

# Joint Family Suicide in South Korea

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**Abstract**— *The recent phenomenon of parent-child suicide pacts is related to the family concepts in modern South Korea. The traditional Confucius concepts emphasize the superior authority of the father in the family, they mean the child's excessive subordination to the father. So, the social recognition of the child's individuality had not developed in South Korea. As a result, South Korea tend to regard a child murder followed by a parent's suicide as a familial suicide pact. Extensive pseudo-familial social networks are to be built to solve an acute problem in the family. The institution of the nuclear family in South Korea since the early twenty century has made a parent's crisis. The frequent 'parent-child suicide pacts' in South Korea suggest that the strong social ideology of the nuclear family, which urges the strict division of gender roles and the performative gender identities based on such roles, is no longer congruous with rapidly changing socioeconomic situations in recent decades.*

**Keywords**— *Suicide pacts, psychological autopsy, joint family suicide, confucian family culture.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In most western countries, including Europe and United States, the main cause of suicide can be explained by psychical disorder such as depression [1]. Nevertheless, the causes of suicide in East Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, and China cannot be fully explained by individuals' psychical disorders. People often commit suicide by disembowelment in Japan, and by burning one selves in Korea and China [2]. In 1988, Korea was hit by a crisis of sovereign default due to IMF. Since then, many middle class families could not withstand such financial hardship and instances of joint family suicide began to occur. Joint family suicide not only occurs in Korea but also in other countries of East Asia and Central Europe [2]. It's just that the causes of such suicide varies. This paper aims to investigate the ways in which the recent phenomenon of 'parent-child suicide pacts' is related to the family concepts in modern South Korea.

## II. THE BODY AUTOPSY

Once a dead body is found, the cause of death must be identified. Responsibility to find out what caused the death lies in the hands of the living. The body tells absolute truth. But it is not an easy task to be aware of the truth the body speaks. Only after the dissection and observation of the internal organs can one find out whether the death of man was by a murder or an accident. This process is known as autopsy. Thanks to the development of forensics, the cause of death is concrete when the body is dissected. There are various causes: suffocation, drowning, drugs, shock, and so on. Recently, a man forced a woman to eat a live octopus, eventually leading her to death by suffocation. He pleaded not guilty while the bereaved argued that he is, but in the end, the court declared to find him not guilty. This acquittal is known to be declared not

because of the error in the autopsy but due to the insufficient evidence to prove that the woman's consumption of live octopus was by the man intentionally. It was the autopsy that revealed the cause of woman's death being the suffocation from eating a live octopus. The autopsy is carried out by surgeons who specialized in forensics. Out of the three, accidental deaths (fall, crash, snake's poison), homicide, and suicide, one is to be examined closely. For instance, when a suicide is proved through the body autopsy, the body autopsy is not sufficient to find out the suicide motive. Often, when murders occur, the culprit is investigated for the motive; because only after the reason for the murder is known, the culprit's circumstances can be sympathized to an extent. The same is true for suicide. By all means, there always is a motive hidden in suicide. A few years ago, ex-President No Mu Hyun's suicide, throwing himself from a rock, shocked our entire country. Although initially thought to be attempted due to the psychological pressure of the prosecution, his suicide is questioned to be because of depression, as reported by a psychology professor of Yeonsei-Wonjoo University. Psychological Autopsy is a type of psychiatry, examining the concrete causes of the suicides. It is commonly in effect in the U.S and is expected to be legitimately introduced even in Korea as the court adopted the psychological autopsy recently [3].

## III. THE CAUSES OF SUICIDE

Not all suicide is due to depression. But the psychiatrists generally believe that depression enervate the willingness to live, often more prone to committing suicide. The symptoms of depression are as follows: 1) continuous depressing mood, 2) decrease in the interest for work or hobbies, 3) reducing weight following loss of appetite, 4) occurrence of insomnia with nervousness, 5) excessive fatigue and torpidity, 6) excessive remorse, 7) a significant decrease in concentration, 8) repetitive thoughts of suicide [4]. If corresponds to more than half of these symptoms, it is diagnosed to have depression. If the depression is not cured at the right time, the probability to commit suicide increases. In the case of a man who has no history of depression or problem in mental health, the family members or acquaintances recognize him as a responsible and reticent person and do not take any special measures of care. When suicides occur, the bereaved or acquaintances do not understand the suicide motive at once. Most say there was nothing different in the suicide's behavior. This does not imply that there really wasn't any change in the suicide's behavior; the acquaintances simply did not recognize the change in suicide's mind as they failed to pay attention. The causes of suicide can be classified into genetic, neurobiological, psychological, and social. Not just one of the above causes but combinations of two or more causes lead to

suicide. Genetic causes refer to family history, cases in which someone in the family has a suicide attempt. It is often reported that suicides occur due to psychotic symptoms, panic disorder, anxiety disorder, or alcohol dependence disorder found in the family members. Neurobiological causes refer to excessive release of stress hormones leading to release of neurotransmitters related to depression such as Antoinette, (lack of) norepinephrine, and the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal. Psychological causes are thought to be the typical symptoms of depression leading to suicide. Social causes relate to the suicide attempted to avoid humiliation and significant decrease in self-confidence. Suicides among officials who have received bribes are mainly because of social causes, committed after an investigation or before the appearance at the law enforcement agencies. Suicides due to criticisms of insufficient work skills are also social causes. Loss of motivation to live with increase in work stress, failure to promotion despite the efforts put in, and bankruptcy of private business all leading to frustration and eventually to suicides are caused by the social aspects. Upon analysis, suicides are classified mainly into two categories: suicide due to depression or non-depressive disorder [5]. The former is the main cause of suicides while the latter takes up the rest of probability. Suicides with genetic or psychological causes are suicides due to depression and those with social causes are ones due to non-depressive disorder.

#### IV. PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY

Autopsy is to examine the direct or indirect physical causes of the suicide. It is, through examination of the body, to find out what actions or things led to suicide. At times, the means or ways of suicide are not entirely examined by this post-mortem examination. This is when the psychological autopsy is required to determine if the death is by a suicide attempt or a murder and further figure out the details of the causes. Psychological autopsy grasps the solid circumstances of the suicide's psychology before death[6]. It adds to the detectives' investigation by seizing the suicide's social reputation, personality, associates, and relation with the family. It is carried out by tracing back the suicide's behavior, feelings and thoughts right before the attempt. In other words, psychological autopsy analyses and studies the suicide's reaction towards the suicide factor, led by a psychiatrist. One of the fundamental reasons of psychological autopsy is to understand the suicide from his point of view. Certainly, understanding the suicide with his feelings helps in preventing the attempt. Psychological autopsy not only helps to figure out the bereaved family's chagrin at present, but also establishes important strategies to prevent people from committing suicides[7]. Individual's personality or character can be known through the psychological autopsy. Through the analysis of information gathered from the associates that had direct or indirect contact with the suicide, the details of the process leading to the suicide can be identified. Finding out whether the suicide was an act of deliberation is also the role of the psychological autopsy. Since the suicide is already dead, a physical penalty is impossible. But if there was a third person involved, he or she becomes the subject of the penalty.

Psychological autopsy is what helps to find out the involvement of the third person. A life insurance company does not hold any responsibility for its member's suicide. However, most life insurance companies do provide some compensation even in the case of suicides. Hence it is important also for these companies to know whether the death was a suicide. In addition, through psychological autopsy, know-how for prevention of suicides can also be learnt. Furthermore, in the case of patients admitted in a hospital, the sufficient level of care from the hospital can also be checked through psychological autopsy.

#### V. UNDERSTANDING WITH SUICIDAL PACT IN THE FAMILY

There are two kinds of suicidal pact. It is either child murder followed by a parent's suicide or a homicide suicide in the family. In Korean broadcasts, it is often called 'joint family suicide'. However, the so-called 'joint family suicide' is often carried out by parent's murder of their children or a child. In United States, the incident of child's death followed by his or her parent's is called as child homicide or filicide [7]. Then, why is this unique phenomena occurring mostly in East Asia? Cause of such situation cannot be solely attributed to wrong decision of the family. Some sociologists claims that child murder followed by a parent's suicide is a phenomena influenced by Confucius concept of family relationship that still lingers in Korean culture [8]. In other words, since Confucius idea states that spouse and child exist as single-fate destiny around father, the financial crisis faced by father will be recognized as the crisis of whole family leading to a thought that there is no other choice than death to sustain their lives [9]. Moreover, since Confucius idea claims children as the property of parents, such concept has lead to the voluntary murder of a child by his or her parents [9]. This interpretation based on Korea's 'Confucian family culture' only provides a partial justification because our 21st society is a democratic country. Thus, we can't solely claim that Confucian ideals still linger in the values of Koreans. In Korean society, joint family suicide most often occurred in families that suffered from chronic hardship of life or that faced sudden economic crisis. 1) An economic structure and increasing polarization that leads to unemployment and bankruptcy, 2) Deep rooted culture of familism and wrong sense of community that claims child as their property, 3) and poor social security can be causes of joint-family suicide in Korea [10]. However, the first reason does not provide understanding of why such decision has to include the death of their child. This question is rather answered by second and third causes. Eventually, the concept of familism and the thought that no-one else will take care of their child leads to murder of child followed by suicide of parents.

#### VI. SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS ON SUICIDAL PACT

In current Korean society, the causes of the incident of child murder followed by a parent's suicide shows several characteristics. First, no matter who killed the child, recent economic crisis faced by the family is one of the characteristic of joint family suicide. Father's business failure, unemployment, family's debt, or chronic hardship of life have

big influence on joint family suicide [12]. The main cause of a murder of child by father alone is spouse's disappearance from home [11]. Such cause reflects upon the importance of gender role in a family. In general, the joint family suicide has been committed by the families whom with low social position, and who has no-one to help fight through economic hardship. Government insists that the social security system is increasingly improving, but since child rearing in Korean society is depended on parent's ability, parent's death implies the dim future of the child [12]. The main cause of child murder followed by parents is not because parents think of their child as property but because they think it is irresponsible for them to leave their child alone [12]. Such collective sense of the fate of family members still lingers in our society even though 21st is an age of nuclear family [13]. In reality, it is true that child's future can't be separated from survival of parents since child in Korean society relies on financial aid of parents. Gender role in family is especially emphasized in Korean society. In other words, father is responsible for financial stability, whereas the role of mother is to rear her young child [14]. Child murder in case of missing father most often occurs due to poverty whereas child murder with missing mother occurs due to anxiety of child rearing [15]. Korean parents think if they can't protect their child, the child will suffer in society. Such accepted thought leads to joint family suicide. In Korean society, parents perceive their children as an ego extension [16]. This perception naturally makes parents think that it is their responsibility to sacrifice their life for their children's success. This distorted concept of oneness leads to joint family suicide in face of hardship [17]. In case of Christian parents, they might think death as salvation. Death can be perceived as a way to heaven away from hell in reality [17]. In addition, joint family suicide by mothers of young child can be perceived as resistance against husband's disavow or husband's disdainful behaviors. In this case, taking away child from her husband is thought of as revenge. In general all this causes relate back to the perception of 'collective fate'. The joint family suicide in face of financial crisis relates back to culture of patriarchal family.

#### VII. THE PREVENTION OF SUICIDAL PACT

Sociologist Durkheim classifies suicide as egoistic suicide and altruistic suicide. Altruistic suicide is choosing death to protect others. For instance, secretary committing suicide to hide CEO's corruption is an example of altruistic suicide. A murderer killing many students in school and committing suicide to avoid judicial pressure is an example of egoistic suicide [18]. The parent child suicide pact can be perceived as egoistic suicide if viewed as inducement of death but it can be altruistic suicide if in context of thinking death reduces suffering of reality. In Korean society, family is seen as a community whom should share both happiness and sadness. Such feeling is defined as sympathy. This feeling is one of the causes of parent child suicide pact [18]. Such strong unconscious sympathy leads to distorted thinking that killing their child is like killing themselves. The starting point of preventing suicidal pact is changing the cognition that young child is part of themselves. People should start recognizing

that young child of their own is separate individual. Families should stop sympathizing each other but rather emphasize each other, recognizing that all members are different individuals [15]. Having the role of parent does not grant a right to take away their child's life. It is only a child's fate to born in rich family, in poor family, or in family who will soon be bankrupted; thus, no-one will criticize parents for not being able to provide their child with economic prosperity [16]. Even though hardship comes, with efforts of all family members, families can manage to stabilize. Young child will one day grow up and support the family. Giving young child an opportunity to live their life up to his or her standards is the last duty as a parent. View family members as separate individuals can really help fix the distorted thought [19].

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

For this research, the existing studies and recent newspaper articles in suicide areas are reviewed. This paper proposes three findings. First, the traditional Confucius concepts of the family emphasize the superior authority of the father and the child's subordination have tended to continue in South Korea over the last millenium. As a result, South Korea tend to regard a child murder followed by a parent's suicide as a 'familial suicide pact.' Second, the institution of the nuclear family in South Korea since the early twenty century has made a parent's crisis to be that of the whole family. Third, the frequent 'parent-child suicide pacts' in South Korea suggest that the strong social ideology of the nuclear family, which urges the strict division of gender roles and the performative gender identities based on such roles, is no longer congruous with rapidly changing socioeconomic situations in recent decades [20].

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