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Suicide, Precarity, and Korean Media:

A Sociocultural Analysis of the Adolescent Suicide Epidemic in South Korea

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Suicide, Precarity, and Korean Media:

A Sociocultural Analysis of the Adolescent Suicide Epidemic in South Korea

By

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Abstract

Suicide, Precarity, and Korean Media:

A Sociocultural Analysis of the Adolescent Suicide Epidemic in South Korea

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2019

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This thesis provides a sociocultural analysis on South Korea's suicide epidemic, particularly focusing on the vulnerability of Korean youth. A discussion on the relevant psychosocial theories of suicide is presented, as well as an explanation of how the rise of precariousness in Korean society has caused Korea to have one of the highest suicide rates in the world. Some of the major issues causing suicidality in young Koreans, including the competitive education system, bullying, job placement, and socioeconomic inequality, are discussed in detail. In addition, the impact of sensationalized reporting of celebrity suicides in Korean news media, as well as the pervasiveness of suicide narratives in Korean television shows is explored. As demonstrated by a textual analysis on two recent Korean dramas, Korean television both reflects and perpetuates Korea's public suicide culture. Finally, an international comparison to the Netherlands and Switzerland is provided, in addition to a discussion on ways to lower the suicide rate among adolescents in South Korea.

Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1

Suicide in Korea: An Acute Social Issue in Contemporary Korean Society

An epidemic of unhappiness is spreading across the planet, while capital absolutism is asserting its right to unfettered control of our lives. As bio-semiocapitalism infiltrates the nervous cells of conscious sensible organisms, it inoculates in them a thanato-political rationale, a morbid sentiment which is progressively taking hold of the collective unconscious, culture, and sensibility.

-- Franco Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide*

Suicide is a much-discussed issue in contemporary South Korea, hereinafter referred to as Korea. However, suicide itself is not a new problem, nor is it unique to Korea. With the expansion and deepening of global capitalism in the 20th and 21st centuries, suicide has become a major issue for many countries. In fact, over the past five decades, suicide rates have increased 60 percent worldwide, and attempted suicides are up to twenty times more frequent than completed suicides.[1] Over the past century or so, many developed nations have experienced the removal of closely-knit family and work units, and many also suffer from severe issues with socioeconomic inequality and fierce competition in the global market. These massive societal changes have resulted in dramatic changes in individuals' personal lives, leading many people to feel that suicide may be a valid escape from their daily hardships.

According to the World Health Organization, approximately 800,000 people commit suicide globally each year, with many more attempts as well.[2] Worldwide, suicide has become the second leading cause of death for people between the ages of 15-29, and in Korea, it is the

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[1] Franco Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (London, UK: Verso, 2015), 164.

[2] World Health Organization, "Suicide," last modified August 24, 2018, https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide.

first leading cause of death from ages 10-39.[3] Since suicide is a pervasive health concern for

Korean adolescents, this thesis will discuss the common sociocultural issues surrounding

adolescent suicide.

Although mental illness is commonly thought of as the precursor to suicide, many

suicides are caused by the inability to withstand stress, financial issues, or other hardships

influenced by increasing precarity in modern society.[4] Korea, for example, has seen a drastic

incline in the annual number of citizens committing suicide over the past several decades. With

almost 26 deaths per 100,000 people each year, Korea has the second highest suicide rate of all

developed nations measured by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD), which is more than twice the OECD average of 12 suicides per 100,000 people (figure

1.1).[5] This equates to almost 44 suicides a day, or nearly 2 suicides per hour.[6] Korea's steady

rise in suicide rates coincides with the rapid industrialization of Korean society.

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[3] 통계청[Statistics Korea], "Causes of Death Statistics in 2017," last modified September 19, 2018, http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/pressReleases/8/10/index.board?bmode=read&bSeq=&aSeq=371140&pageNo=1&rowNum=10&navCount=10&currPg=&sTarget=title&sTxt=. ; World Health Organization, "Suicide."

[4] World Health Organization, "Suicide."

[5] OECD, "Suicide Rates (Indicator)," *OECD Health Statistics: Health Status*, last modified 2019, https://data.oecd.org/healthstat/suicide-rates.htm.; OECD, *OECD Factbook 2015-2016: Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics* (Paris, France: OECD Publishing, 2016), 207, http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/Oecd-factbook-2015-2016_factbook-2015-en.

[6] Nam Ju Ji et al., "The Impact of Indiscriminate Media Coverage of a Celebrity Suicide on a Society with a High Suicide Rate: Epidemiological Findings on Copycat Suicides from South Korea," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 156, no. 1 (March 2014): 56.
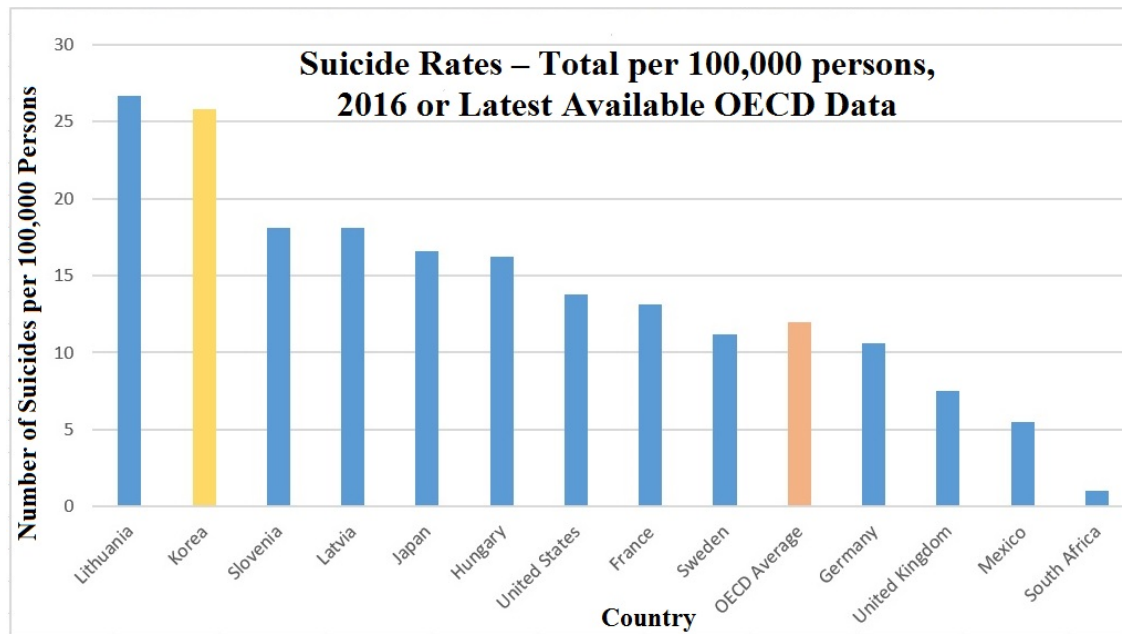
Figure 1.1. *Suicide Rates for Select OECD Countries.* Source data from OECD, "Suicide Rates," *OECD Health Statistics: Health Status.*

After the devastation of the Korean War, Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world. However, due to outward facing political-economic initiatives led by authoritarian leader Park Chung Hee starting in the 1960s, Korea became one of the fastest growing economies of all time, and is currently fourteenth in the world for yearly gross domestic product (GDP) earnings.[7] To put this into perspective, Korea's GDP in 1962 was U.S. $2.7 billion, compared to US$2.035 trillion in 2017.[8]

Although this development has brought a world of wealth and advancement to Korea, it has also caused many societal issues. In his text *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide*, Italian Marxist theorist, Franco Berardi, describes the transformation of Korea by explaining that "this

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[7] Central Intelligence Agency, "Country Comparison: GDP (Purchasing Power Parity)," *The World Factbook*, last modified 2017, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/ the-world-factbook/fields/208rank.html#KS.

[8] Abeer Khandker, "Why Is the South Korean Growth Experience Different? An Analysis of the Differences of per Capita GDP between South Korea and South Asian Countries," *Economic Change and Restructuring* 49, no. 1 (February 2016): 44.; Central Intelligence Agency, "Country Comparison," *The World Factbook*.

dramatic improvement has been the desertification of daily life, the hyper-acceleration of rhythms, the extreme individualization of biographies, and an unbridled competition in the work market."[9] The drastic lifestyle changes to which Koreans have been forced to acclimate during recent decades have created deep rifts of anomie within Korean society. Thus, it is important for researchers to analyze the latent factors that are causing Korean suicide rates to remain comparatively high amongst global averages. Linking suicide to mental health disparities may be the most common framework in which to analyze a suicide epidemic, however, by pathologizing each victim of suicide, it removes the individual's agency, as well as ignores the structural societal issues that may have led an individual to suicide. Therefore, this thesis will analyze the suicide epidemic from a cultural and sociological viewpoint. In this chapter, some of the common theoretical framework used to explain and interpret suicidality will be referenced, in addition to a discussion on some of the populations who are most vulnerable to suicide in Korea.

Theories on Suicide

It is said that "no one who kills himself does so without reference to the prevailing normative standards, values and attitudes of the culture to which he belongs."[10] This implies that there are multiple factors, both personal and societal, that lead an individual to suicide. While many people assume that depression is the main cause of suicide, research demonstrates that only about 3.5-15 percent of people with depression end up committing suicide.[11] Kim (2008)

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[9] Berardi, *Heroes: Mass*, 194.

[10] Menno Boldt, "The Meaning of Suicide: Implications for Research," *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention* 9, no. 2 (1988): 97.

[11] G. W. Blair-West, G. W. Mellsop, and M. L. Eyeson-Annan, "Down-rating Lifetime Suicide Risk in Major Depression," *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 95, no. 3 (March 1997): 259.

found that depression alone is not a reliable indicator that an individual will commit suicide.[12]

Therefore, it is important to analyze other factors that are contributing to the death of so many

Koreans each year. Nosological classification schemes often group suicidality into three models

of causation: the ecological model, the developmental model, and the learning theory model.[13]

These models vary in the degree to which psychosocial factors influence suicidality, however,

each model shows some validity and relevance in Korea's suicide epidemic.

To begin the discussion on the theories of suicidality, let us first consider the ecological

model of causation. The ecological model has been used in a multitude of facets to connect

suicidality as a product of one's surroundings. Perhaps the most common text to fall under the

ecological model is *Le Suicide*, published in 1897 by French sociologist Émile Durkheim. As one

of the most well-known researchers in the field of suicide, Durkheim explained that there are

four reasons why an individual would be driven to suicide: a) detachment from society, b)

feelings of intense altruism in which an individual feels that it would be better for their society if

they were dead, c) a sudden shift of social change which leaves an individual feeling uncertain of

their place in society, or d) "cosmic factors," which Durkheim essentially described as random,

unpredictable influences caused by humans or nature.[14] From Durkheim's text, we can conclude

that society has an extremely pertinent role in influencing suicidal ideation. Although his text is

one of the most well-regarded on suicide theory, Durkheim was not the first researcher to

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[12] Seung-yeon Lee, Jun Sung Hong, and Dorothy L. Espelage, "An Ecological Understanding of Youth Suicide in South Korea," *School Psychology International* 31, no. 5 (October 2010): 533.

[13] Joseph Zubin, "Observations on Nosological Issues in the Classification of Suicidal Behavior," in *The Prediction of Suicide*, ed. Aaron T. Beck, Harvey L.P. Resnik, and Dan J. Lettieri (Philadelphia, PA: Charles Press, Publishers, 1986), 3-25.

[14] Edwin S. Shneidman, *Comprehending Suicide: Landmarks in 20th-Century Suicidology* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 34.; Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1951).

observe the influence of social change on suicidality. In 1822, French psychiatrist Jean-Pierre

Falret wrote in his text *De l'hypochondrie et du suicide* "that suicide rates tend to rise during

periods of rapid social change."[15] This hypothesis coincides with the situation in Korea, since the

country has experienced a period of rapid industrial development since the 1960s, and increased

globalization since the 1990s. For a comparison, in 1960 there were only 344 recorded suicides

in Korea.[16] However, by 1990, this number rose 845 percent to approximately 3,251 suicides,

and by 2010, the number of yearly suicides increased astronomically to 15,566.[17] As

demonstrated by the chart in figure 1.2, the suicide rate continued to increase in correlation to the

rapid change of Korea's socioeconomic and global development, as demonstrated by the

dramatic rise in annual GDP (figure 1.3). Particularly, suicide rates began to categorically

skyrocket in the 1990s in correlation with the "hyperglobalization" of the Korean economy.[18]

The rise in globalization led to a rise in competition, both in education and the workforce,

causing additional stress for Koreans trying to adapt to a newly "hyperglobalized" society.

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[15] Bijou Yang Lester, "Learning from Durkheim and Beyond: The Economy and Suicide," *Suicide and Life- Threatening Behavior* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 16.

[16] 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "사인(50분류)과 연령계급별 사망자 수 - 년 1960 [Sign (50 Classifications) and Number of Deaths by Age-Year 1960]," last modified July 7, 2010, http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=999S&tblId=DT_999S_036062&conn_path=I2.

[17] 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "사망원인(236항목)/성/연령(5세)별 사망자수, 사망률 [Number of Deaths by Cause (236 Items) / Sex / Age, Mortality Rate]," table, Statistics Korea, September 19, 2018, http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1B34E07&conn_path=I2.

[18] Samuel S. Kim, "Korea and Globalization (Segyehwa): A Framework for Analysis," in *Korea's Globalization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2-4.

Figure 1.2. *Yearly Korean Suicides, 1960-2010.* Source data from 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "사망원인(236항목)/성/연령(5세)별 사망자수."
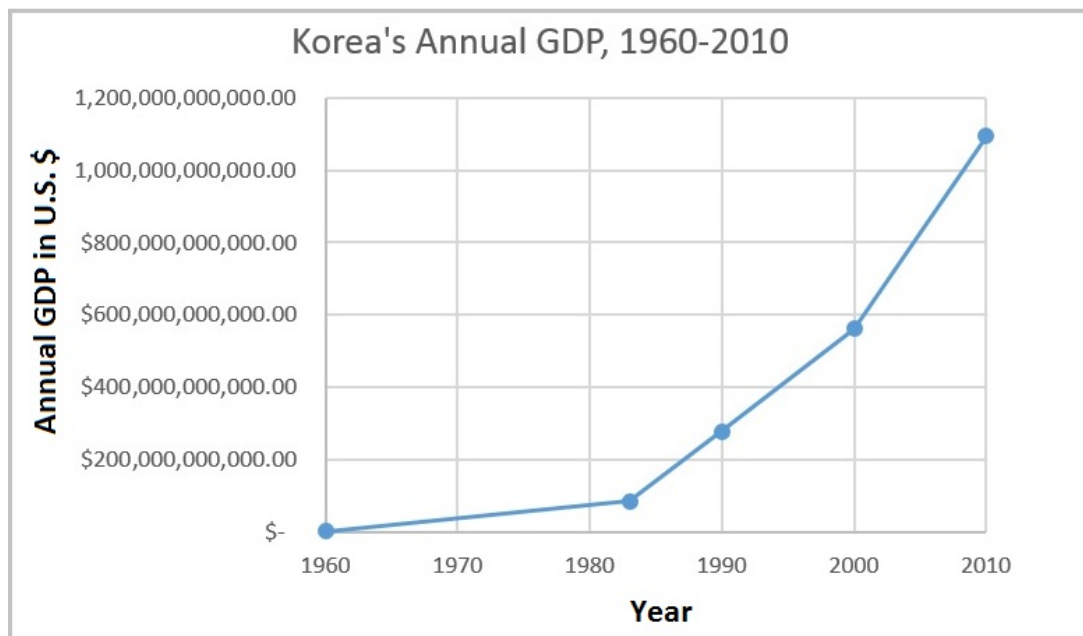
Figure 1.3. *Korea's Annual GDP, 1960-2010.* Source data from World Bank, "GDP by Country - Statistics from the World Bank, 1960-2017," Knoema Corp., last modified April 9, 2019, https://knoema.com/mhrzolg/gdp-by-country-statistics-from-the-world-bank-1960-2017?country=Korea.

Another argument in favor of the ecological model of suicidality came from sociologists

Henry and Short. In their seminal text *Suicide and Homicide. Some Economic, Sociological and*

Psychological Aspects of Aggression (1954), they found a close connection between suicide and homicide rates in countries that were experiencing extreme social change.[19] According to their analysis, the existence or absence of external restraints in various social conditions may cause an increase in suicide and a decrease in homicide and vice versa.[20] For example, during times of economic prosperity, they observed that homicide rates were higher and suicide rates were lower; conversely, during economic depressions, suicide rates rise, while homicide rates fall.[21] While recorded homicide rates in Korea have never been very large, suicide rates indeed continued to rise as the country gained more economic prosperity.

The developmental model, most notably used by Freud, is another theory commonly utilized by researchers to explain the causality of suicide.[22] According to the developmental model, people are driven to suicide due to biological factors and/or unresolved issues from childhood, which have a negative impact on an individual's ability to cope with hardships in life, causing the individual to be more vulnerable to mental health issues.[23] While there is strong evidence that the ecological model of suicide can explain the motivational factors driving Korean suicides, the developmental model has also found strong evidence to demonstrate that many suicidal individuals experienced a damaging, unresolved childhood issue that led to their future suicide. For example, a study led by the McGill Group for Suicide Studies in Quebec, Canada,

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[19] Andrew F. Henry and James F. Jr. Short, *Suicide and Homicide: Some Economic, Sociological and Psychological Aspects of Aggression* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1954).

[20] Airi Varnik et al., "Suicide and Homicide: Durkheim's and Henry and Short's Theories Tested on Data from the Baltic States," *Archives of Suicide Research* 7, no. 1 (January 2003): 52.

[21] Varnik et al., "Suicide and Homicide," 52. ; Henry and Short, *Suicide and Homicide.*

[22] Zubin, "Observations on Nosological," 10.

[23] Monique Séguin et al., "Developmental Model of Suicide Trajectories," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 205, no. 2 (August 2014): 120.

found that over forty percent of the suicide victims they analyzed in their study showed a history

of physical or sexual abuse during the first ten years of their lives.[24] In Korea, incidence of child

abuse are extremely high in comparison to other OECD countries. Stemming from Confucian

tradition, many Korean parents and teachers believe that corporal punishment is a valid

disciplinary measure.[25] In 2016, there were nearly 30,000 reported cases of child abuse in Korea,

and it is likely that there were hundreds to thousands more cases left unreported.[26] In a 2001

survey, 45 percent of Korean parents stated that they had kicked, hit, or beaten their children in

the past.[27] Additionally, as it will be discussed in chapter two, school bullying is another

extremely prevalent issue for Korean children, and it is likely that bullying incidents leave a

lasting scar on many Korean children.

The developmental model of suicide has also been used to demonstrate biological

vulnerability to suicide, as there have been many cases involving twins, adoption studies, family

links, and nuclear biological studies that have demonstrated a strong biological vulnerability to

suicide.[28] The model dictates that when the biologically vulnerable experience a triggering

situation, such as abuse, the loss of a loved one or a break up, the genetic variable is triggered in

the individual's brain, causing them to become suicidal.[29] Some research has even traced

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[24] Séguin et al., "Developmental Model" 123.

[25] Lee, Hong, and Espelage, "An Ecological," 538.

[26] Ministry of Health and Welfare, "Referral Rates by Year: Report on Child Abuse," trans. 통계청 [Statistics Korea], last modified December 14, 2017, http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=117&tblId=TX_117_2009_HJ004&conn_path=I2&language=en.

[27] OECD, "SF3.4: Family Violence," last modified January 31, 2013, https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/SF3_4_Family_violence_Jan2013.pdf.

[28] Thomas J. Verberne, "A Developmental Model of Vulnerability to Suicide: Consistency with Some Recurrent Findings," *Psychological Reports* 89, no. 2 (October 2001): 217.

[29] Verberne, "A Developmental," 117.

adversity in childhood to suicidal ideation in midlife.[30] Looking at this theoretical model could offer some explanation when looking at the high number of middle-aged men committing suicide in Korea, as discussed in the following section. Overall, this model of suicidality focuses less on society's role in causing an individual's suicide, and focuses more on the individuals' genetics and childhood development.

The social learning theory model is another theoretical concept that can be utilized when analyzing Korea's suicide epidemic. The social learning theory states that individuals can learn to adopt suicidal behavior in the same way that they learn to adopt healthy coping mechanisms.[31] This concept of suicide contagion is important to consider when viewing Korea's public culture of suicide, because the prevalence of suicide and suicidal ideation have become widespread in Korean culture during the past decade. In fact, at least 14 percent of Korean adults admit to have seriously considered committing suicide in the past, and that number is even high for adolescents.[32] The theory stipulates that the more an individual is exposed to suicide or suicidal ideation in their daily social interactions, the more acceptable and feasible the idea of suicide will become. [33]

The Werther Effect, which is discussed in great detail in chapter three, offers one example of how the media contributes to the idea of suicide as a coping mechanism. The

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[30] S. A. Stansfeld et al., "Childhood Adversity and Midlife Suicidal Ideation," *Psychological Medicine* 47, no. 2 (January 2017): 327.

[31] Zubin, "Observations on Nosological," 12.

[32] Jun-ho Kim, "한국인 10명 중 1.4명 '자살 심각히 고려' [1.4 Out of 10 Koreans 'Seriously Consider Suicide']," *Medical Tribune*, April 11, 2016, http://www.medical-tribune.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=67147.

[33] Anna S. Mueller and Seth Abrutyn, "Suicidal Disclosures among Friends: Using Social Network Data to Understand Suicide Contagion," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 56, no. 1 (March 2015): 133.

Werther Effect has shown that individuals who view suicidal media content have an increased likelihood of committing suicide themselves. Therefore, it is important to look at how suicide is being represented in the public eye, as this can have an extremely detrimental impact on vulnerable populations who may not have learned more useful coping mechanisms. In societies like Korea, with extremely high rates of suicide, committing suicide can become somewhat of a "cultural script" which is reverted to when hardships arise.[34]

Vulnerable Populations

The three theoretical models mentioned above can help when analyzing the suicide epidemic in Korea, however, it is also important to understand the individual pressures among specific sub-groups of Korean society that cause certain individuals to be more likely to commit suicide that others. Although anyone can become susceptible to suicidal ideation, there are particular groups within the Korean population who exhibit more suicidal behavior than others.

While the majority of the chapters in this thesis will focus on the vulnerability of Korean adolescents, it is important to have a brief understanding of other sub-groups in Korea who are vulnerable to suicide. Thus, a discussion of two of the most vulnerable groups, middle-aged men and the elderly, will be briefly presented below. Although there are many other sub-groups that are more vulnerable to suicide than the average layperson (such as rural bachelors, immigrants, military personnel, and the LGBTQ community), due to their relatively small size in the Korean population, they will not be discussed in this paper.

While the situational triggers that incite suicide in Korean adolescents are somewhat different from those of older Koreans, all three groups can cite the growing issue of precarity in

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[34] Mueller and Abrutyn, "Suicidal Disclosures," 133.

Korean society as a root cause of their hopelessness. Originally used to discuss the flexible labor models of late stage capitalism, in *Precarious Japan*, Anne Allison extends the meaning of precarity to refer to the unpredictable and uncertain conditions that cause citizens to feel that there is no prospect of a bright future.[35] Those who survive the precarious hardships of adolescence in Korea often feel that their future is still uncertain vis-à-vis the omnipresent issues that cause middle aged and elderly Koreans to still struggle with suicidality later in life. A discussion of some of these issues of precarity will be discussed below, followed by a more in depth discussion of Korean adolescents in chapter two.

Middle-aged Men

One of the subgroups that is most vulnerable to suicide in Korea is middle-aged men. Although suicidal ideation and suicide attempts are more common among females, completed suicides are much more pervasive among men.[36] In 2017, 4,424 men between the ages of 40-64 committed suicide in Korea compared to 1,492 women in the same age bracket.[37] At approximately 43.8 suicides per 100,000 people, the suicide rate for middle-aged men in nearly twice as high as it is for the population as a whole.[38] In particular, men in their fifties are the most at risk in this age bracket, with a suicide rate of approximately 47.7 per 100,000 people.[39]

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[35] Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

[36] Hoo-Yeon Lee, Myung-Il Hah, and Eun-Cheol Park, "Differential Association of Socio-economic Status with Gender- and Age-defined Suicidal Ideation among Adult and Elderly Individuals in South Korea," *Psychiatry Research* 210, no. 1 (November 2013): 325.

[37] 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "사망원인(236항목)/성/연령(5세)별 사망자수," table.

[38] 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "사망원인(236항목)/성/연령(5세)별 사망자수," table.

[39] 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "사망원인(236항목)/성/연령(5세)별 사망자수," table.

For middle-aged men in Korea, issues related to economic and job stability lie at the heart

of their increased levels of suicidality. Among middle-aged Koreans, economic hardship is cited

as the cause of suicide in nearly 50 percent of recorded cases.[40] As previously mentioned,

Korea's economic growth has climbed dramatically over the past several decades. However, the

Asian Economic Crisis in 1997 had an extremely detrimental impact on a large portion of

Korean society. The financial crisis and subsequent bailout by the International Monetary Fund

(IMF) led many companies to lay off large quantities of their workforce; this resulted in many

middle-aged men losing their job, which many had dedicated their life to for decades. Since

many Korean companies use a seniority based wage system, older employees with higher wages

were more vulnerable to company layoffs.[41] Consequently, as middle-aged men faced high rates

of unemployment during the economic crisis, women were called upon to work in low-wage,

blue-collar jobs in order to support their families in lieu of the male breadwinner.[42] This situation

had a severe impact on many Korean men, who had not only lost their sense of professional

identity with the loss of their employment, but also their sense of masculinity as the patriarchal

head of their family. Many men were often too ashamed to tell their family they had lost their

job, and left home every morning and came back at night in order to maintain their identity as the

household provider and patriarch. The financial crash had such a deep impact on middle-aged

Korean society that the number of suicides for men aged 40-64 increased more than 69 percent

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[40] Sang-Sik Moon and Sang-Mi Park, "Risk Factors for Suicidal Ideation in Korean Middle-aged Adults: The Role of Socio-demographic Status," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 58, no. 6 (November 2012): 657-58.

[41] Kwang-Yeong Shin and Ju Kong, "Why Does Inequality in South Korea Continue to Rise?" *Korean Journal of Sociology* 48, no. 6 (December 2014): 35.

[42] Moon and Park, "Risk Factors," 657.

from 1997 to 1998, in comparison to an increase of 42 percent for the Korean population as a whole.[43]

As a lasting result of the Korean government's IMF restructuring, the neoliberal job market has seen a huge increase in precarious work and a decrease in regular, full-time employment.[44] This too has negatively impacted the mental health of Koreans, as precarious workers are at a much higher risk of suicide than those who are employed in secure, full-time labor.[45] Borrowing terminology from Japanese social activist Amamiya, in her text *Precarious Japan*, Anne Allison describes this pervasive precariousness as an "'annihilation of the spirit' (*seishintekina ikizurasa*) that festers around aspirational goals (and its supply chain of well-being) so sutured to a social and work affiliation."[46] The neoliberal restructuring has been virtually soul crushing for many middle-aged Korean men, who have been forced to give up their career aspirations and conform to a harsher, more temporary labor market.

Aside from economic and employment issues, another factor that influences suicidal ideation in middle-aged men is the absence of a spouse; men generally have fewer social contacts than women, so unmarried men (single, divorced, widowed) often lack an emotional support system.[47] Without a spouse to comfort or encourage them, men who may be suffering from economic or job insecurity may end up feeling hopeless and alone. Furthermore, in a

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[43] 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "사망원인(236항목)/성/연령(5세)별 사망자수," table.

[44] Kwang-Yeong Shin, "Economic Crisis, Neoliberal Reforms, and the Rise of Precarious Work in South Korea," *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 3 (2013): 335.

[45] Kyoung-Bok Min et al., "Precarious Employment and the Risk of Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts," *Preventive Medicine* 71 (February 2015): 72.

[46] Allison, *Precarious Japan*, 69.

[47] Moon and Park, "Risk Factors," 661.

patriarchal society such as Korea, the absence of a wife or child to provide for may further

provoke a man's suicidal ideation.[48]

The Elderly

According to national statistics, as of 2019, approximately 14.9 percent of the Korean

population is 65 years-old or older.[49] This percentage is expected to increase in the near future,

as Korea has been labeled one of the fastest aging societies in the developed world.[50] From being

victims of violence, abuse, family abandonment, and fraud, to being financially unstable with

little help from social welfare services, the Korean elderly face many hardships in their daily

lives, which cause them to be considered one of groups most vulnerable to suicide. Elderly

people aged 65 or above account for approximately 27 percent of all recorded suicides, and the

suicide rate for this age group was 47.7 per 100,000 deaths in 2017, which was nearly twice the

average of 24.3 per 100,000 people for all Koreans that year.[51] As demonstrated by figure 1.4,

the suicide rate drastically increases for elderly Koreans as they age.

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[48] Moon and Park, "Risk Factors," 662.

[49] 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "Projected Population by Age Group (Korea)," table, March 28, 2019, http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1BPA003&conn_path=I2&language=en.

[50] OECD, *Working Better with Age: Korea* (Paris, France: OECD Publishing, 2018), 26, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264208261-en.

[51] 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "사망원인(236항목)/성/연령(5세)별 사망자수," table.
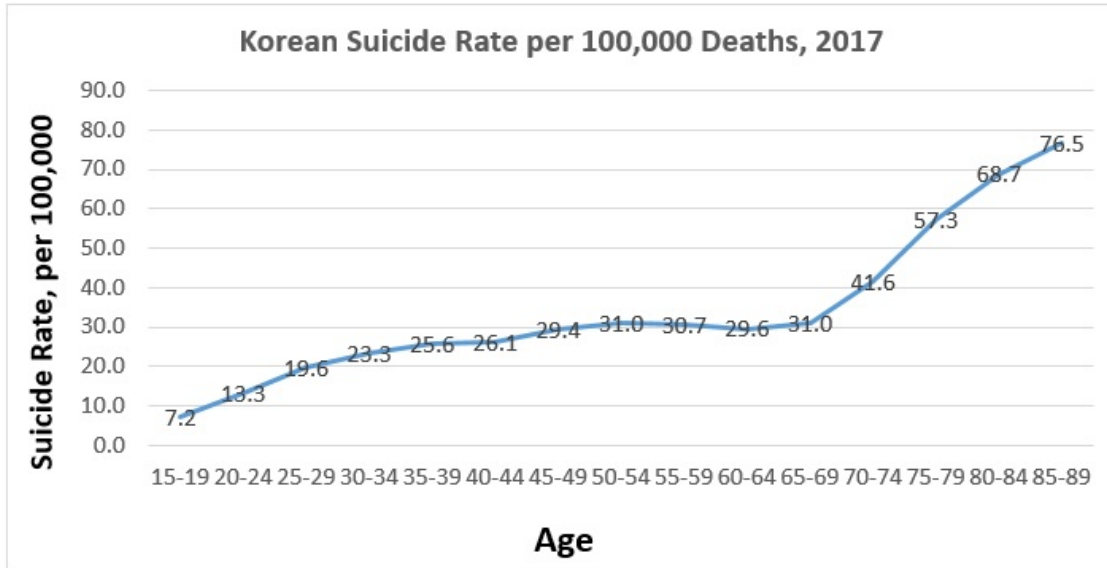
Figure 1.4. *Korean Suicide Rate, per 100,000 deaths, 2017.* Source data from 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "사망원인(236항목)/성/연령(5세)별 사망자수."

One of the most obvious hardships ailing the elderly is the deterioration of their physical and mental health. Many elderly people suffer from a variety of physical ailments, which limit their mobility and severely curb their daily interactions with society. These health issues can also cause elderly people to take a numerous medications, many of which have harsh side effects, such as increased depression or suicidal ideation.[52] Common symptoms of depression, such as insomnia, weight loss, digestion issues, muscle pain, and fatigue, may be missed as depressive symptoms and misdiagnosed as side effects of daily medications.[53]

In the past, Confucian societies like Korea believed strongly in filial piety; it was not uncommon for several generations to live in the same household. However, since the period of rapid industrialization, there has been a strong emphasis on the nuclear family and a decrease in

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[52] Sonia Chehil and Stan Kutcher, *자살 위기자 관리 매뉴얼 [Suicide Risk Management: A Manual for Health Professionals]*, 2nd ed. (Seoul, S. Korea: 학지사 [Hakjisa], 2015), 158.

[53] Chehil and Kutcher, *자살 위기자*, 159.

the number of multigenerational homes. For example, in 1960, 28.6 percent of Korean households housed three or four generations under the same roof, however, by 1985, the number of three-four generation households fell to 16.2 percent.[54] As of 2019, it is estimated that only 2.3 percent of households have three or more generations of the same family living together.[55] This results in approximately 33.7 percent of Koreans over the age of 65 living alone, and the likelihood of them living alone increases with age, as many elderly eventually lose their spouse or their children move out of their home after marriage.[56] Elderly Koreans who live alone are significantly more likely to experience suicidal ideation, depression, and hopelessness than their counterparts who live with family.[57] Furthermore, since many elderly people live alone, their suicide attempts are likely to be more fatal than other populations, because there is often no one home to resuscitate them or call for help.[58]

Aside from issues with social withdrawal and physical/mental health, poverty is another major issue that is plaguing much of the elderly society in Korea. Due to Korea's poorly developed social security and social welfare systems, many elderly Koreans struggle to make ends meet and end up falling into abiding poverty. With nearly 50 percent of all old people living

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[54] Howard A. Palley, "Social Policy and the Elderly in South Korea: Confucianism, Modernization, and Development," *Asian Survey* 32, no. 9 (September 1992): 788.

[55] 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "Projected Households by Age of Household Head and Household Type," table, April 13, 2017, http://kosis.kr/statHtml/ statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1BZ0502&conn_path=I2&language=en.

[56] 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "Projected Households," table.

[57] Jung Nam Sohn, "독거노인과 비독거노인의 자살생각 관련요인 [A Study on Factors Influencing the Suicidal Ideation in Elderly People Who Live Alone or Live with Family]," 정신간호학회지 *[Journal of the Korean Academy of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing]* 21, no. 2 (June 2012): 118.

[58] Chehil and Kutcher, *자살 위기자*, 157.

in poverty, Korea has the highest elderly poverty rate in the developed world.[59] Due to the fact

that Korea's social security system has not yet matured, those who are physically well enough to

continue working often end up working well into their seventies; in fact, a 2009 study found that

with an average retirement age of 72, Korea has the oldest effective retirement age out of all

countries measured by the OECD.[60] Although working elderly have more social engagement

than their unemployed counterparts, "poor working conditions, precarious engagement and low

pay" are much more common among older workers than they are among the rest of the labor

market.[61] Overall, the sheer volume of issues that elderly Koreans must deal with on a daily basis

have caused them to become one of the most suicidal subgroups in Korea.

This chapter has presented statistics and background information on the suicide epidemic

in Korea, as well as presented some of the relevant theoretical viewpoints on suicidality. Two

subgroups of Koreans, middle-aged men and the elderly, were identified as two of the most

vulnerable groups in Korea. While middle-aged men tend to struggle with job insecurity and

maintaining their sense of masculinity amidst layoffs, the elderly struggle with physical and

mental ailments, social isolation, and poverty. The following chapter will provide a more in-

depth discussion on another subgroup in Korea that is extremely vulnerable to suicide--

adolescents.

Although briefly mentioned above, chapter three will discuss the Werther Effect in more

detail. It will also offer insight on the implications of sensationalized media reports on celebrity

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[59]OECD, *Society at a Glance 2019: OECD Social Indicators* (Paris, France: OECD Publishing, 2019), 100, https://doi.org/10.1787/soc_glance-2019-en.

[60] OECD, *Working Better*, 42.

[61] OECD, *Working Better*, 43.

suicides in Korea. Chapter four will discuss how Korea's public culture of suicide is both

reflected and perpetuated in Korean television dramas. Finally, chapter five will conclude this

discussion on Korea's suicide epidemic by considering possible suicide prevention techniques

that have been effective in lowering suicide rates for other countries.

Chapter 2

The Youth Suicide Epidemic:

Analyzing the Leading Cause of Death for Adolescents in South Korea

"What could be considered a holdover of the competitive society has only heightened in the competitiveness young people face in social media online and peer relations at school. While always precarious in terms of peer popularity and the threat of exclusion, the market in youth sociality shows signs of ratcheting up. Refugeeism from the social is becoming more ordinary every day."

                                                                    --Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan*

Suicide is an issue that can impact people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds. However, there are certain groups within the Korean population who have been identified as more vulnerable to suicide than others. In most developed or developing countries, young adults are often considered one of the most vulnerable populations to suicide, and such is the case in Korea.[62] According to a 2017 report from Korea's national statistical agency, suicide is the number one leading cause of death for Koreans aged 10-39, however, in the U.S. and most other developed countries, suicide is at least the second or third leading cause of death for this age bracket.[63] In a 2018 survey conducted by the Hanam City Youth Social Environment Survey in Gyeonggi Province, almost 30 percent of Korean youth admitted to having previously thought about committing suicide, and around 15 percent report that they have attempted suicide at least once.[64] The number of recorded suicide attempts for Korean adolescents in 2018 was

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[62] Franco Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (London, UK: Verso, 2015), 165.

[63] 통계청[Statistics Korea], "Causes of Death Statistics in 2017," last modified September 19, 2018, http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/pressReleases/8/10/index.board?bmode=read&bSeq=&aSeq=371140&pageNo=1&rowNum=10&navCount=10&currPg=&sTarget=title&sTxt=. ; World Health Organization, "Suicide," last modified August 24, 2018, https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide.

[64] 통계청[Statistics Korea], "자살 생각 여부 및 자살의 큰 이유 [Suicidal Ideation and Main Reasons For Suicide]," last modified December 7, 2018, http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=628&tblId=DT_628003_A007&conn_path=I2.

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approximately 60,040, or more than 3 percent of the youth population, but it is likely that there

were many additional suicide attempts that were not officially reported.[65] While the suicide rate

for adolescents in Korea is comparative to the U.S. and Japan's rates (figure 2.1), Korea's

adolescent suicide rate has remained consistent for the past decade despite the fact that the

aggregate suicide rate has shown progress in decreasing.[66] Thus, as this data demonstrates,

suicide is an extremely prevalent issue among youth in Korean society.

Figure 2.1. *Teenage suicides, 1990, 2000, and 2015 or latest available year: Suicides by people aged 15-19 per 100,000 people aged 15-19.* Chart from: OECD, "CO4.4: Teenage Suicides (15-19 Years Old)," last modified October 17, 2017, https://www.oecd.org/els/family/CO_4_4_Teenage-Suicide.pdf.

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[65] 통계청[Statistics Korea] and 보건복지부 [Ministry of Health and Welfare], "자살 시도율 [Suicide Attempt Rate]," last modified January 8, 2019, http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=117&tblId=DT_117_12_Y071&conn_path=I2.

[66] 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "사망원인(236항목)/성/연령(5세)별 사망자수, 사망률 [Number of Deaths by Cause (236 Items) / Sex / Age, Mortality Rate]," table, Statistics Korea, September 19, 2018, http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1B34E07&conn_path=I2. ; OECD, "CO4.4: Teenage Suicides (15-19 Years Old)," last modified October 17, 2017, https://www.oecd.org/els/family/CO_4_4_Teenage-Suicide.pdf.

Although it is difficult to know the exact causation of each suicide, reports from Korean youth and medical professionals can help us determine common issues for youth that need to be addressed. In 2015, the Korean Youth Counseling Institute analyzed the main crises affecting young people who were receiving counseling. The issues reported related to interpersonal relationships (22.4%), education and career advancement (20.4%), mental health problems (11.9%), juvenile delinquency (drugs, crime, etc.) (11.3%), computer or internet addiction (8.6%), and family issues (7.7%).[67] Although these statistics are only representative of the 28 percent of young people who received counseling in Korea in 2015 (approximately 3.9 million), they give us insight into the daily problems that impact the lives of Korean youth.[68] Since interpersonal relationships, education, and career advancement are the most prominent issues affecting young adults, this chapter will further analyze these issues in an attempt to better understand the adolescent psyche in modern Korea.

Korea's Competitive Education System

In Korean society there are many pressures that impact young adults. One of the most measurable societal pressures is Korea's rigorous education system. Compared with all countries measured by the OECD, Korea has the highest scores in mathematics, the second highest scores in reading, and the third highest scores in science.[69] However, Korea's highly competitive education practices come at a great cost. Students in Korea study an average of 15 hours a day,

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[67] 통계청[Statistics Korea], "전국 청소년 상담 내용 및 대상현황 [Nationwide Youth Counseling Current State of Affairs]," last modified 2016, http://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtlPageDetail.do?idx_cd=1600.

[68] 통계청[Statistics Korea], "전국 청소년."; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, "The World Population Prospects: 2015 Revision," last modified July 29, 2015, http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/publications/world-population-prospects-2015-revision.html.

[69] OECD, *PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment* (2016), http://www.oecd.org/pisa/.

and at least 50 percent of teenagers have suicidal thoughts due to school-related pressures.[70] In Western societies, children usually finish schooling by three p.m., and are free to spend the rest of their nights and weekends partaking in leisure activities or sports. In Korea, however, school is an "all-consuming way of life."[71] Students will usually start their day around six a.m. and head to school. They will stay at school until around five p.m., and afterwards approximately 80 percent of students will head to their *hakwon*, or a private cram school, for private tutoring or group lessons.[72] Those who cannot afford to attend *hakwon* usually end up falling behind in school. At *hakwon,* students will study until ten or eleven p.m., at which time they will head home to shower, eat dinner, and study for several more hours before heading to bed. Some parents will stay up and monitor their children to ensure they do not fall asleep too early. On average, middle and high school students sleep less than five hours a night.[73]

New initiatives have aimed to increase awareness of the alarmingly high suicide rates in Korea. Some organizations have started making public service announcements to help society understand the pressures that Korean students face on a daily basis. One such video titled *The Tough Life of a Korean Student (Yeojung Sangoiyagi),* which is based on a true story, depicts a young girl whose entire life revolves around her coursework.[74] The girl's mother locks her in her room and monitors her so that she will not fall asleep while studying. At the end of the video, the

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[70] *Korea: Education Gangnam Style*, produced by Bronwen Reed and Australian Broadcasting Corporation, performed by Matthew Carney, Films Media Group, 2015.

[71] Hae-joang Cho, "Children in the Examination War in South Korea: A Cultural Analysis," in *Children and the Politics of Culture*, ed. Sharon Stephens (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 148.

[72] Hyunjoon Park, Soo-yong Byun, and Kyung-keun Kim, "Parental Involvement and Students' Cognitive Outcomes in Korea: Focusing on Private Tutoring," *Sociology of Education* 84, no. 1 (2011): 5.

[73] Cho, "Children in the Examination," 150.

[74] "여중생 이야기 [The Tough Life of a Korean Student]," video file, YouTube, posted by 딩고 [Dingo], November 24, 2015, https://youtu.be/-pEWlGZj5DI.

girl's mother tells her that she can live her life autonomously now that she has passed the exam (most likely referring to the college entrance exam). The girl thanks her mother, and then incongruently proceeds to walk to the roof of their apartment to commit suicide. Although many might question why the girl would commit suicide after receiving (seemingly) positive results on the entrance exam, this incongruence is perhaps telling of the girl's dismay in having to continue into four more years of rigorous education at the university level. Although the video may seem hyperbolic, it is not far from the reality of what many Korean students experience on a daily basis. Many Korean mothers will not accept their child doing anything but studying, and thus, many children who are less apt to maintain rigorous study habits tend to fear or avoid their parents.[75] A negative relationship between a parent and child is one of the biggest risk factors for suicidal behavior in Korean adolescents. [76]

Although it is a staple of Confucian societies to believe that education has a crucial role in establishing oneself, it is irrefutable that this way of life is detrimental on the physical and mental health of young Koreans. Even without duress from parents, students feel pressure from society to constantly improve their grades in order to out-compete their peers. In a 2010 study, approximately 53 percent of students admitted to having suicidal thoughts due to their own dissatisfactory academic performance.[77] Additionally, spending the bulk of their day studying leaves Korean youth with no time to get involved in sports, clubs, or other stress relieving

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[75] Cho, "Children in the Examination," 149.

[76] Byung Duk Son, "일반청소년 학습장애 청소년의 우울 및 자살충동에 미치는 다변적 요인예측 [Multivariate Predictive Factors on Depression and Suicidal Thoughts in Adolescents with Learning Disabilities]," 청소년학연구 *[Korean Journal of Youth Studies]*12, no. 1 (2005): 207.; Seung-yeon Lee, Jun Sung Hong, and Dorothy L. Espelage, "An Ecological Understanding of Youth Suicide in South Korea," *School Psychology International* 31, no. 5 (October 2010): 535.

[77] Se-Woong Koo, "An Assault upon Our Children," *The New York Times*, August 1, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/02/opinion/sunday/south-koreas-education-system-hurt s-students.html.

activities. Research shows that physical activity is important in relieving and preventing depression and anxiety, as well as improving mental well-being.[78] Hence, the lack of physical activity, sleep, and social interaction can unsurprisingly lead to compromised mental health conditions, and possibly suicide.

Interpersonal Relationship (Socialization & Bullying)

The belongingness hypothesis states that human beings have a significant desire to form positive, lasting relationships with their peers.[79] Individuals who lack positive social interactions often suffer from depression and may feel isolated from society. Research also shows that a lack of supportive relationships can increase the severity of an individual's stress. Furthermore, just as Durkheim's theory proposed, being isolated or uncertain about one's place in society can be a contributing factor in committing suicide.

Korean society places a strong emphasis on familial ties, and parents are often the most influential people in a child's life.[80] Having a warm and positive relationship with parents is crucial in order for young adults to control their stress levels.[81] Unfortunately, as demonstrated in the public service announcement mentioned above, Korean parents may often become overzealous and onerous in hopes of helping their children succeed in school; this can become an

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[78] Kenneth R. Fox, "The Influence of Physical Activity on Mental Well-Being," *Public Health Nutrition* 2, no. 3A (March 1999): 411.

[79] Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497.

[80] B. C. Park, "Cultural Ambivalence and Suicide in South Korea," in *Suicide and Culture: Understanding the Context*, ed. Erminia Colucci and David Lester (Cambridge, MA: Hogrefe Publishing, 2013), 237-262.

[81] Rachel Kenny, Barbara Dooley, and Amanda Fitzgerald, "Interpersonal Relationships and Emotional Distress in Adolescence," *Journal of Adolescence* 36, no. 2 (April 2013): 359.

even larger stressor than the schoolwork itself. Some parents will resort to using physical abuse as a means to punish their child for poor academic performance. In 2014, there were 17,791 reported cases of child abuse in Korea.[82] This number does not take into account the number of child abuse cases that are left unreported. Since family relations and child rearing can still be seen as an extremely private matter in Korean society, many children will not tell authorities if they experience abuse at home. Usually a teacher or peer reports the abuse. Sometimes the harsh conditions that Korean youth experience at home can lead to drastic consequences; in 2012, a teenage boy in Seoul killed his mother after suffering from years of physical and emotional abuse.[83] Research has also shown that Korean adolescents who experience abuse or harsh discipline at home may have an increased number of suicidal thoughts.[84]

Interpersonal relationships with peers can also be very influential on an adolescents' mental health. The lack of free time to spend with friends may be damaging to a young person's interpersonal relationships. Additionally, the high rates of bullying reported in Korean schools can also have a negative impact on the wellbeing of young people. Adolescents who lack support or acceptance from their peers have an increased chance of experiencing suicidal ideation.[85] News segments on horrendous bullying incidents often appear in Korean news outlets, and it is not uncommon for students to cite bullying in their suicide letters as a critical factor in their

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[82] 보건복지부 [Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare], "아동학대 신고 전년 대비 36% 증가 [36% Increase from Child Abuse Report]," last modified 2015, http://www.mohw.go.kr/.

[83] Jaeyeon Woo, "Teenager Sentenced for Killing Grades-Obsessed Mother," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 21, 2012, http://blogs.wsj.com/korearealtime/2012/03/21/teenager-sentenced-for-killing-grades-obs essed-mother/.

[84] Son, "일반청소년 학습장애," 207.; Lee, Hong, and Espelage, "An Ecological," 535.

[85] Lee, Hong, and Espelage, 'An Ecological," 535.

decision to end their life.[86] The acts carried out by bullies range from isolating a student, taking

their money, cyberbullying, and physical violence. In some cases, bullies will subject their peers

to exceptionally heinous acts, such as one case in 2013, when a bully urinated in his

schoolmate's mouth.[87] In a similarly horrifying case from 2012, bullies buried their classmate up

to his neck and took turns urinating on his face.[88] Research has shown that violence in schools

has become increasingly pervasive and organized in recent years, forming what many would

describe as gangster-like groups that ban together to mentally and physically dominate or harass

other students.[89]

The issue of bullying in Korean schools comes with great consequence; survey data

suggests that somewhere between ten and forty percent of students have considered committing

suicide due to being bullied. Teens who have been bullied physically or over the internet are 3

times more likely to attempt suicide than those who have not been bullied.[90] Recent surveys

show that nearly 41 percent of students in Seoul, and 22 percent of students nationwide, have

been verbally or physically bullied by their peers in the past year.[91] Moreover, the number of

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[86] "Schoolgirl Committed Suicide after Being Bullied," *Korea Times*, December 22, 2011, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/10/113_101391.html.; "Bullying in Schools," *Korea Times*, March 13, 2013, http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinon/2013/03/137_132020.html.

[87] Kyung-min Lee, "Bully Urinates in the Mouth of a Boy, School Covers It Up," *Korea Times*, July 15, 2013, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2013/07/116_139308.html.

[88] Jeong-ju Na, "'I Felt Fear of Being Buried Alive,'" *Korea Times*, February 22, 2012, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/special/2012/02/139_105463.html.

[89] Trent M. Bax, "A Contemporary History of Bullying and Violence in South Korean Schools," *Asian Culture and History* 8, no. 2 (2016): 91-96.

[90] Beop-Rae Roh et al., "The Structure of Co-Occurring Bullying Experiences and Associations with Suicidal Behaviors in Korean Adolescents," *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 11 (November 2015): 1.

[91] Whan-woo Yi, "40% Students Suffer from School Violence," *Korea Times*, January 7, 2013, http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2013/01/113_128451.html.; Na, "'I Felt."

students who are being bullied may be underreported; Na's 2012 study found that 45.9 percent of students claimed that they would rather keep quiet about being bullied rather than report it to an adult. Many students are too afraid to report school violence in fear of backlash from the perpetrator, in addition to the overwhelming consensus that police and school administrators do not take bullying seriously enough.

Job Placement & Socioeconomic Inequality

Similar to the arduous academic environment, many young Koreans must also face rigorous competition to enter the labor market. Graduating from college is considered a prerequisite for establishing oneself in Korean society; however, a degree is no longer enough to stay competitive in the job market.[92] In order to obtain a job as a full-time employee at a good company, it is nearly a requirement to graduate from one of the top-tier universities in Seoul.[93] Unfortunately, with the exception of the extremely smart or talented, only students from wealthy families can afford the amount of private schooling necessary to be accepted by a top-tier university.[94] As Dr. Vladimir Hlasny of Ewha Womans University in Seoul describes it: in order to be accepted by a top-tier university, a student needs to have attended a good high school. In order to attend a good high school, a student needs to have attended a good middle school.[95] This cycle begins in early childhood, when many wealthy families send their child to private tutoring

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[92] Cho, "Children in the Examination," 148.

[93] *Korean Kontext*, "Addressing Inequality and Inefficiency in the Korean Labor Market," Korean Economic Institute of America, November 17, 2016, hosted by Jenna Gibson, performed by Vladimir Hlasny, http://keia.org/podcast/addressing-inequality-and-inefficiency-korean-labor-market.

[94] Hae-joang Cho, "The Spec Generation Who Can't Say 'No': Overeducated and Underemployed Youth in Contemporary South Korea," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 23, no. 3 (August 2015): 461.

[95] *Korean Kontext*, "Addressing Inequality."

before they enter primary school, and continues indefinitely.[96] Thus, a persistent dilemma has

been created in which the children of wealthier families are the only ones who can obtain

permanent, full-time employment, leaving the children of poorer families perpetually in the

lower class of Korean society (figure 2.2). This complex issue is the strongest example of

socioeconomic inequality in Korea.
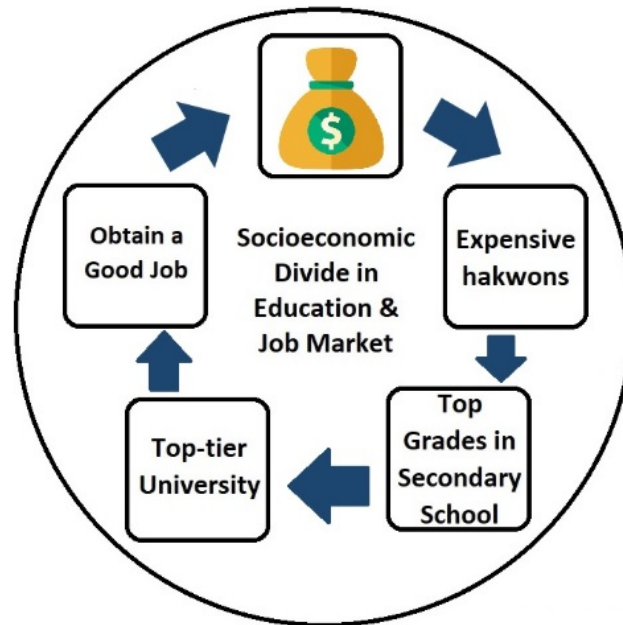
Figure 2.2. *The Socioeconomic Divide in the Korean Education & Job Market.*
Created by Lisa Marie Longenecker, 2019

    Aside from the socioeconomic divide in the labor market, unemployment is another

factor contributing to the high suicide rates of young people. Due to the fact that Korea is a

society that places a strong emphasis on education, nearly 75 percent of Koreans continue on to

receive a college degree after graduating high school.[97] While the number of highly educated

young adults has increased drastically over the past several decades, the amount of jobs for

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[96] Cho, "The Spec Generation," 450.

[97] OECD, *OECD Economic Surveys Korea* (OECD Publishing, 2014),
https://www.oecd.org/eco/surveys/Overview_Korea_2014.pdf.

college educated Koreans has not increased enough to keep up with demand. Recent data suggests that one in three young adults with a bachelor's degree in Korea are currently unemployed.[98] As of September 2016, approximately 315,000 college graduates were unemployed. Research has demonstrated that unemployment leads to social isolation, financial problems, and familial disputes, which all have the ability to increase the risk of suicide for young adults.[99]

Lastly, while entry into the Korean job market may be relatively difficult, the daily life of a worker may be even harder. Korea works the second highest number of hours per year with Korean employees working 2,124 hours on average.[100] Long hours have been shown to create a higher risk of suicide among workers.[101] Moreover, due to the unavailability of high-level jobs, many workers are underemployed or working in jobs they disdain.[102] In order to survive, many young people with college degrees are forced to take part-time jobs in the service industry or retail. Not only does this cause job dissatisfaction and anxiety among workers, underemployment has also been correlated with higher suicide rates in many research studies.[103] Cho (2015)

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[98] "One in Three Unemployed People Have Bachelor's Degrees," *Korea Times*, October 17, 2016, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/10/116_216218.html.

[99] Ken Inoue et al., "Relationships between Suicide and Three Economic Factors in South Korea," *Legal Medicine* 12, no. 2 (March 2010): 101.

[100] OECD, *OECD Factbook 2015-2016: Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics* (Paris, France: OECD Publishing, 2016), http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/oecd-factbook-2015-2016_factbook-2015-en.

[101] Karen Belkić and Čedo Savić, *Job Stressors and Mental Health: A Proactive Clinical Perspective* (n.p.: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2013), 18.

[102] *Korean Kontext*, "Addressing Inequality."

[103] Andrew Page et al., "The Role of Under-employment and Unemployment in Recent Birth Cohort Effects in Australian Suicide," *Social Science and Medicine* 93 (September 2013): 155.

describes the situation stating, "There's no end to this vicious cycle of engaging in high-cost education for low-income jobs."[104]

This chapter has presented some of the main issues that impact Korean youth today, causing suicide to become the leading cause of death for young people. Without performing more in-depth field research, it is difficult to address all of the vast number of issues impacting the suicidality of young Koreans. However, it is clear that many of the issues mentioned in this chapter impact a significant amount of Korean adolescents. Problems with the harsh and rigorous education system, bullying, parenting, job placement, and socioeconomic inequality, all work together to create an extremely stressful environment for Korean youth. In order to address these common issues, it is important for Korean health care providers, policy makers, educators, and parents to educate themselves about the hardships that are causing young people to believe that suicide is the only solution. In the following chapters, I will discuss how vulnerable populations, especially young people, can become further susceptible to suicide due to influence from the media.

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[104] Cho, "The Spec Generation," 450.

Chapter 3: Suicide in Korean News Media:

Vulnerability and the Werther Effect

South Korea's suicide culture is perhaps most visible in its hyperbolic and sensationalized forms displayed in Korean media. In the news, social media, television shows, and novels, suicide is a commonly approached discourse among media professionals. For the sake of gaining viewership, Korean news outlets often display extremely sensitive information related to suicide, including explicit details related to suicide method, suicide notes, and personal anecdotes on the life of the deceased. Many Korean television shows also display scenes of dramatized suicides that are often graphic and reflect common suicide methods in Korea. Although specific guidelines on how to deal with the subject of suicide in media have been enacted over the past decade by the World Health Organization and other suicide prevention groups, very little progress has been made in getting media professionals to actually respect these guidelines. This chapter will take an in-depth look at Korea's suicide culture, which is represented and perpetuated through Korean media, as well as provide psychosocial theory and ethnographic media analysis that demonstrates why this is problematic for vulnerable populations.

Celebrity Suicide in Korean News Media

Similar to most developed nations, news media in South Korea is extremely influential in developing and shaping public opinion. With hundreds of news stations, newspapers, online news portals, and social media, media saturation is critically high, which drives competition amongst reporters to gain the most viewership for their content.[105] This fierce competition in the

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[105] BBC. "South Korea Profile - Media." https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15291415.

news market encourages sensationalized reporting, which becomes a serious problem when taking into consideration the way that suicide is communicated in news media. Particularly in the reporting of celebrity suicide, numerous studies have proven that the sensationalized news reports about celebrity suicides can lead to a copycat effect among media viewers.[106] In sociological terms, the causal link between celebrity suicide reports followed by an increase in public suicide is known as the "Werther effect."[107] The Werther effect has been studied for decades in countries across the globe; however, some research suggests that Koreans may be more vulnerable to the Werther effect than citizens of other countries.[108]

For several decades, both psychologists and sociologists have pondered over why the Werther effect exists in modern society. Most agree that the Werther effect is created by a complex interworking of psychological and sociological determinants. Analyzing the Werther effect psychologically, or from an individual perspective, the imitation of celebrity suicide may be caused by a combination of triggering media elements (such as discussions on suicide method, suicide notes, or photos/videos of the deceased) and a vulnerable audience who may be prone to suicidal ideology.[109] These factors may lead to a "cognitive endorsement of the normative model," which the media consumer implicitly absorbs from news articles or videos.[110]

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[106] Charles-Edouard Notredame et al., "Why Media Coverage of Suicide May Increase Suicide Rates: An Epistemological Review," in *Media and Suicide: International Perspectives on Research, Theory, and Policy*, ed. Thomas Niederkrotenthaler and Steven Stack (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 134.

[107] David P. Phillips,"The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect," *American Sociological Review* 39, no. 3 (June 1974): 341.

[108] Soo Ah Jang et al., "Copycat Suicide Induced by Entertainment Celebrity Suicides in South Korea," *Psychiatry Investigation* 13, no. 1 (2016): 78.

[109] Notredame et al., "Why Media," 154.

[110] Notredame et al., "Why Media," 154.

From a sociological perspective, the causation of suicide can often be attributed to anomie, or a

breakdown in society, and anomic individuals tend to be particularly susceptible to suicide when

they have been subjected to media discourses that are saturated in suicidality.[111]

There are several cases from the past two decades which demonstrate the Korean

population's vulnerability to the Werther effect. The first case to be presented here is the suicide

of a 24 year old Korean actress named Lee Eunju in February 2005. Ms. Lee, who had become

quite famous after her roles in the movies *Taeguki* (National Flag) and *Juhong Geulshi* (The

Scarlet Letter), is said to have ended her life due to depression.[112] Following her death, news

sources heavily publicized the details related to her suicide, including graphic descriptions of the

suicide method and details written in the suicide note.[113] There was an average of fifty articles

per day during the first four days following Lee's death, and approximately 40 percent provided

"inappropriate visual materials (suicide scene, precise location or method used)" in their

reports.[114] Furthermore, 98.7 percent of the articles on Lee's death did not provide any

information on suicide prevention hotlines or other resources that could be utilized by readers

who felt triggered by the information presented.[115] Researchers at the University of Hong Kong

who statistically analyzed suicide metrics following this event found that there was an increase

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[111] Phillips, "The Influence," 351.

[112] Reuters. "Family Blames Star's Suicide on Nude Scenes," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 24, 2005, https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/celebrity/family-blames-stars-suicide-on-nude-scenes-20050224-gdksn6.html.

[113] "이은주 '누구도 원망 않는다' 유서 [Lee Eun-ju "I Don't Blame Anyone" Suicide Note]," 경향신문 *[Kyunghyang Newspaper]*, February 22, 2005, http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=200502221754381.

[114] Nam Ju Ji et al., "The Impact of Indiscriminate Media Coverage of a Celebrity Suicide on a Society with a High Suicide Rate: Epidemiological Findings on Copycat Suicides from South Korea," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 156, no. 1 (March 2014): 58.

[115] Ji et al., "The Impact," 58.

of 65 suicides in the first week following Ms. Lee's death, and a significant increase in suicides remained for three weeks following her death.[116] The copycat effect was clearly demonstrated by this incident, because the number of Koreans who committed suicide by hanging (the method used by Lee) increased 145.8 percent in the four weeks following the publicizing of her death.[117] In a very similar case, an increase of copycat suicides was found after 26-year-old actress Jeong Dabin, best known for her role in the drama *Oktapbang Goyangi* (Cats on the Rooftop), committed suicide by hanging in February 2007.[118] The deaths of Ms. Lee and Ms. Jeong were the beginning of a long series of celebrity suicides that severely impacted Korea.

A String of Celebrity Suicides, 2008

In 2008, the Korean news media covered several high profile celebrity suicides that gravely affected the nation's susceptibility to suicide.[119] In September 2008, a renowned Korean actor, Ahn Jae-hwan, committed suicide at the age of 36, due to stress caused by financial struggles.[120] The details surrounding his suicide were released to the public via dozens of news outlets, and his unique suicide method of burning charcoal to inhale carbon monoxide became a detrimental fad among vulnerable populations in Korea. Although charcoal burning suicide had been used in Hong Kong and Taiwan since the late 1990s, up until Ahn's death, it was still an

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[116] King-wa Fu and C.H. Chan, "A Study of the Impact of Thirteen Celebrity Suicides on Subsequent Suicide Rates in South Korea from 2005 to 2009," *PLoS ONE* 8, no. 1 (January 2013): 3-4.

[117] Ji et al., "The Impact," 58.

[118] Fu and Chan, "A Study," 3-4.

[119] Sang-ho Song, "Celebrity Suicides Shock the Nation in 2008," *The Korea Herald*, April 4, 2010, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=200812240007.

[120] Ji-sook Bae, "Actor Ahn Dead in Apparent Suicide," *The Korea Times*, September 8, 2008, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/09/117_30755.html.

uncommon suicide method in Korea.[121] Before the news reports of Ahn's suicide, charcoal

burning only accounted for less than one percent of suicides in Korea, however, in the year

following his death, the number of people utilizing this method increased fivefold.[122] Although

some speculate that the rise in charcoal burning suicide correlated with the rise in suicide in

general, statistical analysis has shown that overall suicide by other methods increased 38.4

percent that year, whereas charcoal burning suicides increased nearly 704 percent.[123] This

increase in charcoal burning suicides continued for more than a year after Ahn's death, and it

was found that men under the age of 45 showed the highest increase in charcoal burning deaths

following this incident.[124] Before Ahn's suicide, men under 45 years of age used charcoal

burning as their suicide method in 2 percent of deaths; however, after Ahn's death this subgroup

used the same method nearly 11 percent of the time.[125] Furthermore, the number of suicides for

men between 35-44 years of age (close to Ahn's age of 36) increased almost 20 percent between

2008 and 2009.[126] These statistics correlates with additional suicide research that discovered that

citizens with similar demographic characteristics to the celebrity who committed suicide are

more at risk of copycat suicides following the celebrity's death.[127]

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[121] Haesoo Kim et al., "Implementation and Outcomes of Suicide-Prevention Strategies by Restricting Access to Lethal Suicide Methods in Korea," *Journal of Public Health Policy* 40, no. 1 (March 2019): 93.

[122] Ying-Yeh Chen et al., "The Impact of a Celebrity's Suicide on the Introduction and Establishment of a New Method of Suicide in South Korea," *Archives of Suicide Research* 18, no. 2 (2014): 222.

[123] Chen et al., "The Impact," 223.

[124] Chen et al., "The Impact," 223.

[125] Chen et al., "The Impact," 223.

[126] 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "사망원인(236항목)/성/연령(5세)별 사망자수, 사망률 [Number of Deaths by Cause (236 Items) / Sex / Age, Mortality Rate]," table, Statistics Korea, September 19, 2018, http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1B34E07&conn_path=I2.

[127] Kim et al., "Implementation and Outcomes," 3.

The month following Ahn's suicide, another beloved and iconic TV and movie actress,

Choi Jin-sil, chose to end her life at the age of 39. It is suspected that Choi turned to suicide

because of the immense anxiety she felt over the circulating rumors that she had acted as a loan

shark and blackmailed Ahn Jae-hwan, causing the financial stress that led to his suicide the

month prior.[128] Choi's death is perhaps one of the most serious examples of the Werther effect

yet demonstrated in Korea. Before reports of Choi's death began to circulate, the average number

of daily suicides in Korea was around 30 deaths; the day after Choi's suicide was reported,

approximately 78 people committed suicide.[129] Within the two months following Choi's death,

the number of suicides reached 3,081, which was drastically higher than the 1,807 suicides from

the same time period in the previous year.[130] Eighty percent of the suicides following Choi's

death utilized hanging, the same suicide method as Choi.[131] Furthermore, it is implicated that the

news of Choi's death not only impacted the general population, it also created a domino effect

with several other Korean celebrities taking their own lives as well. In the days following Choi's

suicide, two other celebrities, Jang Chae-won (26) and Kim Ji-hoo (23), also committed suicide,

and celebrities Lee Seo Hyun (30), Kim Seok-kyun (30), Jang Ja-yeon (29), Lee Chang Young

(38), and Woo Seung-yeon (25) all committed suicide by hanging in the months following

Choi's death.[132] While there were 12,858 total suicides in 2008, or 26 suicides per 100,000

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[128] Song, "Celebrity Suicides."

[129] Ju-yeon Lee, "The Effect of Fellow Entertainers' Suicide on Mimic Suicide of Entertainers Suffering from Psychological Maladjustment: Focusing on Media Texts Analysis," *Korean Journal of Converging Humanities* 6, no. 2 (May 2018): 38.

[130] Lee, "The Effect," 38.

[131] Lee, "The Effect," 38.

[132] Fu and Chan, "A Study," 3.

deaths, the constant bombardment of celebrity suicide news, in addition to the international financial crisis, led to Korea's highest suicide rate ever in 2009, with approximately 15,412 suicides that year, or 31 per 100,000 deaths.[133]

Medical researchers at Yonsei University College of Medicine who analyzed emergency room cases of attempted suicide in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province observed a significant increase in suicide attempts utilizing the same method as a celebrity following news reports of the celebrity's death.[134] The medical researchers believed that their data indicated a clear imitation of the celebrity suicides. Furthermore, researchers at Asan Medical Center, who were also conducting research on the 2008 celebrity suicide impact, found that the more famous the celebrity, the graver the impact on society; news outlets spend significantly more time reporting about celebrity suicides if the celebrity had achieved a high level of fame.[135] Thus, the death of someone as beloved as Choi Jin-sil, who was even referred to as "the nation's actress," can demonstrate the Werther effect in its deadliest potential. In all, the string of celebrity suicides in 2008 and the subsequent copycat suicides demonstrate the grave influence that news reports on celebrity suicide can have on vulnerable populations in Korea.

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[133] 통계청 [Statistics Korea], "사망원인통계 : 사망원인(236항목)/성/연령(5세)별 사망자수, 사망률 [Number of Deaths by Cause (236 Items) / Sex / Age, Mortality Rate]," table, http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1B34E07&conn_path=I2.

[134] Sun-young Kim, "연예인 자살, '자살 방법' 모방 많아 [Celebrity Suicide, Many Imitate 'Suicide Method']," *Chosun Media*, May 18, 2011, http://health.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/05/17/2011051701403.html.

[135] Min-sik Yoon, "유명인 따라 자살하는 '베르테르 효과' 통계로입증 [Reports on Celebrity Suicides Trigger Copycat Effect]," *Korea Herald*, March 18, 2014, http://m.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20140318001397.

Idol Suicide and Conversations on Mental Health

While the celebrity suicides mentioned above occurred nearly a decade ago, Korea is still

suffering from the shock of a more recent celebrity suicide. On December 18, 2017, Korean pop

culture fans across the globe were devastated by the news of the untimely death by suicide of

Korean idol Kim Jonghyun. Jonghyun was a member of SHINee, one of the most prominent K-

pop idol groups since 2008. In the weeks following his death, the Korean news cycle was

flooded with intimate details surrounding his suicide, including the triggering contents of his

suicide note. The heartbreaking letter, which was originally posted to Instagram by Jonghyun's

friend, stated that he was "broken from the inside."[136] He wrote, "The depression that has slowly

eaten away at me has finally consumed me, and I couldn't beat it." The release of intimate details

relating to his suicide, which were spread across Asian media sources, posed as a risk to many

young fans. Mental health professionals pointed out that the public release of Jonghyun's suicide

note could be triggering to fans who are suffering from similar mental illnesses and mourning the

loss of the idol.[137] Although most media consumers do not have a personal relationship with

celebrities such as Kim, the repetitive consumption of media allows fans to develop parasocial

relationships with celebrities; this, in turn, can cause fans to experience a great sense of loss in

the event of celebrity death.[138] As Media and Communication scholar, Lee Barron, describes it,

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[136] Amy B. Wang, "K-pop Star's Suicide Note Reveals Pressures of Fame, Depression That 'Consumed' Him," *Washington Post*, December 19, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/12/19/k-pop-stars-suicide-note-reveals-depression-that-consumed-him-pressures-of-fame/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.cb2a12957f75.

[137] Hyun-Jin Lee, "정신건강 전문가들 분석…종현의 유서 내용 보니" [Analysis of Jonghyun's Suicide Note by Mental Health Professionals], 중앙일보 *[JoongAng Daily]*, December 19, 2017, https://news.joins.com/article/22218257.

[138] Linda Levitt, "Death on Display: Reifying Stardom through Hollywood's Dark Tourism," *Velvet Light Trap* 54 (Spring 2010): 66.

"it is this second-hand, media-created proximity that is put forward to account for the often highly emotional reaction that can accompany news of the death of a particular celebrity. Thus, while celebrity elicits practices analogous to religious worship, the death of some celebrity figures have produced extraordinary moments of social and cultural cohesion."[139] Furthermore, the parasocial relationships that form between a fan and an idol can be particularly detrimental in cases such as this one where the idol displays self-harm, because young fans are often unable to resist the "ideals and lifestyle choices of the idols as potential role models."[140] Thus, if they witness that the role model whom they identify with believed there was no other option than suicide, then they too may believe that suicide is a justifiable solution to their sorrows.

Although the death statistics for the months following Kim's suicide have not yet been released by the national statistics office, a look at social media posts following Kim's death can provide insight on a possible copycat effect sparking from this incident. Thousands of fans took to Twitter and Instagram to memorialize Kim with trending hashtags such as "#종현아_덕분에_내평생이_따뜻해" (Thanks to you, my life was warm Jonghyun) and "#수고했어종현아" (You worked hard, Jonghyun), but many fans seemed too distraught to express any positive messages of remembrance. Many Korean language posts on Twitter from the day of Kim's death include suicidal messages such as, "Jonghyun, I want to be with you," "I'll see you again tomorrow, Jonghyun," and "I want to die too."[141] One emotional fan

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[139] Lee Barron, *Social Theory in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 49.

[140] Joanna Elfving-Hwang, "K-pop Idols, Artificial Beauty and Affective Fan Relationships in South Korea," in *Routledge Handbook of Celebrity Studies*, ed. Anthony Elliott (London & New York: Routledge, 2018), 197.

[141] Publicly posted tweets in Korean that mentioned Kim Jonghyun's suicide were analyzed, but links to the posts will not be provided to protect the privacy of the users.

desperately wrote, "I cut my wrist because I really want to die. When I was having a very hard time, I could survive by listening to your songs, but after hearing this news, I cannot live anymore. I cannot stop crying. I don't want to believe. Please tell me it is not true. I cannot even breathe. Please." The bombardment of news surrounding Kim's suicide was extremely damaging to many young people in Korea who could not avoid hearing about his death. Even Koreans who were not fans of Kim were affected by his death; as one Korean Twitter user wrote, "I'm not even a fan of Jonghyun, but now I'm fucking depressed. I think I've received too much news… my head is spinning. I'm depressed... I was depressed before, but the news made me even more depressed. It reminds me of all my trauma from my middle school. It makes me want to die. I should take a break from seeing my phone for a while." Although these quotes provide a speculative analysis of the impact of Kim's death, there is at least one confirmed case of attempted suicide from a SHINee fan in Indonesia.[142] The fan wrote on her Twitter account, "Should I give up my life for now since I lost both of my parents and my idol? It's stressing me out," and later followed with, "I can't endure it anymore. Mom, dad, Jonghyun oppa, we'll meet really soon." Luckily, the young woman survived after being hospitalized, but the act of a fan attempting suicide due to the suicide of a public figure is unfortunately not a rare occurrence. Many fans of SHINee's Jonghyun had developed a real emotional connection with him through his music and television appearances. The news of his death completely devastated many fans, as they lost someone who they genuinely idolized. Even citizens who were not fans of SHINee became distraught by the triggering messages portrayed by the media after Kim's suicide. Graphic and uncensored public discussion of depression and suicide can trigger vulnerable people to negatively reflect on their own struggles.

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[142] Dam-young Hong, "Indonesian Fan Attempts Suicide following Jonghyun's Death," *Korea Herald*, December 21, 2017, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20171221000714.

Over the past decade, Korean music idols have developed an almost godly image in Korean society. Idols train for many years before they debut, and often practice their routines until they can perform them with perfection. Korea is a very competitive and often judgmental society, and many Koreans believe that if someone wants to be a Korean idol, they should be perfect in every way possible. Paparazzi reporters such as *Dispatch* follow idols around endlessly in an attempt to catch them in a scandal, usually involving dating, drugs, or corruption. Many companies strive to have their idols maintain a godly image, and hence they are encouraged not to express their more human emotions like depression, love, or anger (with the exception of some outliers, such as the more human direction that BigHit Entertainment took with the boy group BTS). Thus, many Koreans were shocked by the details of Kim Jonghyun's suicide letter, which revealed that he had been struggling with depression for a long time. The fact that even an idol from one of the most famous boy bands in the country could be suffering so greatly that he would take his own life was very disheartening to many Koreans, regardless of whether they were a fan or not. Kim Jonghyun's death opened many people's eyes to the unspoken struggles that Korean idols are often forced to stay quiet about.

The discovery of Kim Jonghyun's depression has encouraged more discussion on depression and mental health treatment in Korea. Following his death, several other Korean idols released statements on social media stating the importance of mental health treatment and reaching out to people around you who seem to be struggling.[143] However, despite the rise in the number of discussions on mental health in the media and online, many Koreans are still relatively ignorant about pervasive mental disorders that are impacting society. This may be

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[143] "This Is How K-Pop Idols Are Reacting to Jonghyun's Death," Koreaboo, last modified December 18, 2017, https://www.koreaboo.com/news/this-is-how-kpop-idols-are-reacting-to-jonghyuns-death/.

caused by a general lack of education on these issues during secondary school, as well as a pervasive stigma of mental illness that is still lingering in Korean society. For example, in March 2018, Korean actor and singer, Lee Joon, was removed from active-duty military status due to the fact that he was suffering from panic disorder.[144] According to the DSM 5, panic disorder is an illness that causes an individual to suffer from recurrent and unexpected panic attacks (a panic attack is a sudden "surge of intense fear or intense discomfort that reaches a peak within minutes").[145] Despite the fact that he had been medically discharged from active duty, and his agency had released a statement saying he had been receiving treatment continually with no success, many netizens (a term often used to refer to Korean citizens online) were sarcastically skeptical of his illness and believed that if he could not serve as an active duty soldier then he could no longer continue with his acting career as well.[146] While Koreans are often critical of men who try to evade active military duty, this incident represents a lack of empathy by netizens for Lee's situation, as well as general ignorance regarding the symptoms and severity of common mental illnesses.

Although the Werther effect can have an extremely detrimental impact on media consumers, it does not mean that reporters should no longer discuss mental health or suicide related issues in the news. Instead, if reporters are trained to deliver information more responsibly, it is possible that news reports could have a more positive impact on media viewers. The Papageno effect, an antithetical theorem to the Werther effect, states that there may be a

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[144] Jonah Hicap, "Actor Lee Joon Removed from Active Duty Military Service Due to Panic Disorder," *Metro*, March 30, 2018, https://metro.co.uk/2018/03/30/actor-lee-joon-removed-active-duty-military-service-due-panic-disorder-7428663/.

[145] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition: DSM-5* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 208.

[146] CedarBough T. Saeji et al., "Regulating the Idol: The Life and Death of a South Korean Popular Music Star," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 16, no. 13 (July 1, 2018): 15.

positive effect on media consumers who view stories featuring a depressed or suicidal individual who overcomes their battle with mental health issues.[147] Rather than focusing on sensationalized reporting that describes individuals who could not overcome their hardships, a media report that focuses on an individual who develops positive coping skills in order to defeat their suicidal ideation has been correlated to lower suicide rates among viewers.[148] Responsible reporting recommendations have been implemented in countries such as Austria and Finland, and these changes in reporting standards have shown positive results in decreasing suicide rates.[149] By refraining from aggrandizing Korean suicides, the media should proactively seek out cases that demonstrate personal transformation from despair to hope.

This chapter has shown that the suicides of Korean celebrities Lee Eunju, Jeong Dabin, Ahn Jae-hwan, Choi Jin-sil, and Kim Jonghyun, have had a serious, detrimental impact on Korea's yearly suicide rate. Celebrities play an important role in society, especially for younger fans who tend to idolize celebrities as role models. Through the snowballing suicide clusters that have stemmed from provocative media exploits in the past decade, it is clear that the Werther effect should be taken into consideration as a real threat to media consumers in Korea. The next chapter will discuss how Korean television shows and movies can have a similarly pernicious impact on media viewers, as well as how these fictional adaptations offer a reflection of major societal issues that are kindling the suicide epidemic in Korea.

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[147] Thomas Niederkrotenthaler, "Papageno Effect: Its Progress in Media Research and Contextualization with Findings on Harmful Media Effects," in *Media and Suicide: International Perspectives on Research, Theory, and Policy*, ed. Thomas Niederkrotenthaler and Steven Stack (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 163.

[148] Niederkrotenthaler, "Papageno Effect," 162.

[149] Elmar Etzersdorfer and Gernot Sonneck, "Preventing Suicide by Influencing Mass-Media Reporting: The Viennese Experience 1980-1996.," *Archives of Suicide Research* 4, no. 1 (March 1998): 67; Hokyeong Kim, 자살 예방 커뮤니케이션 *[Suicide Prevention Communication]* (Seoul, South Korea: 커뮤니케이션북스 [Communication Books], 2015), 75.

Chapter 4: Suicide in Korean Dramas:

A Reflection of Suicide Culture in Korean Society

Although there has been a plethora of research on the impact of sensationalized suicide reporting in Korean news media, the impact of fictional Korean media on the suicide epidemic has rarely been discussed. From the causation to the method, suicides in Korean dramas both reflect and perpetuate the Korean suicide epidemic. In particular, over the past several years, the suicide epidemic has been represented in many Korean television dramas including: *SKY Castle* (*SKY Kaeseul,* 2019*), Tempted* (*Widaehan YuhokjaI,* 2018), *About Time* (*Meomchugo Sipeun Sungan,* 2018), *Miss Hammurabi* (*Miseu Hammurabi*, 2018), *My Only One* (*Hanabbunin Naepyeon*, 2018), *Chicago Typewriter* (*Sikago Tajagi*, 2017), *Radiant Office* (*Jachebalgwang OpiseuI,* 2017*), Save Me* (*Guhaejwo, 2017)*, and *Let's Fight, Ghost* (*Ssauja Gwisin-a*, 2016). Suicide plots have also been present in many popular Korean films, such as *The Swindlers* (*Kkun,* 2017*), Thread of Lies* (*Uahan Geojitmal*, 2014), *The Suicide Forecast* (*Susanghan Gogaekdeul,* 2011), *The Housemaid* (*Hanyeo,* 2010*),* and *Poetry* (*Si*, 2010). With heightened awareness of Korea's abysmal suicide rates, screenwriters seem to be emulating this epidemic when writing their scripts. It seems as though almost every other Korean drama that has aired recently features the suicide of at least one character. Fictional narratives, such as the storylines of Korean dramas, can serve as an abstraction of society and allow for simulation of real social experiences.[150] As film theorist, Sue Thornham, writes, "film reflects social changes, but it also shapes cultural attitudes."[151] Thus, while some may suspect that suicide in Korean dramas is

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[150] Saxby Pridmore and Garry Walter, "Does Art Imitate Death? Depictions of Suicide in Fiction," *Australasian Psychiatry* 21, no. 1 (2013): 65.

[151] Sue Thornham, *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1999), 10.

merely being used as a dramatic means to an end for the sake of entertainment, further analysis demonstrates that the suicides represented in Korean dramas are intentionally reflective of Korea's public culture of suicide.

Researchers have often debated whether fictional representations of suicide can induce imitative behavior; while there is still debate among scientists, several studies have shown a clear correlation between fictional suicide and suicidal ideation.[152] One such study conducted by medical professionals, Gould and Shaffer, discovered a significant correlation between the viewing of suicide in films and an increase in youth suicide in New York.[153] Research also suggests that vulnerable youth may interpret emotionally disturbed or suicidal characters in film as reinforcement for the inefficiency of mental health treatment.[154] Since young people are often prone to depression and anxiety, speculation over whether or not mental health treatment can be effective in mitigating their symptoms may create long-term problems for the emotionally unstable. Furthermore, psychological research on the impact of watching suicidal films has demonstrated that some participants (varying with individual vulnerability) who watch a film where the protagonist commits suicide are more likely to experience a rise in suicidal tendencies, especially if they personally identify with the protagonist.[155] Thus, it is important to reflect on how suicide is being represented in Korean dramas, and to analyze how these suicidal scenarios

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[152] Alan L. Berman, "Fictional Depiction of Suicide in Television Films and Imitation Effects," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 145, no. 8 (August 1988): 982.

[153] Madelyn S. Gould and David Shaffer, "The Impact of Suicide in Television Movies: Evidence of Imitation," *New England Journal of Medicine* 315, no. 11 (September 11, 1986): 690.

[154] Patrick E. Jamieson, Daniel Romer, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Do Films about Mentally Disturbed Characters Promote Ineffective Coping in Vulnerable Youth?," *Journal of Adolescence* 29, no. 5 (October 2006): 749.

[155] Benedikt Till et al., "Determining the Effects of Films with Suicidal Content: A Laboratory Experiment." *British Journal of Psychiatry* 207, no. 1 (July 2015): 72.

both reflect and perpetuate suicide culture in Korea. This chapter will provide a textual analysis of several recent Korean television dramas, as well as provide explanation on how these fictional representations of suicide offer insight into Korea's public suicide culture.

The Deathly Toll of the Korean Education System

Looking at examples of the fictional suicides represented in television shows can provide insight into the prevailing situations that cause Korean citizens to commit suicide. The 2019 drama, *SKY Castle*, is perhaps the best place to start in analyzing common suicide triggers in Korean society. *SKY Castle* is a melodrama that tackles many of the most controversial issues related to the Korean education system and the harshly competitive environment that encompasses Korean adolescents and their families. The title of the show eludes to the acronym "SKY," which Koreans use to describe the top-tier universities in Seoul: Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University. While the characters of *SKY Castle* mostly represent Koreans in the upper-middle class, the issues that their children face in maintaining perfect grades and getting into a good college are prevalent throughout Korean society. In fact, the show garnered so much discussion over its blatantly accurate representation of the Korean education system, that it broke Korean television viewership records for the most viewed show of all time; the final episode of the drama aired on February 2, 2019, with 23.78 percent viewership nationwide.[156]

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[156] 뉴스1코리아 [News1 Korea], "'SKY캐슬', 23.78% 자체 최고 기록으로 종영 [Sky Castle Breaks It's Own Record with 23.78%]," last modified February 2, 2019, https://entertain.naver.com/now/read?oid=421&aid=0003817773.

SKY Castle depicts the high-pressure, highly competitive educational environment that four families mitigate whilst raising their children in modern day Seoul.[157] The main character, Han Seo Jin, is a mother of two teenage daughters. Han's highest priority in life is getting her eldest daughter, Kang Ye Seo, accepted into Seoul National University's medical school, and she will stop at nothing to make sure that Ye Seo has the upper hand. Throughout the plot of *SKY Castle*, viewers can clearly see the amount of money, effort, time, competition, and manipulation that is needed in order to get ahead in the Korean schooling system. The ending of the first episode of the drama shows the main character's next-door-neighbor and best friend, Lee Myung Joo, commit suicide after finding out that her teenage son refuses to go to Seoul National University's medical school, even after receiving an acceptance letter. As demonstrated by the hyperbolic devastation that Myung Joo felt before choosing to end her life, the sheer volume of importance that is placed on educational reputation in Korean society can be a matter of life or death desperation for many Koreans. Furthermore, Koreans often view academic achievement as a measure of filial piety,[158] so refusing to enroll at the university can be interpreted as highly disrespectful in a society built on Confucian values such as Korea. Although this is an extreme situation, it reflects the importance that Korean parents place on getting their child into a SKY university.

Myung Joo's death was not the only suicide represented in *SKY Castle*. Later in the show, it is revealed that another resident of the *SKY Castle* neighborhood, Lee Soo Im, was previously working towards becoming a high school teacher. However, she resigned from her teaching

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[157] *SKY 캐슬 [SKY Castle]*, directed by Hyun-tak Jo, written by Hyun-mi Yoo, produced by Sang-kyoo Joo, aired November 23,2018- February 1, 2019, on JTBC.

[158] Young Shin Park et al., "부모자녀관계와 자기효능감이 청소년의 학업성취와 효도에 미치는 영향 [The Effects of Parent-Child Relationship and Self-Efficacy on Adolescent Academic Achievement and Filial Piety]," *Korean Journal of Educational Psychology* 29, no. 3 (September 2015): 542.

certification program after one of her students committed suicide. Soo Im has several flashbacks showing that her suicidal student displayed obvious signs of depression and anxiety (including cutting herself during class), but the more seasoned educators at the school instructed Soo Im to ignore the suicidal girl. Sadly, the girl ended up committing suicide, which devastated Soo Im. Due to the guilt she felt over this experience, Soo Im made sure to never pressure her own son about his grades.

As discussed in chapter two, it is not uncommon for Korean adolescents to feel suicidal over the intense pressure they feel from school. In fact, over 451 Korean grade school students attempted suicide in 2017, and this number only represents attempted suicides that were reported to the children's school districts, so it is expected that this number may be much larger.[159] Since adolescent suicide is such a prevalent concern in Korean society, this theme was presented a second time in episode twelve. Jin Jin Hee, another mother living in the *SKY Castle* neighborhood*,* constantly pressured her son in middle-school to raise his grades. As the only child, Woo Soo Han felt immense pressure from his family to receive top grades, and his mother frequently yelled at him to do better on his tests. She also constantly compared his grades with those of a neighbor girl of a similar age. After reaching his breaking point, Soo Han writes a suicide letter, and attempts to run away to kill himself. Luckily, however, his mom found his suicide note soon after he wrote it, and she was able to catch him before he could go through with his plan. When his mother confronts him about the situation, he cries out with heartbreaking remarks such as, "I'm sorry I was born, Mom," and "I really want to get good grades to make you happy, but I'm too stupid." As viewers can tell by the emotional breakdown that Woo Han experiences, adolescents often severely internalize their failure in school, often associating it

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[159] Hyun-bin Kim, "More Students Commit Suicide Due to Excessive Stress," *Korea Times*, October 14, 2018, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/10/113_256871.html.

with a failure in life. Both of these incidents involving youth suicide in *SKY Castle* offer relevant insight into the extremely competitive, harsh and lonely atmosphere that Korean school children deal with on a daily basis.

Reflections of Bridge Suicide in Korean Dramas

One of the more distinct suicide methods utilized in modern Korea is suicide by jumping off a bridge. In Seoul alone, there are approximately 31 bridges crossing the Han River and 22 bridges above the Cheonggyecheon Stream.[160] Considering that nearly half of all South Koreans live in the Seoul Metropolitan area, the sheer volume of bridges in Seoul provides an extremely accessible suicide method for a significant portion of the population. A suicide hotline phone has even been installed on some bridges to offer assistance to citizens who are drawn to the bridge to kill themselves (see figure 4.1 below). The number of people attempting suicide by jumping into the Han River increased nearly 4 fold in the past decade, with 132 people attempting suicide from Han River bridges in 2005 to 543 people in 2015.[161] Thus, it is not surprising that suicide by bridge jumping is a commonly utilized plot in many recent Korean dramas. Dramas such as *My Strange Hero (Boksu-ga Dorawatda, 2019), My ID is Gangnam Beauty* (*Nae Aidineun Gangnammiin*, 2018)*,* and *W* (*Deobeulyu,* 2016*)* all feature scenes where the main character attempts to commit suicide by jumping off bridges over the Han River. Moreover, the scenarios where characters commit suicide by jumping are strikingly similar to the real situations occurring daily in modern Seoul.

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[160] Sun-ho Lee, "Bridges in Seoul," *Korea Times*, December 10, 2014, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinon/2014/12/162_169662.html.

[161] Kiwon Kim and Hong Jin Jeon, "Frontal Lobe Dysfunction in a Depressed Patient Who Survived a Suicide Attempt by Jumping from the Bridge on the Han River," *Psychiatry Investigation* 14, no. 6 (November 2017): 904.

Figure 4.1. *SOS Suicide Hotline Phone on the Mapo Bridge*. Users can press the red button to report an emergency situation, and the green button can be used to connect to a suicide prevention hotline. Photograph by Lisa Marie Longenecker, June 9, 2018, Mapo Bridge, Seoul, South Korea.

The first episode of the 2017 Korean drama, *Radiant Office (Jachebalgwang Opiseul)*, offers a realistic depiction of what it is like to be a postgraduate young adult in South Korea.[162] *Radiant Office* follows the journey of three mid-to-late twenties Seoulites who are desperate to find their first full-time job at a company; they end up struggling with suicidal ideation due to the consistent rejection they face while job hunting. The main character, Eun Ho Won, lands an interview at a food manufacturing company, but quickly discovers that the other applicants are much more qualified than she. It has been three years since she graduated college, and this is the hundredth company with which she has interviewed. Due to the fact that she had to work several part-time jobs throughout high school and college, she did not have the opportunity to build her

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[162] *자체발광 오피스 [Radiant Office]*, directed by Ji-in Jung and Sang-hoon Park, written by Hoe-hyun Jung, produced by Hyun-joong Yoo, aired March 15, 2017-May 4, 2017, on MBC.

resume specs, a practice that is imperative for prospective job hunters in Korea as of late.

Lacking study abroad or internship experiences places her far behind the other applicants. After

receiving a rejection email from the company, she falls into a deep despair. Drinking while

walking on a bridge crossing the Han River,[163] she reads the messages written on the bridge that

are intended to dissuade people from committing suicide. The first message reads, "In life,

brighter days will come someday," to which she replies to herself, "What a joke." The following

bridge messages "How was your day?" and "Did you have a hard time?" start to make Ho Won

look visibly more upset. Starting to sob, she says to herself, "In life, brighter days *won't* come

someday… that's life. I got rejected 100 times. The 100th time told me that in life, you're

doomed." While standing on the railings of the bridge, contemplating whether or not to jump

into the Han River and end her life, she accidently falls, having the decision made for her.

Fortunately, she is found in by the water rescue squad and rushed to the emergency room.

After waking up in the emergency room, Ho Won meets two other young adults who had

also just attempted suicide, Do Ki Taek and Jang Kang Ho. Kang Ho is in a similar situation as

Ho Won-- he has applied to dozens of companies and only received rejection letters. His mother

tells him he is worthless and that he should "go die," so he resolves to kill himself. Ki Taek is in

his late twenties and has been working part-time jobs while trying to pass the civil service exam.

Many Koreans believe that passing the civil service exam is the key to a stable future, as

employment in the civil service field is highly regarded in Korea, but the test is very difficult.

Unfortunately, Ki Taek has failed the exam several times, and has recently been abandoned by

his significant other. Thus, he resorts to suicide, since his life seems hopeless. After meeting in

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[163] The bridge featured in this episode is the Dongjak Bridge, however, the suicide prevention messages do not appear on this bridge in reality. It seems that they were added for the shooting of this drama in order to imitate the messages on the Mapo Bridge, which would have been more difficult to shoot the jumping scene on due to the height of the railings.

the emergency room and discussing their hardships together, the three characters decide to try again to commit suicide by jumping off the Dongjak River together.

This situation may seem ridiculously hyperbolic to a Western audience, but to Koreans in their twenties, this situation is commonly understood as a way to escape "Hell Joseon."[164] Salient news reports can be found describing very similar situations, such as in 2017, when a 23-year-old who had struggled to find a job after failing to get accepted into university, committed suicide by jumping off the Jamsil Bridge into the Han River. News reports indicate that he left a note for his parents that said, "I'll study harder in the next life, I'm sorry."[165] Sadly, even for young people who manage to survive the rigid Korean education system long enough to get into university and obtain their degree, the hardships do not end with a college diploma. As represented by the situation in *Radiant Office*, finding employment in Korea's extremely competitive job market is like finding a needle in a haystack for many college graduates. As discussed in chapter two, this is a major reason why suicide seems like a reasonable solution to many young adults.

Radiant Office not only provides a reflection of how many young Koreans feel amidst the neoliberal economy, it also offers insight into socio-spatial examples of Korea's public suicide culture vis-à-vis the suicide prevention messages on Han River bridges. It is important to look at how physical space is represented in relation to suicide in Korean dramas, because as Foucault stated in a pertinent interview in 1982, "Space is fundamental in any form of communal life."[166]

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[164] "Hell Joseon" is a recent slang term that Korean youth have come up with to describe the way they feel about the 'backwardness' of Korean society since the onset of rapid neoliberalization.

[165] Jae-hyun Heo, "'I'll Study Harder in the Next Life' - Youth Suicide Spurs Debate on Unemployment," *The Hankyoreh*, June 13, 2017, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/798628.html.

[166] Michael Mahon, *Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy: Truth, Power, and the Subject* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 30.

In *Radiant Office*, the messages that Ho Won passes while walking on the Dongjak Bridge are almost identical to the real suicide prevention messages that people can see along the entirety of the Mapo Bridge, crossing over the Han River in central Seoul. While walking on the Mapo Bridge, passersby can first see phrases like, "Have you eaten yet?" and "It's been hard, hasn't it?" lining the guard rails.[167] However, as one continues to walk, the messages become more personal, intense, and some may argue, insensitive to vulnerable passersby. Phrases such as "Why don't you just think of all your difficulties like a blowing wind?" and "Do you remember what you worried about three years ago? What about a year ago? What about six months ago? The worry that you have right now will soon be like them." Perhaps one of the worst message on the bridge is, "The pain you're feeling now is nothing compared to the pain your mother felt when birthing you." Messages such as these (see figure 4.2 below) that trivialize the issues that a suicidal person is dealing with may actually do more harm than good. In fact, after the messages were installed on Mapo Bridge in 2012, suicides on the bridge increased six fold by 2013.[168]

Installed as part of a project to turn the bridge into a "Bridge of Life," these messages seem to be coming from a sincere place of concern, however, many of the messages seem to lack an empathetic understanding of suicidal ideology. These insensitive messages both reflect and perpetuate the stereotypes that Korean citizens have about suicidal individuals, both in real life and in Korean dramas. This negatively impacts the interactions that a layperson might have with a suicidal individual in their life, which could perpetuate Korea's suicide problem. Furthermore, the effectiveness of placing suicide prevention messages in public spaces is still inconclusive

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[167] The present author has documented all of the suicide prevention messages lining the Mapo Bridge that were present in June 2018.

[168] Casey Baseel, "Seoul Anti-Suicide Initiative Backfires, Deaths Increase by More than Six Times," *Sora News 24*, February 26, 2014, https://soranews24.com/2014/02/26/seoul-anti-suicide-initiative-backfires-deaths-increase-over-than-six-times/.

amongst mental health researchers; studies have shown that suicide prevention messages are

difficult to develop for varied audiences, which causes a detrimental impact on some individuals

who perceive the messages differently than how they were intended to be used. [169]

Figure 4.2. *Suicide Prevention Message on the Mapo Bridge*. The message roughly translates to, "Don't be stingy/trivial." Photograph by Lisa Marie Longenecker, June 9, 2018, Mapo Bridge, Seoul, South Korea.

Originally installed in lieu of adding higher barrier railings, the messages were meant to

deter suicidal people from jumping off of the bridge; however, by drawing more attention to the

fact that people can commit suicide on the bridge, the messages ended up being

counterproductive. The number of suicide attempts actually increased more than 16 times

compared to the the number of attempts that took place before the instillation of the messages.[170]

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[169] Maria Ftanou et al., "Crafting Safe and Effective Suicide Prevention Media Messages: Outcomes from a Workshop in Australia," *International Journal of Mental Health Systems* 12, no. 23 (May 2018): 1.

[170] Haesoo Kim et al., "Implementation and Outcomes of Suicide-Prevention Strategies by Restricting Access to Lethal Suicide Methods in Korea," *Journal of Public Health Policy* 40, no. 1 (March 2019): 97.

Thus, eventually the Seoul government installed higher guard railings, however, the suicide prevention messages still remain today as a constant reminder of Korea's public culture of suicide.

Modern Korea and High-Rise Suicide

Similar to the act of jumping off of a bridge, another commonly utilized suicide method in Korea is jumping off of a high-rise building. The Korean National Police Agency (*Gyeongchalcheong*) and the national statistics agency (*Tonggye-cheong* or Statistics Korea) group all suicides by jumping into one category, so it is hard to determine exactly how many suicides occur by high-rise jumping versus bridge jumping. However, for 2017, the number of suicides from both forms of jumping was approximately 1,873, making it the second most common suicide method after hanging.[171] In areas such as Seoul where there is limited space to accommodate nearly half of the population that resides in the greater metropolitan area, there is often nowhere to build but up. With a consistent increase in the number of Korean high-rises, suicide by jumping continues to become more easily accessible to vulnerable populations. For an international comparison, similarly large cities with ample high-rises, such as New York City, have observed much higher suicide rates by jumping off of buildings than cities with fewer high-rises.[172]

Like bridge jumping, high-rise jumping is also commonly reflected in recent Korean dramas. One example occurs in a 2017 drama called *Save Me* (*Guhaejwo*). In the first episode of

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[171] 경찰청 [Korean National Police Agency], *2017년 경찰통계연보 [Police Statistical Yearbook 2017]* (Seoul, South Korea: Korean National Police Agency, 2018), 221, https://www.police.go.kr/portal/main/contents.do?menuNo=200589.

[172] D. Gunnell and M. Noweis, "Suicide by Jumping," *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 96, no. 1 (July 1997): 1.

this drama, the main character's twin brother ends up committing suicide by jumping off his school's rooftop.[173] Suffering from a limp, he was constantly tormented at school; he was so distressed from constantly dealing with school bullies that he felt like death was the only way to escape the torment. As discussed in chapter two, school bullying is an all-too-common problem that impacts the majority of Korean adolescents. This drama provides a good representation of this issue, which may help viewers understand the dire consequences of leaving school bullying issues unresolved.

Another example of a suicide by jumping from a high-rise is seen in the 2016 Korean drama called *Let's Fight, Ghost* (*Ssauja Gwisin-a*). In episode six of this drama, an adolescent girl commits suicide by jumping off the top of her high-rise apartment building after being scolded by her mother for poor scholastic performance. It seems that she could not withstand the pressure of obtaining perfect grades, which is often enforced by strict Korean parents and perpetuated by the harshly competitive school environment. This situation is reflective of many real suicide stories that have been observed in Korea during the past decade. For example, in 2011, four students from Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), one of Korea's top universities, committed suicide due to depression and anxiety over their grades--one of whom committed suicide by jumping off the rooftop of his high-rise apartment complex in Incheon.[174] For many young people, maintaining perfect grades in Korea's harsh education system can be too stressful to persevere. Due to the fact that this sentiment is widely acknowledged in Korean society, suicides similar to the one represented in *Let's Fight, Ghost* are

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[173] 구해줘 *[Save Me]*, directed by Kim Sung-soo, written by Jung Shin-kyoo, produced by Hidden Sequence, aired August 5-September 24, 2017, on OCN.

[174] Ji-hyun Kim, "Fourth KAIST Student Commits Suicide," *The Korea Herald*, April 8, 2011, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20110407001084.

commonly utilized as plot devices in Korean dramas. This further perpetuates the Korean public's suicide culture, as these instances can be seen as more and more justifiable or understandable to audiences, both in fiction and reality.

This chapter has mentioned only a few of the many examples of suicide representations in Korean media, however, these fictional narratives offer a clear reflection of the issues that many Korean youth are dealing with today. As represented in *SKY Castle* and *Let's Fight, Ghost*, the harshly competitive Korean education system needs to be addressed for definitively inducing the youth suicide problem. Also, by examining the bridge and high-rise suicides present in Korean dramas such as *Radiant Office, Save Me,* and *Let's Fight, Ghost*, we can see concrete examples of the spatial correlation related to increased suicide rates. As Zhang's analysis of Lefebvre's (1991) *The Production of Space* states, "lived social space is produced by concrete human practices and serves as a powerful tool in shaping people's thoughts and actions." The continued observance of Korean dramas in which bridges and high-rise buildings are being utilized as a suicide method can further provoke and inspire vulnerable individuals. However, it can also offer us valuable insight into Korea's public suicide culture. Through these observations, we can understand Korean issues that are sparking the suicide epidemic, which can in turn help mental health workers and policy makers better understand what changes are necessary in order to help prevent Korean suicides.

Chapter 5

Addressing the Suicide Epidemic: Comparison, Action and Prevention

This thesis has explored many of the sociocultural and structural issues that cause suicide to be the leading cause of death for Korean adolescents, as well as an omnipresent issue among middle-aged men and the elderly. The previous two chapters explored the media's influence on the suicide epidemic in Korea, and how this influence has abetted in creating a strong public culture of suicide. This public culture of suicide that is reflected and perpetuated in Korean media can be extremely detrimental to the Korean psyche, especially for young adults who are more vulnerable to suggestion.

Although this thesis has focused on the suicide epidemic in Korea, suicide is a widespread issue that has caused concern in many developed nations. Since Korea's suicide rate is currently twice as high as the OECD average, it is imperative for the Korean government to address suicide as a major cause of concern for Korean society. In order to formulate an intelligible response to this crisis, it is important to look at how other countries have handled high suicide rates in the past and present. This chapter will provide a brief international comparison on how the Netherlands and Switzerland have dealt with suicide, and discuss how the Korean government has addressed the suicide epidemic thus far. Possible changes to Korea's education and social welfare system, which the present author believes will help lower suicide rates among Korean adolescents, will be discussed in brief detail. Finally, the conclusion will provide a summary of the prevention techniques discussed in this chapter, as well as a summary of the thesis as a whole.

International Comparisons

The Netherlands

The Netherlands is a good place to start for an international comparison with Korea. While both countries perform extremely well academically (figure 5.1), the Netherlands does not struggle with suicide nearly as much as Korea. According to the latest available data from the OECD, the Netherlands' suicide rate is 10.5 per 100,000 deaths, compared to Korea's 25.8 per 100,000 deaths.[175] Since suicide rates in the Netherlands have remained mostly stable since at least the 1950s, it is important to analyze some of the tactics that the country utilizes to maintain a stable and content society.[176]

Average scores of 15-year-old students on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015		
	Reading	Mathamatics	Science
The Netherlands	503	512	509
Switzerland	492	521	506
South Korea	517	524	516
OECD Average	493	490	493

Figure 5.1. *Average scores of 15-year-old students on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015.* Source data from Joel McFarland et al., "International Comparisons: Science, Reading, and Mathematics Literacy of 15-Year-Old Students," in *The Condition of Education 2018 (NCES 2018-144).*

As discussed in chapter two, issues with schooling and job placement are extremely prevalent in Korean society. A major difference between secondary education in the Netherlands and Korea is that the Netherlands does not discourage young people from developing trade or vocation skills. In 1999, 32 percent of secondary students in the Netherlands were enrolled in

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[175] OECD, "Suicide Rates (Indicator)," *OECD Health Statistics: Health Status,* last modified 2019, https://data.oecd.org/healthstat/suicide-rates.htm.

[176] World Health Organization, "Suicide Rates (Per 100,000), by Gender, Netherlands, 1950-2009," https://www.who.int/mental_health/media/neth.pdf.

some type of trade or vocational program.[177] However, by 2012, the number of students in these types of programs rose to approximately 48 percent. Korea, however, saw a decline in secondary students enrolled in vocational programs, from 21 percent in 1999 to only 9 percent in 2012.[178] A major issue resulting from Korea's focus on post-secondary education achievement is that there are no longer enough jobs for college educated young adults. Recent surveys have found that 1 in 3 young Koreans with a college degree are unemployed.[179] Even though many young people may be better off developing a trade or vocational skill, Korea's strong emphasis on obtaining a college degree discourages many young people from exploring less competitive fields, many of which would require less education.

The OECD provides biennial reports on subjective well-being in participating countries, and by analyzing these reports, societal differences between the Netherlands and Korea can be observed. Aside from the educational differences mentioned above, the Netherlands scores much higher on many of the OECD's measurements of subjective well-being; for example, when the OECD surveyed Koreans on how they would rate their relative life satisfaction in 2017, Koreans rated that their life satisfaction was extremely low, whereas in the Netherlands it was relatively high.[180] Additionally, Korea scored highest on the amount of job strain out of all OECD countries, compared to relatively low amounts of job strain in the Netherlands.[181] Koreans also

[177] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, comp., *Education for All 2000-2015: Achievements and Challenges*, 126, 2015, https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2015/education-all-2000-2015-achievements-and-challenges.

[178] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Education for All 2000-2015*, 126.

[179] "One in Three Unemployed People Have Bachelor's Degrees," *Korea Times*, October 17, 2016, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/10/116_216218.html.

[180] OECD, *How's Life? 2017: Measuring Well-being* (Paris, France: OECD Publishing, 2017), 262 & 274, https://doi.org/10.1787/how_life-2017-en.

[181] OECD, *How's Life?*, 262 & 274.

exhibit signs of a poor work-life balance and a lack of social support, contrary to the findings in the Netherlands.[182] From this data, we can infer that Korea should work on creating more social support and promote a healthier work-life balance.

In addition to providing an overall sense of well-being for their citizens, the Netherlands has implemented some innovative suicide prevention programs that have shown to be reasonably effective in helping suicidal individuals. In particular, their use of the internet in suicide prevention has been praised by many health professionals and researchers internationally. In order to address suicidal behavior among Dutch adolescents, an online program called Mental Health Online was created. Through this program, adolescents can utilize self-report instruments to help recognize unhealthy or suicidal thought patterns and access training modules to help them develop healthier coping skills.[183] In addition to this program for adolescents, the Dutch have also implemented an online "Train-the-Trainer" program for health professionals to receive current and factual training on suicide prevention techniques.[184] Clinical research has shown that this program is effective in improving knowledge of suicide prevention guidelines and techniques as well as improving nurses' confidence in their ability to provide health services for suicidal patients.[185] Korea ranks first in worldwide smartphone and internet usage, with over 90

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[182] OECD, *How's Life?*, 262 & 274.

[183] Rezvan Ghoncheh et al., "Mental Health Online: A Self-Report and E-Learning Program for Enhancing Recognition, Guidance and Referral of Suicidal Adolescents," in *Suicide Prevention and New Technologies: Evidence Based Practice*, ed. B. Mishara and A. Kerkhof (London, UK.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 76.

[184] Derek P. de Beurs et al., "The Effect of an E-Learning Supported Train-the-Trainer Programme on Implementation of Suicide Guidelines in Mental Health Care," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 175 (April 1, 2015): 446.

[185] de Beurs et al., "The Effect," 446.

percent of Koreans using the internet, so it is likely that online programs such as these would be equally beneficial to Korean society.[186]

Switzerland

Switzerland is another good example to use for an international comparison of suicide prevention. Unlike the Netherlands, Switzerland had relatively high suicide rates in the past, but managed to lower their suicide rate to 12.5 per 100,000 people, very close to the OECD average of 12.4 (figure 5.2).[187] Over the past twenty years, Switzerland has managed to lower their annual number of suicides by a third.[188] The OECD's measurement of subjective well-being shows that the Swiss show high rates of life satisfaction and personal security, similar to the Netherlands.[189] The Swiss also report having much less job strain in comparison to Koreans.[190]

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[186]Ji-young Sohn, "Korea No. 1 Worldwide in Smartphone Ownership, Internet Penetration," *Korea Herald*, June 24, 2018, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180624000197.

[187] OECD, "Suicide Rates," *OECD Health Statistics: Health Status*.

[188] Marie Vuilleumier, "How Switzerland Wants to Prevent 300 Suicides a Year," last modified September 10, 2018, https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/ suicide-prevention-day_how-switzerland-wants-to-prevent-300-suicides-a-year/44386378.

[189] OECD, *How's Life?*, 301.

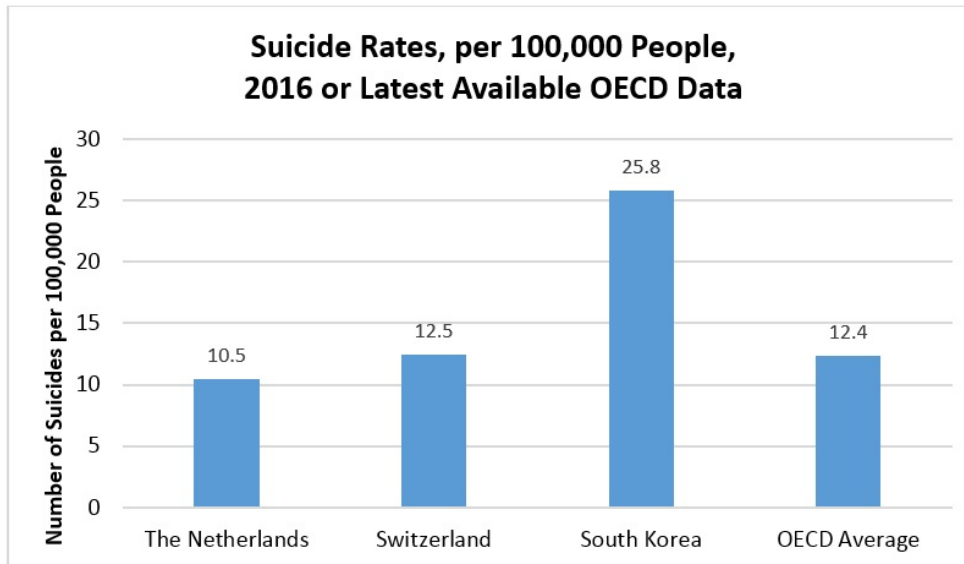[190] OECD, *How's Life?*, 301.

Figure 5.2. *Suicide Rates for Select OECD Countries.* Source data from OECD, "Suicide Rates," *OECD Health Statistics: Health Status*.

In regards to education, Korea and Switzerland both score highly on international tests of math, reading and science (figure 5.1). However, like the Dutch, the Swiss also allow more freedom in choosing either an academic path (for university) or a vocational track. In fact, Switzerland has some of the highest rates of enrollment in vocational programs out of all OECD countries, with approximately 65 percent of upper secondary students enrolled in some type of vocational program.[191] This has had a significant impact on unemployment rates, as less than 3 percent of young Swiss are unemployed.[192] The Swiss also strive to frame vocational training as a valuable and legitimate career path, rather than viewing it as an option for less intelligent students. Some vocational programs are so successful that students can obtain jobs starting at

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[191] OECD, "Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators - Switzerland," last modified 2018, https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2018-68-en.

[192] Helena Bachmann, "Who Needs College? The Swiss Opt for Vocational School," Time, last modified October 4, 2012, http://world.time.com/2012/10/04/who-needs-college-the-swiss-opt-for-vocational-school/.

$50,000 USD or more.[193] If Korea could promote vocational training programs in a positive way, it could help address the intense unemployment and underemployment that many young Koreans face.

Among psychiatric and public policy professionals, Switzerland is highly regarded as having one of the best models of mental health services available worldwide.[194] Using a national reimbursement schedule, the Swiss government insures that the health care companies keep mental health services at a relatively low cost for all citizens, in addition to providing a large number of psychiatric inpatient and ambulatory services.[195] Switzerland offers many mental health resources to their citizens, and in 2018, the Swiss government launched a website that organizes all available resources on suicide prevention, including self-help, support groups, and medical care.[196] Korea, in comparison, lacks general organization of its mental health services, and systematic studies on planning and implementing better mental health services are severely lacking.[197] Psychiatric researchers believe that in addition to more medical services and social support becoming available, an important factor in lowering the suicide rate in Switzerland was a growing social acceptance of seeking help.[198] Since Korea lacks both social support and social acceptance of seeking help, this could be another barrier to improving the suicide rate.

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[193] Bachmann, "Who Needs."

[194] Andres R. Schneeberger and Bruce J. Schwartz, "The Swiss Mental Health Care System," *Psychiatric Services* 69, no. 2 (February 2018): 126.

[195] Schneeberger and Schwartz, "The Swiss," 128.

[196] Vuilleumier, "How Switzerland."

[197] Sungwon Roh et al., "Mental Health Services and R&D in South Korea," *International Journal of Mental Health Systems* 10, no. 45 (2016): 2.

[198] U. Hepp et al., "Suicide Trends Diverge by Method: Swiss Suicide Rates 1969–2005," *European Psychiatry* 25, no. 3 (April 2010): 134.

Another factor that has been found to be associated with lower suicide rates in Switzerland is religious affiliation. Researchers at the Institute of Social & Preventive Medicine found that religious participation has a "protective effect" discouraging religious believers from committing suicide.[199] The religious protective effect is strongest among Catholics, younger people, and women.[200] In Switzerland, 66.0 percent of people are Christian, and only 24.9 percent have no religious affiliation.[201] In comparison, only 29 percent of people practice Christianity in Korea, 23 percent are Buddhist, and 46 percent have no religious affiliation.[202] Since nearly half of the Korean population does not practice religion, this could be another reason why the suicide rate is high. Christian religious practices not only provide ideological framework that prevents suicide, but the social aspect of congregating within a religious community is also a protective factor that could dissuade individuals from suicide.

Government Action in Response to the Suicide Epidemic

In 2011, the Korean government enacted a law aimed to expand suicide prevention efforts.[203] This law states that all Korean citizens should assist with suicide prevention by reporting suicidal behavior seen in the community; specifically, the law states that the central

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[199] Adrian Spoerri et al., "Religion and Assisted and Non-assisted Suicide in Switzerland: National Cohort Study," *International Journal of Epidemiology* 39, no. 6 (December 2010):1486.

[200] Spoerri et al., "Religion and Assisted," 1486.

[201] World Atlas, "Major Religions in Switzerland," last modified 2019, https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-in-switzerland.html.

[202] Phillip Connor, "6 Facts about South Korea's Growing Christian Population," *Pew Research Center*, last modified August 12, 2014, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/12/6-facts-about-christianity-in-south-korea/.

[203] Korea Legislation Research Institute, comp., *Act for the Prevention of Suicide and Creation of Culture of Respect for Life*, report no. Act No. 10516 (2011), http://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_mobile/viewer.do?hseq=23521&type=part&key=36.

and local governments should actively provide assistance to citizens who have been reported as suicidal, and that business owners should take necessary measures to maintain the mental health of employees. Despite government awareness campaigns, many Korean students still feel that they do not have the right to intervene and stop someone from committing suicide.[204] In Confucian philosophy, the act of committing suicide is not always seen as inherently wrong, especially if the individual killed his or herself due to unfulfilled roles within society.[205] The 2011 law also addressed this issue by asking Koreans to change their mentality on the acceptance of suicide in order to become a "culture of respect for life."[206] Although this law has helped to reduce the number of yearly suicides from 31.7 per 100,000 in 2011 to 25.8 per 100,000 in 2015, there are still additional changes that can be made in order to reduce the suicide rate to the OECD yearly average of 12.4 per 100,000 people.[207]

Despite their good intentions, some of the government's efforts appear to be misguided, or address methods rather than causes. For example, the number of Koreans committing suicide by jumping from subway platforms decreased 62 percent in 2009 when the government installed screens in subway stations to ensure that citizens could not jump onto the tracks.[208] However, this action led to a 30 percent increase in people committing suicide by jumping from bridges

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[204] Kristen Kim and Jong-Ik Park, "Attitudes toward Suicide among College Students in South Korea and the United States," *International Journal of Mental Health Systems* 8, no. 17 (2014): 1.

[205] B. C. Park, "Cultural Ambivalence and Suicide in South Korea," in *Suicide and Culture: Understanding the Context*, ed. Erminia Colucci and David Lester (Cambridge, MA: Hogrefe Publishing, 2013), 237-62.

[206] Korea Legislation Research Institute, *Act for the Prevention*.

[207] 통계청[Statistics Korea], "자살률 [The Suicide Rate]," last modified 2016, http://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtlPageDetail.do?idx_cd=2992.; E. Hewlett and V. Moran, comps., *Making Mental Health Count: The Social and Economic Costs of Neglecting Mental Health Care*, OECD Health Policy Studies (Paris, France: OECD Publishing, 2014), http://www.oecd.org/health/health-systems/making-mental-health-count-9789264208445-en.htm.

[208] In-Soo Nam, "Fewer Seoul Subway Suicides Stirs Debate," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2011, http://blogs.wsj.com/korearealtime/2011/03/08/fewer-seoul-subway-suicides-stirs-debate/.

along the Han River surrounding Seoul. Instead of focusing on the problem of suicide itself, more efforts should be made by the Korean government to address the societal issues that are causing individuals to feel that suicide is their only option. Taking into consideration the problems with the education system, bullying amongst students, and socioeconomic inequality, many changes can be made to address these issues.

Lowering Adolescent Suicide Rates: Education and Social Welfare Reform

As discussed in detail in chapter two, the education system in Korea is extremely rigorous, competitive, and stressful for students. While it is unlikely that Korea will abandon their Confucian values by decreasing the importance of education, there are still changes that can be made in order to make school more bearable for students. First and foremost, instead of creating suicide prevention programs targeted at students, the government should create a robust suicide prevention program that is aimed at educating parents about the risk factors that may lead their child to suicidal thoughts. If the government could work with school administrators to mail pamphlets to parents or hold annual informative meetings at schools to educate parents on these issues, perhaps it could help parents understand their child more. Additionally, statistics regarding the negative impact of physical and emotional abuse should be presented to parents, so that they can fully understand the weight of their actions. If parents are more educated on the causes of suicidal ideation, perhaps they will not put as much pressure on their children to earn top scores on every test. Furthermore, the government has tried to enforce that *hakwon's* close at a reasonable hour, but because they are in the private sector, the government has limited powers

over these institutions.[209] Therefore, parents should encourage their children not to stay at *hakwon* later than nine p.m. so that their children will be able to get adequate rest.

Aside from working with schools and parents to lessen the pressure of obtaining academic success, the government should also change the high school curriculum, which is almost entirely based around the college entrance examination. The standardized curriculum used to prepare students for the college entrance exam leaves very little room for teachers and students to use creativity, innovation, or self-expression. Creativity is important in the development of adolescents because it allows students the opportunity to use unique thought to solve problems as they occur. As the educational psychologist Beghetto (2010) wrote, "creative competence of children is one way to help prepare students for an uncertain future."[210] Thus, inserting creativity into the curriculum could help prepare young people for the stressors they will likely encounter in the university and the labor market. This could have a significant impact on the mental state of Korean adolescents and help reduce the suicide rate.

Although literature has discussed the importance of incorporating creativity into schooling for many years, the majority of information taught to Korean students involves rote memorization rather than creative thinking or problem solving.[211] One study by the Korea Times found that only 19 percent of Korean middle schools used open-ended questions on their tests.[212] Currently it is very difficult for teachers to incorporate activities that require creativity or

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[209] Hyunjoon Park, Soo-yong Byun, and Kyung-keun Kim, "Parental Involvement and Students' Cognitive Outcomes in Korea: Focusing on Private Tutoring," *Sociology of Education* 84, no. 1 (2011): 18.

[210] Ronald A. Beghetto, "Creativity in the Classroom," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity*, ed. James C. Kaufman and Robert J. Sternberg (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 447.

[211] "Korean Education Needs to Foster More Creativity," *Korea Times*, February 20, 2010, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2010/02/113_61139.html.

[212] "Korean Education."

problem solving into their lesson plans.[213] Henceforth, the government should also include more

open-ended questions or creative writing responses on the college entrance examination. This

will allow teachers to use more creativity in their lesson plans. It will also ensure that the exam is

not only testing one's ability to reproduce information, but rather demonstrating if the student

has the ability to produce unique or innovative thoughts. Furthermore, as mentioned previously

in this chapter, the Korean government and school system should do a better job at promoting

vocational programs. It is unrealistic to expect all students to obtain a college education from a

good university, and it is perhaps unethical to encourage students to only pursue a college

education when there are limited amounts of jobs available for highly educated people in Korea.

Another option that could lower the adolescent suicide rate in Korea is for schools and

law enforcement to take more serious actions in reprimanding perpetrators of bullying. Although

the Korean government enacted a school policing system in 2012, in hopes of reducing the

amount of violence, these programs have been very ineffective.[214] Current anti-violence

programs in schools often lack resources or information for students on how they can cope with

school violence.[215] In recent years, many students have also been subjected to cyberbullying

through Kakao Talk, Korea's most popular instant messaging program. While it is harder for

adults to observe when a student is being cyberbullied, victims of cyberbullying should be

[213] Hyun-chae Chung, "Education Needs Overhaul to Nurture Creativity," *Korea Times*, October 31, 2016, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/10/181_217160.html.

[214] "Bullying in Schools," *Korea Times*, March 13, 2013, http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinon/2013/03/137_132020.html.

[215] Jeong-ju Na, "'I Felt Fear of Being Buried Alive,'" *Korea Times*, February 22, 2012, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/special/2012/02/139_105463.html.

encouraged to take a screen capture of the inappropriate message and share it with their teacher or local police department.[216]

Although teachers have become more involved in reporting cases of bullying, school officials often ignore or fail to report these cases to the police in fear that it will damage their school's reputation.[217] In order to show perpetrators that their violent actions come with consequences, school officials and law enforcement agencies need to be trained to take reports of school violence more seriously. When the majority of a child's life revolves around education, they should at least be able to feel safe in their school environment. Educators, school officials, police officers, and judges should take an oath to stand up to school violence.

Concerning the issues that young people face when entering the job market, many changes need to be made. The government should offer more incentives to companies who create new positions for college graduates. This would help alleviate some of the suicides caused by underemployment and unemployment. In order to bring more equality to the job market, companies should also receive an incentive from the government for offering full-time employment to young adults who have not graduated from the top-tier universities. This would help to lower the socioeconomic inequality, thus lowering suicide rates.

On that point, and perhaps most importantly, the government needs to address the vast, cyclical socioeconomic inequality that currently exists in Korean society. The current inequality that exists in the education system and the job market are creating a heavy burden on many young adults. Adolescents from neighborhoods with high levels of economic inequality have

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[216] Ji-hye Lee, "Kakao Bullying Hits Schools," *Korea Times*, March 3, 2015, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2015/03/116_174496.html.

[217] Woo-young Lee, "School Authorities Look Away from Violence," *Korea Herald*, January 24, 2012, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20120124000039.

shown to have higher suicide rates than those who do not.[218] The government should create

programs that reach out to children in these unequal neighborhoods and provide assistance so

that all students have equal access to quality education and jobs. In general, Korea needs to

spend more time, effort, and money to invest in better social welfare systems. Korea only spends

10.4 percent of their GDP on social expenditure to support disadvantaged or vulnerable citizens,

which is considerably lower than the 21.6 percent of GDP spent on average from all OECD

countries.[219] Aside from Mexico, Korea spends the least amount of money on social services out

of all developed countries. In order to lower the adolescent suicide rates, policies and programs

should be implemented to address the economic needs of poorer Korean families with

children.[220]

Conclusion

Overall, this thesis has addressed many of the major issues impacting youth suicide in

Korea. In chapter one, some of the relevant psychosocial theories on suicide were discussed and

applied to Korea's suicide epidemic. Chapter one also discussed how the perpetual precarity of

Korean society can lead to suicidality, not only in adolescents, but in the middle-aged and

elderly. Chapter two provided details on the major issues inciting suicidality in young Koreans,

including issues with the competitive education system, bullying, job placement, and

socioeconomic inequality. In chapters three and four, media in particular was addressed as a

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[218] Dong-Eun Lee and Se Won Kwon, "Community-Level Factors and Adolescent Depression in South Korea: Socioeconomic Composition, Education Environment, and Community Wellbeing," *Child Indicators Research* 8, no. 2 (June 2015): 459.

[219] OECD, *OECD Factbook 2015-2016: Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics* (Paris, France: OECD Publishing, 2016), http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/oecd-factbook-2015-2016_factbook-2015-en.

[220] Myoung-Hee Kim et al., "Socioeconomic Inequalities in Suicidal Ideation, Parasuicides, and Completed Suicides in South Korea," *Social Science and Medicine* 70, no. 8 (April 2010): 1254.

major influence in the lives of young Koreans. The sensationalized reporting of celebrity suicides in Korean news media creates a phenomenon known as the Hawthorne Effect, by which vulnerable individuals commit suicide after viewing inappropriate news reports on suicide. As demonstrated by the textual analyses of *SKY Castle* and *Radiant Office* in chapter four, Korean television both reflects and perpetuates Korea's public suicide culture.

This chapter has discussed some of the reasons that suicide is lower internationally, specifically in the Netherlands and Switzerland. Both the Netherlands and Switzerland have highly prestigious education systems and score well on international measures of academic performance, however, as analyzed above, they provide more room for students to pursue alternative careers vis-à-vis vocational training. By providing alternative paths for students, it can create less competition for both university acceptance and job placement after college. The Netherlands and Switzerland also do a better job of making citizens feel satisfied and secure in their environment, in addition to promoting a better work-life balance. These factors stand as valid suggestions for the Korean government to consider when trying to lower suicide rates.

This chapter has also discussed some of the actions that the Korean government has already taken in order to address the suicide epidemic. Although the government enacted a law in 2011 in attempt to transform Korea into a "culture of respect for life," research has found that many Koreans are still apprehensive to intervene when they observe suicidal behavior in others. Although some of the government's actions have been relatively successful in lowering the suicide rates, some actions may be misguided, and the main issues impacting suicide are not being addressed.

The present author believes that in order to address Korea's suicide epidemic, the Korean government must address the major structural issues in the education and social welfare systems.

These systems, which are intertwined with one another, are responsible for creating many of the conditions that Korean youth experience on a daily basis. From changing the school curriculum to taking bullying more seriously, the Korean school system needs to be addressed as a major factor in youth suicide. The structural disadvantages created by socioeconomic inequality also seem to permanently disadvantage many people, since the ability to afford quality tutoring as an adolescent can significantly impact the ability to get into a good university and find a job later in life.

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