems, the interaction is far from unidirectional. Rather, they are continuously influencing and influenced with the help of the contradictions existing at the multiple levels (Engeström, 1987, 2001).
For a further meso-analysis of concrete experiences of the participants, it is essential to specify the nodes of each individual sub-activity system and to compare them to those of the central activity system. Each node of a sub-activity system implies a specific educational element that the participants experience while attending KNOU. After identifying the sub-activity systems involving specific educational components of KNOU, I can further discuss the detailed actions that indicate contradictions within the KNOU educational system and the attendant resistance among the participants in the CHAT framework.

![Diagram](Image)

**Figure 6-3: Technology-learning activity system**

The technology-learning activity system in Figure 6-3 describes how the participants became involved in the process of using and learning distance educational technology of KNOU. Technology is posed as the motive/object for this activity system, whereas its mediating role is accentuated in the central activity because it serves as a link
between the students and higher education. The objectified technology for distance education can be mediated through actual technical tools, such as computers and TVs. The rules are composed of institutional regulations, more specifically the technology-related regulations set and managed by the Committee for Distance Education in KNOU. Because other community groups and individuals are also required to attain the skills and abilities necessary to use distance educational technology, the community of practice remains the same as that of the central activity system. However, as different community members perform distinct actions to achieve the object, the division of labor has changed along with the variety of tasks allocated for the groups and individuals of the community in this technology learning activity system.

Within this activity system, the participants recognized multiple problems of online learning in KNOU such as the lack of communication channels, the ineffective ways in which learning content was delivered, and the missing space to socialize with each other. Negative aspects of online learning experienced and perceived by the participants imply the problematic context of the distance educational structure of KNOU from their viewpoints.

What appeared most conspicuous in data indicating problems of KNOU’s technology-centered distance education is the participants’ preference of face-to-face courses to an online educational environment. I asked why they thought that they could benefit more from face-to-face than online instructions. Sun-hee answered:

Most of all, it [distance education] is usually a one-way communication. I can express
nothing. Also, the amount of knowledge in an online lecture is generally so huge. So in many courses, the instructors just summarize and read the information in the textbooks. Everyone can read the textbook, right? (Laughing) It is just boring. There is no room for us to have an in-depth discussion. (ISI13, P6, L15-20)

Even though she had chosen KNOU, she believed a distance education course is less desirable for higher education because of the one-way communication of technology-based instructions. She recognized that the mostly online educational system of KNOU facilitates single-directional and hierarchical pedagogical processes. This top-down, one-way teaching did not correspond to her desires. Moreover, she was unsatisfied with the formalized way in which most KNOU’s online lectures are organized and delivered. Her observation was that as a course covers a substantial amount of knowledge, each week’s online lesson encompasses too much information. The huge amount of knowledge to be delivered often causes an instructor to have less flexibility in creating effective online lessons. As a result, she pointed out that some instructors focused just on delivering as much information as possible. Sun-hee’s experience represents how technology-based mass education in the monolithic structure did not meet her individual needs.

Jum-nam more directly criticized the monotonous, boring organization of online lectures.

When I first watched multi-media lectures, I realized that I would be better off reading the textbook instead of spending time watching every online lesson. Most of the knowledge in online lectures is a duplicate of textbooks. There is no room for expanding
our ideas. I guess that there may be a manual to create the online lectures. We can’t get
the professor’s personal ideas online. I think that those ideas are sometimes more useful.
The practical and applied knowledge and the lived experiences of the professor are much
more interesting and valuable to me. (ISI8, P7, L6-12)

She argued that informal teaching-learning processes are missing in technology-driven
KNOU education, which, she thought, is more productive than just delivering knowledge.

Jung-nam pointed out the problem of online lectures in KNOU, especially
stressing the significance of immediate communication in adult education.

I don’t like online lectures. I prefer face-to-face lessons. The online lectures here are so
boring that I could not focus on them after a while. Even if I had questions about the
lesson, I could not ask the instructor right away. This is a big obstacle to me as I’m old. I
know we can ask questions through the online discussion forum or by sending e-mail to
the instructor. But that kind of online communication is not effective for me. Also it is
hard to catch what the instructor really wants us to learn in an online setting. The live
interaction with the instructor is very important to me. (ISI9, P8, L16-22)

Jung-nam emphasized that immediate feedback from the instructor played an important
part in her learning. Therefore, she viewed the mostly asynchronous mode of KNOU
instruction as ineffective. In addition, whether the online instruction is asynchronous or
synchronous, she thought that a live face-to-face interaction would more motivate her
learning. In regards to the technology-driven educational system and her motivation in
learning, she continued to speak:
The [KNOU] system itself fails to motivate our learning. The knowledge produced through discussions with professors is absent. Some students may just want to study alone and graduate. But if they didn’t get good scores on the exams, then they give up and drop out. I don’t think we can blame those students because the system doesn’t give enough information and motivation to retain our learning. That’s why many of us participate in study groups. (ISI9, P8, L24-29)

Jung-nam viewed that learning by real face-to-face interactions is essential for her motivation and learning.

Similarly, in a focused-group interview, Eun-joo also addressed the importance of effective communication channels for quality higher education and questioned the effectiveness of KNOU’s current pedagogical system.

Given the mass education of KNOU, I know it is not easy to respond quickly to every student’s questions. But I think the school should have established a better communication channel to facilitate our learning. Whenever I couldn’t find anywhere to get an answer to my question, I could not but think about the problem of this system. I don’t think we should just study what is given to us, take exams, get grades, and graduate. This is not a certification program. Higher education should be better than this. (FGI1, P10, L5-11)

In the last three sentences of Eun-joo’s statement above, she not only critiqued the problem of technology-driven KNOU education but also developed her critical conceptualization of the meaning of higher education. Her comments suggest that we
need to reconsider the efficiency-orientation in adult learning achieved by the distance educational technology. Despite the positive role that distance educational technology plays in providing extensive educational services, institutionalized distance higher education like KNOU may overlook how the efficiency-centered system can disregard individual students’ expectations as the Eun-joo’s case.

In addition to the ineffective online lectures and limited interaction and communication, the participants also perceived that technology-driven KNOU education kept them from developing their identity as college students. Kyoung-yeol said:

I think that KNOU education is good for those who like to study alone. Many of us want active interaction between students and instructors. We want that kind of a strong bond in the relationship. (ISI21, P7, L11-13)

Young-chul also addressed the importance of face-to-face interaction to develop their college student identity.

We would like to feel a sense of belonging like other young college students. Even though we are not traditional college students, many of us wish to experience the feeling of becoming college students. Only with online communication, it is impossible to have that kind of feeling. I think that’s why many students get together offline. (ISI26, P8, L18-22)

Both Kyoung-yeol and Young-chul saw that the technology-based educational system of KNOU did not fulfill their expectations of obtaining a sense of belonging and of becoming college students.
The selected interviews above shed light on the negative aspects of technology-driven distance higher education in KNOU. It is true that technological development has enabled much broader segments of the population to have access to higher education more conveniently and more affordably. However, at the same time, the technological development could prevent individual students from pursuing in-depth knowledge and creative thinking, which the participants saw as very important for higher education. Despite the widely acknowledged benefits of technology-centered distance education, such as the flexible learning schedule and affordable tuition, the participant group commonly discerned the irreplaceable value of person-to-person interactions for higher education.

Given the problems of distance higher education in KNOU that the participants pointed out, a contradiction arose between technology-driven, efficiency-oriented online teaching and the students’ need for face-to-face learning experience. Fifteen individual interview participants addressed their desire for participation in study groups, which supplemented their unmet learning needs caused by the distance education technology of KNOU. For example, Young-chul stated:

I have participated in a study group called ‘The Flying Sound’ since I was freshman. I was not that serious about going to the study group for the first time, but now I think if I didn’t go there, I may have quit going to KNOU… Through the study group, I could gain up-to-date information about the courses, the instructors and encourage myself to engage in school activities, and get motivated to study hard. (ISI26, P10, L11-15)
The participants also strove to sustain their learning by attending face-to-face meetings and residential lectures organized by the study groups. Likewise, among the participants, attending study groups was means to potentially resolve the contradiction between an efficient technology-driven distance education and the students’ need for personal interactions.

In the central activity system, the KNOU curriculum mediates between the alienated students and KNOU education. However, as the participants’ experiences illuminate why and how the participants accepted or rejected specific components of the KNOU curriculum, the curriculum itself can be considered the object of a sub-activity system among the participants.

Figure 6-4: Curriculum-understanding activity system

Figure 6-4 illustrates the participants’ curriculum-understanding activity system.
Although the community of this activity system is identical to that of the central activity system, different members engage in distinct tasks. For example, the Steering Committee for Curriculum, which is comprised of faculty and staff members, produces and manages the curriculum; the students strive to understand the KNOU curriculum. Through this activity, the participants became involved in a variety of educational actions and operations such as reading textbooks, watching online lectures, and attending face-to-face classes. The participants use knowledge and texts to understand the KNOU curriculum.

In this activity system, the participants noted various points where the KNOU curriculum did not fit their expectations and characteristics as adult learners. Their experiences of the unmatched curriculum are grouped into two contrasting perspectives. While some participants denounced the overly theoretical curriculum for discouraging their learning motivations, others problematized the trend of curriculum transformation from an academic to a practical orientation in line with the more commercialized KNOU education. Their ambivalent perspectives that courses are too practical and too theoretical are elaborated upon below.

On the one hand, seven participants noted that the KNOU curriculum was irrelevant to their lives because it is too theoretical. Yong-sung reflected upon the embarrassing moment when he first recognized that KNOU’s curriculum was theoretical to a fault.

I think that diversity exists among various majors in terms of the extent to which the curriculum is theoretical. I thought my major [media & broadcasting] was relatively
practical. But I noticed it is really very theoretical. I think this is the limit of KNOU education… Our major area ideally requires a lot of hands-on practice. However, given the number of students, the curriculum is just based on theory and the textbook. The school wouldn’t dare provide hands-on courses. I know they can’t. (ISI12, P8, L2-8)

Yong-sung indicated that a gap exists between the ideal and existing curricula. He believed that the gap between his expectation and actual experience of the curriculum discouraged him from engaging in his KNOU education more enthusiastically. A similar point was made by Ji-bok, who is a senior student in Chinese language and literature.

Now I know the curriculum does not match to my previous motivation to study in KNOU. I thought I would learn and practice the Chinese language, but the majority of the curriculum consists of literature. There are also many areas of cultural studies to be completed, especially during the first and second years. I ask myself, ‘Should I learn this kind of subjects in my old age?’ and ‘How am I going to use this kind of knowledge?’ I guess that there is a reason why the curriculum is structured like it is now, but I really didn’t feel like spending my time studying those kinds of subjects. I felt skeptical while I was preparing for the exams of such courses. (ISI19, P7, L22-29)

The participants’ criticism of the overly theoretical aspect of the KNOU curriculum can also be related to another adult learners’ characteristic broadly discussed in adult education research (e.g., Knowles, 1973). The discrepancy between the students’ expectations and the actual knowledge conveyed in the curriculum raises a question about whether KNOU as a social institution of distance higher education meets the learning
needs of its audiences. Despite the variety of disciplinary characteristics across different majors, the evidence reaffirms that the excessively theoretical curriculum may discourage adult distance students from learning.

In addition, three participants complained about the academic language used in the textbooks and instruction, which, they thought, is unnecessary. For example, Kyoung-yeol pointed out the problem of unnecessary academic expressions in some courses. I admit that the major subjects cannot but contain some academically sophisticated languages. But I don’t understand why areas of cultural studies have so much jargon. They were just twisted and complicated expressions that could have been written in more readable ways. For example, you can simply say, “must do”, but it’s written, “should not undo”. That way doesn’t influence the quality of information, but I just think that the author would like to look smarter. (ISI21, P8-9, L29-1)

Eun-joo also reminisced about how she was struggling with the academically sophisticated language. I didn’t understand why our textbooks were written so difficultly. There was so much jargon. I looked up every word that I didn’t know for the first time. I probably don’t understand them because this is my first time seeing academic language. I felt so much stress, but now I’m pretty used to them. (ISI3, P7, L6-9)

The data above presents that the participants viewed the KNOU curriculum as problematic because it did not contain adequate learning materials for their learning as adult learners and students in higher education. The examples also illustrate how the
participants critically recognized the knowledge of higher education. Through their critical reflection, they reconsidered the relevance and appropriateness of information and knowledge in the KNOU curriculum.

On the other hand, six students pointed out that the excessively practical KNOU curriculum is questionable. Their problematization has something to do with the marketization of KNOU education. Those students thought that they faced too simplistic course content and practical skills in the KNOU curriculum. Even though the participants had not experienced higher education other than KNOU, they perceived the problem of curriculum transformation from academic to practical orientations. They found it contradictory to their expectations to attend quality higher education. For example, Sun-hee indicated the decreased number of courses of liberal arts and the trend of curriculum reformation in higher education.

I could see the trend that liberal arts and cultural studies are being gradually excluded from the KNOU curriculum. In particular, our department [English Literature and Language] put more significance on routine English conversation rather than studying the literature. As you may know, there is a rumor that the Department of French Language and Literature may be closed due to the reduced registration… The space for those subjects has been narrowed. I don’t think this happens only in KNOU. I think our [Korean] higher educational institutions have become more like technical training centers, and KNOU is not an exception. (ISI13, P9, L8-14)

Sun-hee observed the problems of KNOU curriculum and expanded her thought to the
general trend of Korean higher education.

Sung-geun pointed out a specific course representing the transformation of KNOU curriculum. He critiqued the fact that the school had closed many humanity-related subject courses and replaced those with practical ones.

They [KNOU] shut down humanities courses and replaced them with skills-based courses. Last year, they opened the Basics of Writing as a substitute for the Korean language. In addition, they excluded some fundamental cultural studies such as Humanity and Science and Humanity and Society. I thought we missed the opportunity to learn some critical points in higher education… I think that such practical courses are to be taught not in place of regular courses but during some special lectures. Higher education should be better than that. (ISI15, P10, L18-26)

Sung-geun highlighted that the development of critical thinking is essential in higher education. However, he ruminated on the fact that the KNOU curriculum more and more emphasized pragmatic outcomes of higher education.

Both Sun-hee and Sung-geun further expanded their thoughts of their KNOU education to general trends within higher education. Given the increasing number of institutions of distance higher education in Korea, whose educational focus is mainly on vocational training for job preparation, they objected to KNOU becoming similar to those institutions. They found that one of the significant functions of higher education, to enhance the critical thinking skills of students, had faded in KNOU education. Their cases above reaffirm that participants experienced a transformation of the KNOU
curriculum that became oriented more toward the labor market over the last few years.

The contrasting views of the KNOU curriculum among the participants imply that there are a variety of perspectives and levels of expectation in the group. However, it is more noteworthy that they came to realize that some systematic factors gave rise to the contradiction embedded in the KNOU curriculum, which arose between overly theoretical/practical curriculum and the students’ need for learning relevant to their lives. They internalized the contradiction in relation to the curriculum and subsequently developed their critical thinking about KNOU education.

The analytic process enabled me to grasp where the participants confronted the oppressive structure of KNOU education. The selected examples indicate that the KNOU curriculum could become a contradiction from the participants’ perspective when they found it overly theoretical and academic, excessively simplistic and practical, and job-market-oriented. Some participants further developed their thoughts by relating those contradictions to broader contexts such as the trends and paradigms of Korean higher education.

The last sub-activity system identified along with the key research outcomes is the evaluation activity system as designed in Figure 6-5 below.
The evaluation activity system, which is based upon accreditation regulations, involves representative institutional functions that enable KNOU to implement national distance higher education. The object ‘evaluation’ is driven by the general mission of KNOU as a distance higher educational institution, that is, the accreditation of students’ learning. In this activity system, the students are required to take examinations, to complete assignments, and to attend face-to-face classes; at the same time, they can accomplish evaluation by means of those assessment tools. Thus examination and assignment are used as instruments for evaluation in this activity system. The community of practice remains the same as that of the central activity system. However, among different community members, the hieratical relationship in the division of labor is highlighted. For example, faculty members make examinations and assignment questions; students are expected to prepare for the exams and the assignments. In this evaluation process, faculty
members gain and exert authority because how they write assignments and grade the students’ answers determines the success or failure of the students in the course, which ultimately influences whether or not they complete their KNOU education.

During occasions when the participants were evaluated, they faced a number of problematic situations influenced by individual and organizational factors. Since an evaluation setting frequently brings about human anxiety (Donaldson, 2005), the participants described their concerns about the examinations in KNOU. Their negative experiences of the evaluation system can be related to adult learners’ generic characteristics widely studied in adult education research (e.g., Caffarella & Barnett, 1994). Specifically, low-self-confidence in learning due to aging (e.g., Hollahan, 1987; Welch & West, 1995) and lack of study time due to schedule conflicts (Lieb, 1991; Valentine, 1990) emerged as two major individual factors that resulted in contradiction in relation to evaluation.

In a focus group, I asked the participants why they tend to have severe anxiety about the examinations. Yeon-joo responded that her low self-confidence is the origin of her apprehension of examinations.

I think the most significant factor [of evaluation anxiety] is a feeling of shame… When I didn’t understand something in the textbook, I hesitated to ask other people because I thought it could bother them. So I was trying to resolve it by myself. It took me too much time. This kind of experience lowered my confidence in learning. It changed my perspective of myself. I am not as confident about myself as before. (FGI1, P15, L2-6)
The low self-confidence is regarded as an individual factor because it had been formed throughout the individual life span beyond the period of KNOU participation. Particularly, two other participants attributed their low self-confidence to the lack of formal education when they were young. For example, Eun-ok said that she always felt inferior in terms of learning because she did not obtain the same level of formal education as others.

I have always been behind other people. When I study together with other students, my achievement was always lower than theirs. Whenever this happened, I regretted that I hadn’t studied harder when I was school-aged. It was frustrating to see myself as always inferior. However, I told myself “let’s do it again”. I know this is late, but I didn’t give up.

(ISI11, P6, L11-14)

Schedule conflict is another individual factor that most participants pointed out when they described their contradictory experiences in the evaluation system. Generally speaking, adult learners have multiple roles to play in a variety of life realms (e.g., as parents, children, workers, friends, members, etc.), and because of this they recognized that the examination process is too formal and demanding for them to accomplish. Yeon-sook reflected upon her experience in the evaluation activity system, which was negative because her unsupportive family did not allow her enough study time.

I am not a full-time student. I have to work and also take care of my family. I thought I had to abandon studying in KNOU because of my husband. He disagreed with my attending KNOU. He complained about the reduced time and effort I have devoted to the family since I began to study in KNOU. Like other traditional Korean husbands, he didn’t
understand why I was trying to get higher education at my old age. He may have felt uncomfortable with me because he didn’t complete higher education. I felt so much stress and couldn’t prepare for exams well. (ISI22, P7, L15-22)

Aside from the individual factors giving rise to problems in the evaluation system of KNOU, the participants also described the variety of institution-level factors that made them experience different types of contradiction in relation to evaluation. In particular, the efficiency-oriented, bureaucratic settings of evaluation barred them from effectively navigating their learning.

For example, Ki-soon pointed out a problem that the structure of examination itself did not lead students to in-depth learning, because most exam questions asked memorization-centered knowledge. She criticized the overall examination system of KNOU as contradictory to the fundamental higher educational principle as below.

I think our KNOU education should lead to our in-depth understanding of subject knowledge. However, our examination system is not sufficient to fulfill that commitment. We don’t have to, or cannot, deeply go into the knowledge to get ready for multiple-choice final exams. It is 70% of the entire grade. Even in mid-term exams, questions don’t ask for philosophically profound knowledge but just simple information in the textbook… Instructors can’t fill what we hope to achieve as they say that adult learning should be self-directed. However, the KNOU evaluation system asks for simple, pre-set answers. Some may think that the midterm exams are open-ended so that we can express subjective ideas, but a lot of students actually think that even midterm exams ask fixed
answers. This kept us from pursuing in-depth knowledge. (ISI25, P7, L5-18)

Ki-soon asserted that the KNOU evaluation system misdirects their learning. She also highlighted the problem of the system built upon the underlying emphasis of self-directed learning. While the principle of self-directed learning is a part of the KNOU system, she perceived that it did not lead students to pursue in-depth learning.

Eun-joo also revealed her negative impression of the evaluation system, reflecting on how she could easily get ready for exams.

When I started the first year in KNOU, KNOU education didn’t look like a college education. Most of the times, I didn’t even have to look at the textbook very closely to get a high score in the exams. I just looked through questions published in the previous years and could get pretty high scores in the exams... Some courses are even easier. Even if you don’t prepare at all, you still can get some points. The questions just required common sense. (FGI1, P16, L22-26)

She argued that easy exam questions did not motivate her learning. Moreover, she argued that the evaluation system made students focus not on subject knowledge but on ways to earn higher scores. In her experiences with two other students in her study group, the problem of the evaluation system became even more evident. One day in the study group, the members discussed how to navigate their study group. The two students argued with each other about what would be the focus of their study group.

Anyway, we have to focus on the exams. That directs us to gain only superficial knowledge. In our study group, there was an argument between a sophomore and a
transferred junior. The transfer student had experience at another college. He insisted that we had to discuss more to consolidate our understanding of the subject. But the sophomore student argued that discussion doesn’t help to enhance our exam scores.

Finally, the transfer student left the study group. (FGI1, P17, L2-7)

Similarly, the participants realized that there was a systematic problem in the evaluation system of KNOU. Even though they pointed out this problem as structural, most of them tended to adapt to the problematic system because they were seen to value the outcome of the KNOU degree more than the process of education. Thus, their critical voices largely remained silent. However, in the interviews, they alluded to their aspiration to attend better higher educational institutions, especially prestigious universities, if feasible.

Nine students pointed out a problem of the evaluation structure of KNOU. As 70% of the total score in a course is allocated to the multiple-choice final exam, students are more likely to study in memorization-oriented ways. The examination schedule also generated extreme stress for some participants. KNOU students are required to take exams of multiple subjects in a day designated by the institution every semester. This tight exam schedule is designed for the efficiency of academic affairs. However, many KNOU students believed that this exam schedule undermined their learning. Jung-yeon stated:

The most challenging thing is that we have to take exams of several courses in a day. This is scary. In particular, we typically have to take final exams of six courses in “one” day. Most students including me felt so much stress. I don’t think this is desirable. It just gives
us a lot of pressure and discourages our learning motivation. (ISI1, P8, L15-19)

Sung-geun similarly pointed out that the amount of knowledge required to complete the degree misleads their learning.

This is not good because there is nowhere we can express our opinions. There is no self-development. KNOU’s education is like our traditional indoctrinating education. We were not the subject but the object of education. The professors may say, this is not an indoctrinating education, but it really is. We don’t have enough time to mull over the knowledge in one chapter. Instead, we are asked to memorize the entire topics in order to pass the course. (ISI15, P12, L1-6)

The problem of indoctrination was most frequently pointed out when the participants reflected upon the problem of evaluation. For example, Moon-hee further criticized the evaluation system for encouraging students to acquire merely superficial knowledge.

The knowledge we get through KNOU education is like an encyclopedia. We may have gained some overall ideas of the subject area, but never developed our own sophisticated ideas. I believe this is why KNOU graduates don’t have good reputations in society. (FGI2, P9, L19-22)

To this end, these students revealed the contradictory aspects of assessment tools, evaluation policies, and their relationships with other KNOU community members, which are reflected in their evaluation activity system. Specifically, the participants argued that KNOU fails to motivate students to pursue in-depth knowledge as its evaluation system was built upon the efficiency and reliability of the assessment and
graduation processes. The students realized that this administratively optimized, bureaucratic system misguided their learning as they engaged in the evaluation activity system.

Even if it is possible to contextualize the number of other potential sub-activity systems with different subjects (e.g., the staff/faculty members) as well as their relation to other nodes of the central activity system, the three sub-activity systems were built upon the key findings of this research and on the basis of the unique perspective of the research participants – the alienated KNOU students – for the analytic and heuristic purposes of this research. Identifying the sub-activity systems permits me to substantiate concrete goal-oriented actions of the alienated students while they were engaging in KNOU education. Additionally, this conceptualization allows me to illuminate the variety of contradictions in each activity system.

**Representations of KNOU Students’ Resistance**

As the participants underwent the problematic KNOU education in the activity systems above, their resistance is embodied in their descriptions of specific events, actions, recognition, and emotions in confronting those problems. The number of codes and threads relevant to their expressions and representations of resistance are grouped into four themes: 1) frustration in contradictory situations, 2) devaluing KNOU education, 3) irony and sarcasm, and 4) paradox of compliance.
Frustration in Contradictory Situations

Most of all, the KNOU students expressed their resistance in association with their emotion of being frustrated in various contradictory situations in KNOU. This emotionally negative reaction was embodied in their descriptions of particular events whereby they realized some structural traits of the problems that were elaborated upon in the previous sections. Thus, the following examples explicate how they got frustrated and subsequently develop their resistant agency in facing the problems.

Eun-ok depicted her frustration when she faced a biased instructor who denigrated her identity. In a face-to-face Chulsuk class, the instructor explained the definitions of job and occupation with her assertion that part-time jobs should be differentiated from full-time occupations. Eun-ok did not agree but had no chance to speak out. She described this frustrating moment in detail in the interview.

I found that some instructors are just ignorant of the reality. They talked about merely theories with no practical clues. If so, I couldn’t agree with those. When an instructor spoke of dictionary definitions of job and occupation, I was feeling humiliated. It seems like she denied my life and identity. She talked about the difference in the meanings between regular occupations and any other irregular part-time works and asserted that a part-time job is not an occupation. She insisted upon the definitional difference very strongly. I was thinking of what I have been laboring to accomplish during my life as a part-time photographer. Yes, I didn’t have an official certificate and formal education for the work. But I do have the professional skill and work harder than anyone else. I would
like to talk with the instructor in person. But I couldn’t. (ISI11, P9-10, L29-5)

Her case represents a resistant moment that she confronted due to a curriculum that was contradictory to her worldview and life experiences. She became upset since there was no channel through which to express her resistance. The mass and online educational environment of KNOU prohibited her from adequately voicing her oppositional opinion to the mainstream and textbook knowledge. Thus, her resistance can be related to the problems existing in KNOU curriculum and technology.

Kyoung-ae also explained how she got frustrated when she was given too simplistic questions on an exam and ignored by an instructor in a Chulsuk class.

Some examinations have such simple questions that we don’t even need to take a look at the textbook. When I was taking a course, the questions were just the simplest ever. The professor may have thought that we would welcome those easy questions. Some students may have welcomed them. But I did not. I got kind of frustrated and humiliated. I would like to ask the professor what he was thinking of. I wanted to ask, ‘Do you really think that our intellectual level is this low?’… Some instructors ignore us even directly in the class. A female instructor said that KNOU students didn’t understand what she said. It seemed to me that she wanted to look very knowledgeable. She let students know the first two examination questions out of the three at the end of the class. She thought we were not able to think deeply. That was frustrating. (ISI6, P10, L3-18)

Kyoung-ae thought that the professor and the instructor undervalued KNOU students’ abilities. Despite the traditional Korean culture of valuing the hierarchical relationship
between teachers and students, Kyoung-ae’s case shows how an alienated student could feel frustrated when facing an authoritative instructor that underestimated the KNOU students’ level.

Mi-pan described her frustration upon seeing twisted questions in examinations.

Some questions [in the exams] are just twisted for nothing. I know that we take exams to be graded, but those questions are useless for our learning. Even if I didn’t answer correctly, I don’t think that’s because I don’t know it, but the questions are just tricky. Whenever I saw those kinds of questions, I got frustrated whether or not I got the right answer. (ISI10, P8, L19-23)

Mi-pan’s story points to a negative aspect of the KNOU evaluation system that misled her learning. Through her frustration, she realized the contradiction of the exam that failed to develop students’ substantial knowledge by asking trick questions. Her experience represents how she developed her resistance, which resulted in part from the quality of questions on exams.

Hee-jung described an irritating experience related to the monotonous online lectures.

I think that there are a few instructors who are not qualified to teach us. In some courses, they [instructors] just read the book. There is nothing dynamic, but the lessons were so boring. I don’t understand why they are producing that kind of boring lectures. Instead, I learn a lot better in our study group in the interaction between the students. (ISI18, P9, L25-29)
Hee-jung censured the quality of some online lectures. Her frustration made her criticize the unqualified instructors. However, she also found an alternative way to sustain her learning by participating in a study group through which she could collect substitute materials for learning and recover her interest in studying. Consequently, attending the study group was a means to resolve the contradiction she faced in KNOU education.

The phenomenon of resistance among the participants, likewise, is manifest in the participants’ experiences of various aspects of KNOU education, which, as in the cases above, resulted in their frustration. These indicators of resistance and the concrete experiences of the participants imply the systematic oppression that KNOU education imposed upon the participants.

**Devaluing KNOU Education**

The KNOU students also depicted their experiences of problem in KNOU education by devaluing the educational level of KNOU. Their devaluation of the KNOU education can be related to the social recognition of KNOU. As the social status of KNOU is negatively recognized in Korean society, the participants described their negative self-identity as KNOU students, which resulted in devaluing KNOU education.

In particular, the following analysis focuses on the data indicating their expressions of resistance when the KNOU system did not meet their expectations for higher education. The students’ resistance can be located in their skeptical perspectives of KNOU education.

Yong-sung viewed the KNOU system as problematic because it did not lead to a
quality higher education whereby he would be able to develop his career. In the interview with Yong-sung, I asked about his career plan. He answered by revealing his pessimistic point of view on the level of KNOU education.

I: So now you have job experiences and will earn the KNOU degree soon. Do you think that it would be easy for you to get a nicer job?

R: No. Our department is a kind of social sciences, but… I think the education I have gotten here provides far from adequate job preparation. I don’t think our school educates us with useful knowledge and skills for a job. It’s more like academic and cultural. The system doesn’t fit our expectations in terms of career development. This school is not for us.

I: So you think that it is the problem of KNOU curriculum, right?

R: I think that the problem is the educational system itself beyond just the curriculum. We can easily earn credits just by studying for a few days. The system doesn’t lead us to deeper knowledge.

I: So did you get disappointed with the system?

R: I didn’t plan to study hard here from the beginning. This is not a school for studying. I just enjoy hanging out with other people. (ISI12, P12, L12-26)

Yong-sung did not regard KNOU education as preparation for his future career. Rather, he viewed KNOU as a site of socializing with other students. By comparing KNOU specifically with his understanding of higher education in general, he devalued the level of KNOU education in terms of students’ preparation for their careers. His view also
reveals the problem of the top-down educational system of KNOU. His straightforward remark ‘This school is not for us’ shows that the students’ needs were not properly and sufficiently handled.

Sung-geun’s comments reveal a disadvantage of technology-driven distance education. He pointed out that as KNOU has developed pedagogical technology, more and more educational activities have become individual-centered and distance-based. In his opinion, the development of pedagogical technology prevents students from engaging in profound learning in collaboration with instructors and other colleague students.

Now our school is equipped with a lot of breakthrough technologies for distance education. Radio and TV lectures are just a minority of the entire instruction, and most of them are delivered online. The technological system enables an individual student to study completely alone. But I think more effective learning takes place in live discussions. If you just hear online lectures, you may get knowledge easily. The way we learn is just mechanical. Memorizing information is not enough. In addition, we can sometimes get more useful knowledge in informal interactions with professors. (ISI15, P13, L18-24)

His statement indicates a contradiction occurring between the institutional orientation of efficiency and the individual learners’ expectation for getting effective higher education.

More participants specifically described that their devaluation of KNOU education derived from the inappropriate evaluation system of KNOU. Yu-ran stated:

It doesn’t seem like college education. When I was taking final exams [multiple-choice exams], I thought that this is almost like high school education. I usually prepared the
exams hastily. Sometimes I asked myself ‘Isn’t this too easy to be higher education?’

(ISI16, P6, L15-18)

Yu-ran pointed out a problem of KNOU’s evaluation system by describing the monolithic format of exams. She devalued KNOU education, indicating that it is driven by a misleading evaluation system that leads students to a simple way of studying, mostly by memorizing. Her resistance to the educational system of KNOU was also represented by her devaluation of the educational level of KNOU. Her expectation of getting involved in quality higher education conflicts with the mass educational system of KNOU, which was built on the basis of efficient ways of evaluating students’ learning.

In a focus group interview, Moon-hee critically reflected upon the process of KNOU education and pessimistically envisioned her future with the KNOU degree.

I think that KNOU graduates are not highly recognized in our society because of the ineffective educational system. People may think that I am a hard-working person if I complete a KNOU education. But they would never see me as a capable one. Our learning in KNOU remains at the lifelong learning level. I heard that a student completed degrees in five different departments of KNOU. This never happens in other colleges.

(FGI2, P9, L21-25)

In their experiences of KNOU education, the alienated students found various points where they realized that KNOU education does not reach their expectations. The participants above negatively evaluated their KNOU educations by using their common sense, which had been formed through their social experiences. Their remarks highlight
the problems of KNOU that resulted from the top-down system, the efficiency-oriented pedagogical system with advanced pedagogical technology, and misleading assessment rules. The participants’ interviews imply that their resistance to the institutionalized system of KNOU education is embodied in their expressions of depreciating the level of KNOU education. They specifically criticized the system that excluded their voices and needs and thus failed to fulfill their goals with respect to higher education.

**Irony and Sarcasm as Resistance**

The resistance of the alienated students became more visible when I delved into their derisive expressions. Their sarcastic attitudes and expressions indirectly point to their resistance to the authoritative and oppressive educational system of KNOU. Particularly, they mocked the gap between the ideal higher education they foresaw before joining KNOU and the lived experiences of the problems rooted in the KNOU system. Their mocking voices indicate that resistance is not always expressed in a direct, explicit way. Instead, the resistance is alluded to by their derisive reflection of the problematic situations in KNOU education. I specifically illustrate three participants’ excerpts below to illuminate how their contradictory experiences became an object of their derision.

First, Sung-geun critiqued the outdated curriculum structure and professors’ mindsets.

I think that our English education has not been changed for decades. I told you that I was not an elite student [when I was young]. But I can’t see any difference in English education curricula over the years. I know our professors are great (laughing). Most of
them graduated from the Seoul National University [the best higher educational institution in Korea] and got degrees abroad. They are so smart that they organized the curriculum “for themselves” (laughing). This is the same curriculum as the one that was used fifty years ago. They are teaching what they were taught in the universities a long time ago. There is no renewal of knowledge. (ISI15, P9, L10-16)

In his interview, Sung-geun reflected on the appropriateness of English curriculum of KNOU along with his own experiences of English learning in the past. He criticized the curriculum focusing overly on the literature and ignoring students’ needs. However, his criticism was expressed not just in a negative mode; rather, he described the situation by making sarcastic remarks of the professors and the steering committee of curriculum sticking to the outdated mindsets and knowledge.

Within Korean culture, working as a professor is considered a highly respected and relatively high-rewarding job. In this social context, the relationship between professors and college students are typically hierarchical. I could reaffirm this underlying culture here and there in the research process. In the Sung-geun’s interview, I could find his resistance to the intractable hierarchical relationship represented by his derisive expressions such as “great professors” and “the curriculum for themselves”.

Young-chul also stated derisively the problem of the KNOU curriculum. He said that some subjects of KNOU reminded him of similar subjects taught in his secondary school. By reflecting upon whether or not those subjects are proper to higher education, he sarcastically problematized the appropriateness of the curriculum. However, his
criticism was not expressed in a directly negative way; instead, he mentioned the curriculum in a more mocking sense.

It was funny. I didn’t expect at all that we would face this kind of learning contents of KNOU. When I first saw the Korean literature, I was asking myself, ‘Do other freshmen in colleges study this as well?’ (laughing). I muttered myself, ‘Do you [the school] seriously need us to study this old Korean poem?’ So I decided not to study what I thought unnecessary. But there are a few subjects in cultural studies such as history that I like. But most subjects of cultural studies seemed like floating clouds (laughing). (ISI26, P12, L13-17)

I could grasp a representation of resistance in his derisive attitude toward the top-down educational system and unsuitable curriculum.

Mi-jung pointed out the problem of old learning materials provided in several courses. She specifically raised the necessity of updating knowledge in this rapidly changing world. However, she did not overtly express this problem either. Instead, her derisive expressions reveal how her resistance arose in her mind.

I think that there are several subjects to be updated promptly. We know knowledge in relation to the subject has been developing very rapidly. The trends and paradigms of knowledge have been updating the fastest ever. But the school and the professors seem not to care about it. When I had to study with materials published in 2001 or 2005, I thought that something is wrong with the KNOU system. There are some brand-new courses with insufficient learning materials. If given only some audio files, I guessed that
the professor must be so busy. We know they are very busy (laughing). (ISI5, P11, L24-30)

In the end of her interview excerpt, she made ironical expressions whereby she stated her criticism of some professors’ idle behaviors in preparing their course. That is, she scolded the ill-prepared learning materials in a roundabout way.

In the participants’ derisive attitudes and expressions against the preset knowledge in the KNOU curriculum, their critical perspectives on the given KNOU educational system emerged. The KNOU education, which consisted of institutionally certified curricula, became problematic because of the participants’ experiences of the hierarchical relationship, authoritative instructors, provider-centered contents, and impractical knowledge. Despite their resistance, the selected data above indicates that they connote their resistance to those privileged educational elements through their derisive and sarcastic reflections of the problems. The aforementioned live examples represent concretely how students experienced contradiction during their KNOU education and what their experience meant to them as the alienated adult students in KNOU.

**The Paradox of Compliance**

While most data contains negative representations of the participants’ resistance, part of the data also indicates their compliant reactions to the problems. If we take a more extensive lens through which to understand the phenomenon of compliance, it is possible to understand the paradoxical facets. Their resistance expressed through their contrasting response of compliance becomes conceivable when I took into consideration the variety
of circumstantial influences of individual participants. The following examples illustrate how and why they came to seemingly comply with what they found contradictory in KNOU education.

Ki-soon insisted in the interview that KNOU students had to respect every teacher irrespective of their ages and qualifications.

Whenever I take a class, I become a student. So it’s very difficult for me to disobey the teacher. Even if I thought that the instructor isn’t qualified to teach us, the bad attributes that he brought to the class don’t matter to me. It’s OK to take just good things from him. Why? Teachers know better than us. At least in the subject area, he knows more than me. I don’t think the age matters in the classroom. This doesn’t mean that I respect him. Not every teacher is the object of respect. But we just comply with teachers in the class because they are more knowledgeable in that specific area. (ISI25, P11, L6-12)

She defined instructors as those who are knowledgeable in the subject area. Therefore, she asserted that the students should show respect to instructors. Ki-soon strove to relate her compliance with instructors, even unqualified ones, to the gap of knowledge between teachers and students. Given a hierarchical relationship between teachers and students in the traditional Korean culture, she described her stereotypical image of teachers. However, even if she noted that her compliance does not signal her respect, she, if allusively, noted that in her relationship with instructors is hard to become intimate. Her case illuminates 1) the socially entrenched norm of the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students in Korea and 2) the system where students are
less likely to build up a close rapport with teachers. Moreover, her compliance was paradoxical, as it was not embodied in real, intimate relationship with instructors.

There are five other participants’ interviews in which I could understand the meanings behind their compliance. A common indication was that their compliance originated from their life contexts that had oppressed their free will. When asked why they became compliant, they recalled oppressive situations they underwent in the family and the society, which, they believed, significantly affected their passive attitudes toward contradictory situations in education. Namely, they attributed their compliance to coercive social and educational norms that had been taken for granted in their ways of thinking.

For example, Hee-jung discovered a problem with the random distribution of students for Chulsuk classes. Since KNOU is a mass educational institution, students are not allowed to choose their instructors in Chulsuk classes. Even though she became very disappointed with several instructors, she accepted the situation without any critical thoughts. I asked why she took the problem for granted. She answered:

It’s random. I really enjoyed some classes, but often was disappointed with the instructors. There are so many students that the school is not able to handle all the individual needs. I am not the kind of person who complains too much. When I went to middle school, there were more than sixty students in a class. It was really hard to express individual ideas. For us, staying calm was a virtue. I know the school [KNOU] may be able to provide a better service if they invest more. But I think it’s not easy in such a big, big school like
Hee-jung thought that this problem resulted from the top-down system. However, considering the limit of KNOU education as mass education, she took for granted the contradictory situation. She described her school years and educational circumstances that forced students to stay silent. This was another widespread educational culture in the past. She said that her tendency to comply with any contradictions in education is historical in her life. Hee-jung’s case represents how social and cultural norms that adult learners experienced in the past educational context perpetuate in current individual learning.

Jung-eun also characterized herself as a passive learner. When she was asked why she became passive in education, she pointed out her oppressive family background.

I think that’s because I was not allowed to speak my opinions. I have been locked in that oppressive, conservative family culture. I didn’t even think about my identity. It’s been almost fifty years for which I have lived like that. Now I take my personality for granted. Now I cannot do something new by myself. This personal characteristic persists when I study in KNOU. I tend just to follow the rules already set. (ISI20, P10, L2-7)

She attributed her passiveness in learning to her authoritative and conservative family background. As a daughter and as a younger sister, she has been oppressed in the family. Even after she got married, she had been obedient to her conservative husband. She realized in the interview that her passive personality that had developed throughout her life made her take for granted every educational situation without any critical
thoughts. Nevertheless, her compliance does not mean that she did not hold any resistance. Rather, her experiences of the family, the society, and the educational system are indicative of her resistance that had been latent in her mind.

The interviews above exemplify the KNOU students’ paradoxical response to the problems of KNOU education. As KNOU has been institutionalized, there are many institutional settings that did not align with students’ characteristics. Their compliant reactions do not signify the harmony between their agency and the educational system of KNOU. Instead, resistance to the system can be deeply rooted in their activities and experiences. In particular, the aforementioned interviews indicate that the participants accepted unconsciously many social and cultural norms. As a result, they did not recognize the problem until they critically reflected upon contradictory situations in the interviews. This suggests that adult learners’ resistance is not reducible to just explicit behaviors and attitudes, but oppressive socio-cultural norms and modalities invisibly affect the ways in which individuals think about and respond to the status quo. The internal and latent facets of their resistance are graspable when we take into consideration broader activities affected by social, cultural, and historical factors within the CHAT framework below.

Contradictions of KNOU Education & Resistance among the KNOU Students Revisited within the CHAT Framework

The list of problems of KNOU education recognized by the KNOU students is outlined in Table 6.1.
Table 6.1: Analyzed problems in each activity system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity system</th>
<th>Recognized problems</th>
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<tr>
<td>Technology-learning activity system</td>
<td>Ineffective online lectures</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The amount of knowledge delivered efficiently through technology</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Monotonous online lectures: missing informal, face-to-face teaching-learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>processes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Limited communication</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• One-way communication of technology-based instructions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Asynchronous mode of KNOU instruction: missing immediate communication</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of interaction</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Unrealized identity as college students: Missing sense of belonging</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Difficult to develop intimate relationships among students and between instructors</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Curriculum-understanding activity system</td>
<td>Overly theoretical curriculum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Useless textbook knowledge</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The overly used academic language</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Knowledge unmatched with students worldview and experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Too practical curriculum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Decreased number of liberal art, humanity-related, and cultural study subjects</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Pragmatic-outcome-orientation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual factors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluation activity system</td>
<td>• Low self-confidence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Conflict in learning schedule</td>
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<td>Organizational factors</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Efficiency-oriented, bureaucratic settings of evaluation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Misleading questions in examinations and assignment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Inappropriate difficulty-level of examinations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Misguiding examination structure: mid-term and final distribution, grading policy,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>etc.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Tight examination schedule</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Indoctrination</td>
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Even though these problems were discussed within each activity system,
structural contradictions of KNOU education that resulted in those problems were not fully understandable in each individual’s statement. Thus, in order to identify the structural contradictions as well as the origins of the KNOU students’ resistance to them, I further discuss the multi-level contradictions existing in/between the identified activity systems within the CHAT framework. However, the following analysis is far from an exhaustive description of all possible manifestations of contradictions and resistance. Rather, the discussion focuses on some of the most evident contradictions and attendant resistance that emerged through the data analysis.

Figure 6-6: Inner-contradictions in the central activity system

Figure 6-6 above describes inner-contradictions in the central activity system. Primary contradictions are rooted in each node of the activity system. Those primary
contractions originate from the tension between the exchange value and the use value in the capitalist socio-economic formations (Engeström, 2001) and arise from the dual construction of the nodes as they have inherent worth (Foot & Groleau, 2011). The research findings specifically indicate that the object and the mediations of the central activity system involve an explicit form of contradictions as experienced by the participants.

Most of all, a primary contradiction embedded in the object arises between the dual principles of KNOU education. KNOU education as open and distance higher education involves the incompatible or conflicting aspects between open/mass and higher education. More specifically, KNOU opens its door to the public by appropriating the inexpensive tuition and positing the minimal requirements for entrance. This efficiency-oriented open and mass educational model of KNOU is designed to accommodate as many students as possible. On the other hand, KNOU as a national higher educational institution pursues in-depth and quality higher education in order to produce capable graduates. Those two principles (i.e., efficiency-oriented open and mass education vs. quality higher education) are inextricably dual. These two contradictory features were manifest in the participants’ need for effective, face-to-face learning relevant to their lives in KNOU.

There are also primary contradictions within the mediations of the central activity system. Distance educational technology is a pure commodity where the relationship between the use and exchange values is evident (Madyarov & Taef, 2012). For example,
the KNOU students use technological methods which are intended to facilitate their learning in KNOU (the use value). However, they realized that technology-driven KNOU system failed to accommodate their need to have immediate communication channels and intimate relationships between KNOU community members (the exchange value). In a similar vein, a primary contradiction is embedded in the KNOU curriculum. While the curriculum containing subject knowledge in regards to the topics of the course can be viewed as the course contents to enhance students’ learning (the use value), the overly theoretical/practical curriculum did not meet the students’ need for learning knowledge and skills relevant to their lives and careers (the exchange value).

Unlike other levels of contradiction, the primary contradiction generally remains unresolved (Engeström, 2001; Foot & Groleau, 2011; Sawchuk, 2006) because it is fundamentally embedded within each element of the activity itself (Engeström, 1987). However, the tension along with this primary contradiction makes the activity system constantly transform (Engeström, 2001; Foot & Groleau, 2011) and subsequently becomes the rudimentary ground upon which the other levels of contradiction are conceptualized.

Secondary contradictions occur in the conflicting relationship between two of the nodes in an activity system. By conceptualizing the secondary contradictions, we can grasp the implicit primary contradictions and address a specific problem (Foot & Groleau, 2011). In this research, I identify three types of contradictions existing at the secondary level. First, the research findings illuminate the obvious contradiction existing in the
relationship between the subject and the object of the central activity system [see ISI6 and ISI8 (p. 151) vs. ISI12 (p. 184), ISI15 (p. 185), and FGI2 (p. 186)]. The participants’ ambivalent perspectives on the KNOU education were intensified from the contradictory relationship between these two elements. While alienation in the educational system and in society motivated students to attend KNOU, their alienation was not sufficiently addressed by the open and mass education of KNOU. The contradictions confronted by the participants who need to complete a higher educational degree as well as to gain useful knowledge and skills for their careers was exacerbated in this particular Korean socio-cultural context where high academic credentials are admired. This conceptualization promotes better understanding of the phenomenon of resistance not just by observing explicit behaviors of the subject, but by relating the subject’s contradictions in this specific socio-cultural context of Korea to the object’s contradictions grounded in the institutionalization of national open and distance higher education.

Second, given the commodity form of distance higher education, another secondary inner-contradiction arises when the rule of KNOU education collided with the object. In the school’s evaluation system, more sophisticated ways of evaluation to assure quality higher education are hampered by the efficient and top-down educational model of open and mass distance higher education. By this structural contradiction, students’ learning was limited to practicing just superficial and memorization-centered knowledge. Given the essential role of evaluation in guiding students’ learning in education, this secondary contradiction can be resolved by increasing funding for a more diversified
evaluation system. However, at the individual level, the participants’ reflection on the misleading evaluation system resulted in their frustration and derision that were the implicit indicators of resistance among the participants as illustrated in the interviews of ISI25 (p. 175-176), FGI1 (p. 173), ISI11 (p. 174), ISI25 (p. 175-176), FGI1 (p. 176), ISI6 (p. 181). The conceptualization of this secondary contradiction makes visible the latent feature of their resistance that was brought about by the bureaucratic system of KNOU education, which was represented in the rule of the central activity system.

Third, another secondary contradiction can be conceptualized in the dialectical relation between the mediations and the object of the central activity system. As the participants were given the institutionally preset pedagogical technology and curriculum, the primary contradictions existing in those two mediations of the central activity system became problematic because they collided with the primary contradiction rooted in the object. For example, ISI12 (p. 166-167), ISI19 (p. 167), and ISI21 (p. 168) stated that they experienced a contradiction due to the overly theoretical KNOU curriculum. In that case, the contradiction between the use value and the exchange value of KNOU education clashed into what the participants are supposed to learn in the KNOU education activity. If the participants learned merely practical knowledge and skills, then that may undermine the original mission of KNOU as a national institution of higher education. Some of the participants present their resistance to too practical curricula in their interviews [see ISI13 (p. 169) and ISI15 (p. 170)]. On the other hand, if they had learned overly theoretical knowledge, that mitigates adult learners’ satisfaction and misguides
their preparation for advanced careers [see ISI12 (p. 166-167), ISI21 (p. 168), and ISI13 (p. 168)]. This ambivalent aspect of the students’ experiences and perspectives of the KNOU curriculum were also articulated in the interviews of ISI15 (p. 185) and ISI26 (p. 189). Similarly, because the technology-driven KNOU educational system emphasizes mass education, the secondary contradiction between the mediation of distance education technology and the object occurs when the alienated students with high motivation, who expects to receive a quality higher education, faced this technology-based mass education. The data also revealed the conflict between convenient, efficient learning methods and the students’ hope to experience quality higher education with active engagement between instructors and students [see ISI9 (p.161), FGI1 (p. 162), ISI21 (p. 163), and ISI26 (p. 163)].

Identifying the secondary contradictions enabled me to elucidate the socio-cultural and structural characteristics of the participants’ resistance. Without considering the social value and institutional settings of KNOU education, their resistance was understood merely as individual actions or emotions. However, analyzing socio-cultural factors made the contradictions surface, which allowed me to re-conceptualize the phenomenon of resistance among the alienated KNOU students in more comprehensive and sophisticated ways.

It is notable that tertiary contradictions derive from secondary contradictions; that is, tertiary contradictions arise when the object of a more culturally advanced activity’s object is introduced into the central activity system (Engeström, 1987). The typical
reason for the introduction of a new object is to relieve the tension along with secondary contradictions. In this research, a tertiary contradiction among the participants arose when the participants looked to resolve the secondary contradictions. For instance, when they realized that technology-driven distance education did not fulfill their expectations, they searched for extra-curricular activities such as organizing study groups in order to supplement their unmet educational needs. Through this activity, they pursued the sense of belonging as a member of higher education and the bond formed through actual, not virtual, interactions with one another. This new ways of learning through extra-curricular activities among the alienated students are internally resisted by the central activity (see Figure 6-7). The participants supplemented the learning materials provided by the school such as online lectures, textbooks, and so on; they also created and participated in their own face-to-face study groups to share information and study together [see ISI9 (p. 161), FGI1 (P. 162), and ISI18 (p. 182)]. They found an alternative way outside of the institutionally imposed educational system to meet their needs.

Figure 6-7: Tertiary contradiction between the central activity system and the extra-curricular activity system of the KNOU student
The introduction of the extra-curricular activity system changed the dynamics of the central activity system. For example, when the participants joined study groups, the distance educational technology was no longer the major instrument of KNOU education for the participants. Furthermore, the ways in which the participants prepared for the exams and assignments were also transformed from individual, self-directed studying to collaborative, interactional activities. By participating in study groups, their resistance was no longer just an individual matter but rather a convergent configuration that they, as adult students who had been alienated from the mainstream educational system, shared, resolved, and/or consolidated.

Conclusion

This chapter identifies the contradictions of KNOU education and subsequently discusses their resistance to them within the CHAT framework. In examining the resistance among the participants, the current analysis focuses specifically on articulating structural contradictions of KNOU education as experienced by the participants and subsequently on examining how their resistance is embodied in the concrete actions in each sub-activity. In doing so, Leont’ev’s (1978) conceptualization of the distinct levels of activity plays a fundamental role in discerning their resistance.

Goal-driven actions are relatively temporary, having a clear-cut beginning and end; an activity system persists and evolves over a quite long period of time so that individual subjects may not be consciously aware of its object and motive (Engeström, 1987). As a result of the data analysis, I conceptualize three evident sub-activity systems that involve
the number of different goal-driven and conscious actions. As Hegel’s philosophy argues that “individual consciousness is formed under the influence of knowledge accumulated by society and objectified in the world of things created by humanity” (Engeström, 1987, p. 7), this CHAT investigation comprehensively illuminates the complex social, cultural, and historical influences on the participants’ learning activities in distance higher education of KNOU.

The entire analysis is centered on understanding the meanings and values of KNOU education that is the object of the central activity system. This object defines the central activity system among the participants and entails various contradictions at multiple levels. From the participants’ standpoint, particular properties of the object such as gaining high-level and professional knowledge and socializing with other students were examined, which is essential for developing their social practice of higher education (Lektorsky, 1984). The object with motivating forces shapes and directs the activity and finally determines actual goals and actions of the participants as well as attendant sub-activities among them.

Contradiction is used as the key term to examine the resistance among the participants. From the CHAT perspective, contradictions exist in the form of resistance to achieving the goals of the activity as emerging dilemmas, disturbances, and discoordinations (Engeström, 1999). Kuutti (1996) notes that CHAT employs the concept of contradiction “to indicate a misfit within elements, between them, between different activities, or between different development phases of a single activity” (p. 18).
Table 6.2: Levels of contradictions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Contradiction</th>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Outcomes (Contradictions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inner-contradictions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflicts between the use value and exchange value rooted in each node of an activity system</td>
<td><strong>Object:</strong> Open/Mass education vs. Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Mediation:</strong> 1) Efficient technological methods vs. Effective communication &amp; interaction methods 2) Curriculum for online, mass, and higher education vs. Its relevance to students’ lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Rule:</strong> Administratively optimized, bureaucratic evaluation system vs. Individualized evaluation system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Subject vs. Object:</strong> Higher education degree through KNOU vs. Negative social recognition of KNOU education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tensions between two nodes of an activity system</td>
<td><strong>Rule vs. Object:</strong> Efficient evaluation system vs. Evaluating students’ learning in sophisticated ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Mediation vs. Object:</strong> Top-down, bureaucratic pedagogical system vs. Immediate communication &amp; intimate interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Studying individually vs. students’ extracurricular activities such as study groups</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict between the central activity system vs. A more advanced activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.2 above lays out the summary of research findings with regards to multiple contradictions embedded in the students’ activities in KNOU. By this conceptualization, I could reconsider the social, cultural, and institutional influences on the students’ resistance. The students’ resistance was characterized as implicit and latent
and represented through diverse reactions and perspectives among the participants. In relation to the contradictions, the origins and contexts of their resistance could become more analyzable in a systemic manner. By relating the contradictions of KNOU education and resistance among the participants in the CHAT framework, the research findings illuminate how the alienated adult students developed their understanding of the meanings and values of distance higher education of KNOU in the specific socio-cultural context of Korea.
CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

Conclusions

This research illuminated the systematic and structural contradictions existing in the variety of educational activities among the group of alienated KNOU students. Even though the students could find ways to resolve some contradictions, for example by attending study groups, most of the contradictions remained unresolved. This indicates that the contradictions were so embedded in the participants’ distance higher education activities cultural-historically. Given the persistent contradictions and the students’ resistance, KNOU’s current distance higher education system has not effectively facilitated the alienated students’ learning.

KNOU’s quantitative development in student number is attributed to the administratively optimized and efficiently operating education system of KNOU (KNOU, 2011b; Lee, 2001; Yoon, 2006). However, the alienated students’ resistance shed light on how KNOU’s top-down, bureaucratic pedagogical system collided with individual expectations and needs. As a ramification of their resistance, the alienated students critically reflected upon their social position and the social status of the institution. In particular, their critical viewpoints imply the incompatible roles that KNOU plays in Korean society. That is, while KNOU contributes to extending higher education opportunities for those who have unmet educational needs, the value of the KNOU degree has not been socially acknowledged since there is little, if any, competition in the entrance process.
This is not just KNOU’s problem; it is rather a common issue that most open, mass, and distance higher educational institutions confront (Garrison, 1989). The efficiency-oriented model of distance higher education inevitably entails a compromise between a competitive, quality curriculum and the efficient extension of audiences (Adams & DeFleur, 2006; Parker, 2008). Thus, the social recognition of KNOU as a national higher education institution will be promoted when KNOU productively offers quality higher education to those who missed higher educational opportunity due to individual and social impediments.

To better accommodate those students’ learning needs, KNOU has to reconsider the original mission of Open University– that is, to provide quality higher education to broader audiences. This task requires balancing between extending educational opportunities by opening the institution’s door and assuring the quality of higher education through the effective distance education system (Cooper, 2010; Garrison, 1989; Perry, 1977). For example, the British Open University provides extensive educational opportunities regardless of the students’ pre-institutional qualifications and simultaneously leads students to more individually customized educational activities within a sophisticatedly designed distance education system (Open University, 2011). I specifically draw two suggestions for KNOU education along with the research findings.

First, the market-oriented transformation of KNOU curriculum is largely due to the increased number of other competing distance higher education institutions as well as the institutional budget structure. If KNOU does not successfully recruit a sufficient
number of students in this more and more competitive environment of Korean distance higher education, KNOU funding that depends exclusively on student tuitions will deteriorate. This funding mechanism made the institution include more popular subjects in curriculum, but consequently made negative influences on the participants’ learning experience in KNOU. Therefore, in order to establish the educational welfare through KNOU, more governmental contribution to the KNOU budget can improve the institutional autonomy in organizing quality distance higher education.

Second, given the lack of variety in the pedagogical system, which was contradictory to students’ needs and lives, it is necessary to diversify the learning contents as well as the ways in which courses are delivered. To do this, KNOU needs to develop more spaces for active communication and interaction as the participants expected the sense of belonging and close interactions with the instructors or between themselves. Moreover, the misleading, efficiency-driven evaluation system needs to be redesigned in order to enhance students’ learning processes and outcomes by customizing it to suit each subject area and course objective.

**Implications**

Despite the rich literature of resistance in education (e.g., Abowitz, 2000; Burnett, 2004; Giroux, 1983, 2002; Haenfler, 2004; McGrew, 2011; Willis, 1977, 1981), a meaningful contribution of this research to the theory of resistance is the identified configuration of adults’ resistance, which should be differentiated in character from the resistance of children. The participants’ resistance was more often than not implicit,
rather than explicit, and thus difficult to be grasped unless we take into consideration the complex interplay between individual agencies and socio-cultural influences. As Haenfler (2004) insisted that resistance of a subcultural group be regarded as a phenomenon that can be elucidated at multiple levels, adults’ resistance should be also conceptualized by considering social, ideological, and institutional contradictions that operate in the educational system as well as shape individual students’ learning experiences. In this regard, the resistance among the research participants not only articulates personal responses to the given educational structure but also draws meta-societal implications for political and economic systems of Korea and for adult education policies and institutions. More generally, the resistance among the participants highlights the demand for more humanistic and emancipatory educational practices in open and distance higher education.

In addition, I argue that resistance theory needs to be more extensively examined in adult, distance, and higher education as the theory can contribute to diversifying critical research by providing a philosophically sophisticated lens through which to investigate the various cultural, ideological, and political mechanisms that underlie predominant education systems. Unless the structural contradictions of distance higher education are resolved, alienation and resistance among subordinated groups of adult learners cannot be overcome. As the systemic contradictions of adult education are so embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of society, only a radical transformation of education can resolve these contradictions (Cunningham, 1992, 1993).

As a number of studies researching resistance in education have investigated the
status of subordinated groups’ trajectories in order to identify the cultural impact on individual development and the reproduction of social relation (e.g., MacLeod, 1995; McLaren, 1999; Munns & McFadden, 2000; Solomon, 1992; Willis, 1977), it will be meaningful to examine how participation in an adult education institution and resistance among a group of students changes their social identity and perspective. By doing so, we can further develop our knowledge of the mainstream cultures and ideologies which may underlie adult education systems and practices.

Through the current research, I specifically emphasized the significance of adult learners’ cultural-historical activities in order to understand their resistance. Activity systems such as the unit of CHAT analysis imply that configurable human actions and operations may not fully indicate the origins and patterns of resistance. Thus, they can often lead to a subjective or even ad-hoc interpretation of observable behaviors (Nardi, 1996). This research demonstrates that resistance among the participants can be understood in a more extensive socio-cultural context that shaped, operated, and transformed the participants’ activities. The distinct levels of activity theorized by Leont’ev (1978) comprise the foundation upon which I could distinguish the participants’ resistant actions and operations from the structural, systemic contradictions and attendant resistance embodied in their activities. Given the dialectical human practice, contradictions existing in/between activity systems guided me to better recognize the meanings and patterns of their resistance (Engeström, 1987, 1999).

However, there are limitations of CHAT, especially in examining macro-level
societal, cultural, and political issues. A CHAT analysis drawing from the triangular system model entails inevitable limitations in exploring the microscopic discourse underlying the society and culture because, despite its merit in clarifying the complex interplay among activity constituents, the bounded system may prevent us from conceptualizing broader cultural influences and paradigms. Sawchuk (2003) describes CHAT as a mid-range theory that manifests itself in its micro-analytic and descriptive potential by means of objectifying and systemizing bounded human activity systems.

Nonetheless, this research can be further extended to investigate a broader context of KNOU education by contextualizing neighboring activity systems with other subjects (i.e., the institution and the government) as described in Figure 8-1 below. The relation among the neighboring activity systems in Figure 7-1 illustrates how relevant activities having the representative subjects at three different levels in an extended context are interlocked. By conceiving of those activity systems and analyzing the relations among them, it will be feasible to unravel the quaternary contradictions along with the conflicting perspectives between the different educational stakeholders. For example, a contradiction may arise when a reformed or expanded object is introduced to the central activity system. Building upon the quaternary contradiction analysis, we can extend our conceptualization to the broader socio-cultural contexts of KNOU. Even though the model above remains empirically unexamined, it reveals how CHAT can be applied to investigate the complicated, macroscopic social relations between several activity systems including subjects at different levels.
Figure 7-1: Activity systems in a broader context
Finally, even if some research findings may indicate universal problems of distance higher education, the research outcomes are not generalizable but comprehensible only among the group of alienated adult students. Besides, even though this research deals with several general phenomena occurring in open and distance higher education, the overall research was premised on the specific social and cultural contexts of Korea. In other words, a study of adult learners’ experiences of distance higher education in another culture and their resistance in a different institutional setting may illuminate other attributes and patterns of resistance in adult education and learning. Thus, further research needs to be carried out in diverse social, cultural, and institutional contexts in order to consolidate the discourse of resistance in adult education research.
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www.aaou.net

www.knou.ac.kr

www.ou.ac.uk

www.wikieducator.org
### APPENDIX A: Open Universities in the World

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regions</th>
<th>Nations</th>
<th>Open Universities</th>
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<td>Korea</td>
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<td>Korea National Open University</td>
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<td>China</td>
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<td>Beijing Radio &amp; TV University</td>
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<td>China Central Radio &amp; TV University</td>
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<td>Jiangxi Radio &amp; TV University</td>
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<td>Sichuan Radio &amp; TV University</td>
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<td>Tianjin TV University</td>
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<td>Yunnan Radio &amp; TV University</td>
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<td>Vietnam</td>
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<td>National Open University</td>
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<td>The University of Philippines Open University</td>
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<td>Zimbabwe</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B: Organizational Structure of KNOU

President

Graduate Program Committee
Management Committee
Faculty Committee
Committee of Academic Affairs
College Deans Committee

Main Campus Organizations
- Department of Academic Affairs
- Department of Student Affairs
- Planning Department
- Executive Office

Lifelong Graduate Programs
- E-Learning
- Nursing
- English Language & Literature
- Cultural Education
- Information Science
- Management

Liberal Arts
- Liberal Arts
- Social Science
- Natural Science

Colleges
- Education
- Educational Science
- Cultural & Humanity
- Children & Youth Education
- Agricultural Science
- Law
- Economics
- Management

Research Institutions
- Library
- History Museum
- Cultural Education Center
- Lifelong Education Center
- Joint Humanity Research Institute
- Distance Education Research Center

Affiliated Institutions
- University Press
- Educational Cooperation Town
- 13 Regional Campuses & 32 Local Learning Centers

Others
APPENDIX C: List of Textual Materials

(1) Electronic articles


(2) KNOU’s institutional documents & websites


http://ide.knou.ac.kr

http://news.knou.ac.kr

http://oer.knou.ac.kr

http://www.knou.ac.kr
APPENDIX D: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The target participant group:
- KNOU students (sophomores, juniors, and seniors)
- Those who attend KNOU without any other college experience (transfer students excluded)
- Those who have at least two years of job experience after they completed secondary education

1. Introduction
1.1 Introduction of the research and researcher
1.2 Current status: Department and major, grade, the year of entrance …

2. Schooling Experience
2.1 Description of school years: Region, school name and type, situations
  - What school did you attend?
  - What type of school was that?
  - Where is the school?
  - Why did you go to that school?
  - Can you describe how your school was?
  - When did you graduate?
  - Were there any memorable experiences at school?
2.2 Reflection on the self through the school years
  - How do you see yourself at the school in the past?
  - What did you aspire to do after graduation?

3. Social and Work Experience
3.1 Job experiences before entering KNOU (Since they graduated from high school or equivalent)
  - What did you do right after you graduated from your high (or any lower-level) school?
  - What did you experience in the job(s)?
How did your education influence your job?

3.2 Current job or work
- What do you do except attending KNOU?
- How does that affect your study?

4. Discrimination due to the Low Academic Credentials
4.1 Experience of the Overvaluation of Educational Background [in association with 3.1 & 3.2]
- What did you experience in the job or in society in relation to your educational background?
- How did you accept or resist that situation?
4.2 Reflection on and Informal Learning about Educational Value in the Society [in association with 4.1]
- How did the experience affect your thoughts about education?
- What was your reflection of social relationship, or any prejudice if any?

5. Educational and Learning Experience in KNOU
5.1 Motivation for entrance [in association with 4.1 & 4.2]
- How did you know KNOU?
- Why did you decide to enter KNOU?
- Why did you choose KNOU over other educational institutions?
5.2 Motivations to choose the major [in association with 3.1 & 3.2]
- Why did you choose the major?
- How can you relate your choice of the major to your previous experiences?
5.3 Expectations of the degree
- What will you do with your expected degree?
- How will you use it for your career or life?
5.4 The adapting process to the KNOU system
- How did you adapt yourself to the system?
5.5 The experience of the institutional systems of KNOU
6. Higher Education Curriculum in KNOU

6.1 The appropriateness of the educational level
- How did you experience educational contents of your major?
- How did you experience the level of difficulty of KNOU curriculum?
- How do you evaluate KNOU education as higher education?

6.2 The Instructional Methods
- How do you evaluate the instructional technology of KNOU?
- What inconvenience have you undergone in terms of program delivery methods?
- What do you attribute the uneasiness to?

6.3 Educational Roles and functions of KNOU as a Higher Education Institution
- How did you experience the evaluation system of KNOU as a higher education institution?
- How did you experience the curriculum of KNOU as a higher education institution, especially in terms of the arrangement of major and liberal arts subjects?
- How did you experience the learning support system of KNOU as a distance higher education institution?

7. Philosophical Orientation of Instructors and Curriculum

7.1 Critical Reflection of the Curriculum Discourse
- What would you find out if you critically evaluate the contents of curriculum?
- What value-orientation or ideology do you think the curriculum involves or is based on?

7.2 Critical Reflection of Instructors
- How did you experience the authority of instructors?
- How did you experience the instructor’s philosophy that is different than yours?

8. Educational Resistance in KNOU
8.1 Difficulties in Adapting Yourself to the System [in association with 5.4 & 5.5]

- What were difficulties in your adaptation of the school system?
- What were personal barriers to overcome those difficulties?
- What were institutional barriers to overcome those difficulties?
- Have you experienced any coercion the school system involves?
- What did you find the contradictions of the school system?

8.2 Expression of Resistance

- What was your reaction to the barriers or coercions you confronted?
- How did you resolve the contradictions you experienced?

8.3 Attributions of Resistance

- What personal characteristics affect your resistance to the system?
- What school and social experiences of yours influence the formation of resistance?
- What oppression does the school system entail?

9. Wrap-up Question: “Overall, what does ‘KNOU’ mean to you?”
### APPENDIX E: Observation Notes Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field Observation No.</th>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Location:</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Events</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Environment depiction</td>
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**Observed Actions, Interactions, Situations, etc.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time / Phase</th>
<th>Descriptive Notes</th>
<th>Reflective notes</th>
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APPENDIX F: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Resistance among Alienated Adult Students in Korea National Open University: A Cultural-Historical Activity Theory Investigation

Principal Investigator: Kyung Phil (K.P.) Joo, Ph.D. Candidate
Adult Education Program
314 Keller Building
University Park, PA 16802
Phone: (814) 359-8086, kjoo@psu.edu

Academic Advisor: Fred M. Schied, Associate Professor
Adult Education Program
305E Keller Building
University Park, PA 16802
Phone: (814) 863-3499, fms3@psu.edu

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to investigate socio-cultural and political aspects of resistance among alienated adult students in Korea National Open University, and subsequently to unravel the complexity of origins and representations of resistance to the distance higher education system and institution.

2. Procedures to be followed: You will be asked to attend a face-to-face interview and to answer questions such as what you conceive of as resistance in your learning experience at KNOU, what you think the origin of your resistance is, how you react to contradictory situations that cause your resistance to the education system of KNOU, and so on. The interviews will be audio recorded.

3. Duration: It will take about 30-50 minutes to complete an interview.

4. Statement of Confidentiality: Your participation in this research is confidential. Your responses will be recorded by a voice-recorder, and the data will be stored and secured at the PI’s laptop computer in a password-protected file. Only the PI will be able to access the data for the purpose of conducting research. This data will be stored until 12/31/2012. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.
5. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Kyoung Phil (K.P.) Joo at +1-(814) 359-8086 with questions or concerns about this study.

6. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

   You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

   You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

   Participant Signature __________________________________________

   Date__________________

   Person Obtaining Consent__________________________________________

   Date__________________
VITAE: K.P. (KYOUNG PHIL) JOO

**ACADEMIC PREPARATION**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>03. 2005 – 02. 2007</td>
<td>M.A. in Adult Continuing Education &amp; Educational Sociology</td>
<td>Korea University</td>
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<tr>
<td>03. 1998 – 02. 2005</td>
<td>B.A. in Education</td>
<td>Korea University</td>
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**ACADEMIC APPOINTMENT**

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<tr>
<td>03. 2006 – 07. 2008</td>
<td>Teaching &amp; Research Assistant, Lecturer</td>
<td>Department of Education, Korea National Open University</td>
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<tr>
<td>09. 2006 – 02. 2007</td>
<td>Research Assistant</td>
<td>Graduate school of Korea University</td>
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<tr>
<td>08. 2005 – 12. 2005</td>
<td>Research Assistant</td>
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**HONORS & AWARDS**

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<tr>
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<td>Comparative &amp; International Education, Penn State University</td>
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<tr>
<td>01. 2011 – 09. 2011</td>
<td>Alexander Charters Research Grant-in-Aid</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2005</td>
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<td>2003</td>
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