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Burdensome Expectations in South Korean Society

In a research analysis published by the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI), it was revealed that most countries that fell under the category as an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), saw signs of a stable or even declining rate of suicides (par. 5). However, South Korea, whom is also an OECD country, actually saw an increase in its countries suicide rates. Within only an eleven year period, the annual suicide rate for both men and women over the ages of 65 had doubled, with a jump from 55.6 to 128.6 suicides per 100,000 men and 23.6 to 46.1 suicides per 100,000 women (par. 12). Now, there is the question of what is the cause of this high rate in South Korea. An obvious clue, which they fail to realize in many aspects, is the burdensome expectations in South Korean society. Critics could possibly say that because I'm not Korean nor do I reside in the country, I wouldn't understand their cultural ethics and shouldn't give input on this controversial topic. However, the reasoning for the high suicide rate in this particular country is very prominent and the proof cannot be ignored. From the young ages of childhood and throughout adolescents, South Korean citizens are being trained on how they must act and work in order to survive in this society as adults. The lifestyle of the majority of South Korean citizens is vigorous and requires a state of mind that is constantly pushing itself to reach ultimate success.

This issue is prominent even at the youngest ages of suicide attempts recorded in South Korea. Once adolescents begin their primary years of schooling in this country, they are pushed

to aim for perfection by their parents and teachers. In a society where honor is extremely important, students are pressured to be number one with no excuses for failure. This is taught even before the children reach middle school and continues for the rest of their career as a student. Probably the most stressful moment for these students is the college entrance exam, which is considered the make it or break it moment for every South Korean student. The fear of failure has become so drastic in schools that both NPR and ABC News have reported on it. The NPR said it was issued that “planes are grounded on test day for fear of disturbing the kids,” in order to take precautions so that students can give their full, undivided attention to the exam, without any interruptions or distractions (par. 8). ABC News gave further detail on this by saying, “To ensure students take the test in a silent surrounding, South Korean military delayed or canceled air force drills and live-firing exercises for the day. The Transportation Ministry also banned airport landings and departures for 40 minutes starting at 1 p.m., not to disturb students taking the English listening comprehension test,” and even included radar imagery as evidence to show just how far and drastic their measures are taken (par. 7-8). The National Public Radio (NPR) gave a visual to the intensity of this work ethic in one of their articles stating, “The 14-hour days in classrooms reflects South Korean society’s powerful focus on educational achievement,” which poses as a difficult and strenuous lifestyle for students (par. 5). The tests and school work are so tough in South Korea that just within the last few years it has become somewhat of a trend for people in the U.S. to upload videos on YouTube of themselves attempting to pass the English section of South Korea’s SAT test. Many of these attempts made among English speaking natives had failed or, at the very least, got a terrible score. According to BuzzFeed, among the South Korean students who took the SATs had as high as a 90.23% incorrect answer rate for many of the English questions (3:48-3:51). BuzzFeed tried out this test themselves, assigning members from their team to try and tackle this test. The members were

people who had done extremely well on the SATs in the United States and had carried out their achievements, attending prestigious colleges where they continued to prosper. After taking South Korea's 2011 SAT test, Garrett, a Stanford graduate who earned two degrees from the institute, had said the South Korean students taking the exam are "set up to fail." He continued by saying, "Like, look at these questions, you're never going to have to talk like this. It's so highly specialized, it doesn't need to be a general standardized test," giving an eye-opening image that even someone who would be highly praised in the U.S. for his educational achievements would consider South Korea's SATs to be confusing, difficult, and stressful (4:18-4:26). If English natives found the English section of the South Korean SAT to be difficult, it is then even more overwhelming for the South Korean students who carry English as a second language. Some would say that society needs this sort of competition and motivation in order to gain that sense of accomplishment and success, but shouldn't there be a limit to how far someone would or should have to go in order to achieve it?

Due to the fear of disappointing their parents and the day students will have to take the strenuous SATs, most of them have to give their full attention to studying while ignoring mandatory health responsibilities such as a balanced diet and a proper amount of sleep. This lifestyle has been molded by many generations before them and continues to burden the children and young adults of South Korea. By simply looking at the number of hours an average South Korean student studies, it offers an idea of what their daily life looks like. Many of the students of South Korea have been given the mindset that they need to work day in and day out in order to get into a top college followed by a good job in order to be happy as an adult. This puts immense pressure on any student, substantially those who are having to keep these thoughts in the back of their mind as they spend the majority of their waking hours studying. Given that the majority of South Korean students aim to spend a minimum of fourteen hours a

day studying, this leaves barely any time for eating, sleeping, and exercise, let alone having a social life, as many students in the states seem to worry most about having lack of time for. This has just recently been seen as an issue among Korean society as reported by TIME Magazine when, in fear of the well-being of the students, a curfew of 10:00 PM had to be set in order to prevent students from studying too late. The article was written by an interviewer with TIME, who went out on a patrol with some of the government employees who were assigned to these “raids”. Cha Byoung-Chul, a mid-level bureaucrat at Seoul's Gangnam district office of education even tells the interviewer of how he once “found 10 teenage boys and girls on a cram-school roof at about 11 p.m..” Cha says, “I told them, ‘It's the hagwon that's in violation, not you. You can go home.’” (par. 3). This just shows how serious this situation has become from all sides. Because of the amount of hours the students have to study, for the sake of their health, they have to stress to condense the time even more. A combination of being deprived of sleep, a lack of nutrition due to skipping meals, overworking the mind, and fearing what the future holds for these young individuals will consequently leave scars on their mental and physical health. The pressure that is in a continuous motion for the students of South Korea is ultimately a main factor as to why many of South Korea’s citizens decide to take their life before they even pass adolescence.

While, from afar, some of this may just seem as a tough but tolerable lifestyle, many students are attempting to speak up about the real issues that lie within it. In a Tumblr project, images were uploaded of young South Korean students displaying phrases placed on pieces of paper that they had written in English. This was done in order to express their desire to broaden their knowledge and fluency of the language and interact with those who speak it, rather than solely using it as a tool to solve problems on tests which is what they have been trained to use it for by the school system. While the majority of things written by the students were playful and

aimless, this project also created a voice and an opportunity for students who wanted to let a broader audience know about their sufferings. Some of the shocking things written by students were “Studying is not ‘the all’ of life”; “Korea education is too hard to study”; “Korea education makes that somebody dies. High school students in Korea are not happy. We always study. We can't sleep. We always compete. We must change Korea's education. Please. Help me”; “STOP printing out students as if they're ROBOTS. Let them be humane”; “I want politicians to think not about their property but the public's HAPPINESS”; and a large number of them say things along the lines of how exhausted they always are. A lot of the students of South Korea are struggling with this lifestyle and are heavily burdened by the ethics conjured up by the school system and their parents. In an article by BBC News, they interviewed a student named Young Chang who, in regards to this strenuous lifestyle of a South Korean student says, "It was really difficult, especially as in Korea we have a lot of students who want to go to college, the competition's really tough." Making this clearer with a personal example, Young Chang says, "I lost about two or three friends. One was extremely stressed by the studying and the other also committed suicide. They were about 15 or 16," showing the scarring effects that this pressure puts on these students from such a young age (par. 20-21). Other countries may look up to their grades, but the students themselves are lacking in other beneficial aspects of life such as finding their passions through hobbies, human interaction and socialization, and things that really matter in society such as compassion and brotherhood. They are instead thrown into an eat or be eaten society and are locked into this mindset throughout adulthood. This creates a feeling of emptiness in their lives that was neglected to be filled in their adolescent years and lingers as the thought of lack of purpose in life.

The hardcore work ethics of a South Korean citizen does not stop after their years of schooling is over with, it continues to overwhelm them as adults. As they surpass their

adolescent years and are now working citizens of South Korea, the happy life that they were promised they'd have in their adult years is not as achievable as it was previously depicted. As a result of the work ethics made for students, this has created an overabundance of college graduates who are qualified for job positions. Yes, this may sound like good news, however, it creates a very harsh playing field in the battle for employment and economic stability. In consequence to this, the individuals in search of employment are poked and prodded at by job interviewers to determine if the individuals are right for the job. It creates insecurities and lack of confidence when put in a situation such as this and conjures up feelings resembling anxiety and depression. In order to survive the battle of unemployment in this country, they have to fight their way to the top just as they did as children. The competitive mindset that was introduced during their years as students resurfaces and now there is more on the line. They are reintroduced to the dog-eat-dog society where their lives now rely on their success. If they fail to get a good paying job they risk being unable to provide for themselves and their families, unable to afford food, proper housing, and facing the risk of losing face by their family. The fear of losing everything feeds the morality they were presented with as students, becoming successful at any means necessary and pushing aside compassion for others. During an interview by the New York Times, they interviewed a psychiatrist in Seoul by the name of Park Jin-seng. Dr. Park said, "As the society became more oriented toward materialism, people started to compare themselves ... There's a lot of competition now, even starting in childhood, and the goals of life have moved. We have a saying, 'If one cousin buys land, the other cousin gets a stomachache,'" offering an example of just how competitive this society has become and the stress that is put on it, even pinning family against family, rather than being supportive and proud of their success (par. 18). This mindset passed down in society has influenced the citizens to push harder in all aspects of their work ethics, overworking themselves in order to grasp even just bits of success.

In effect, it begins to feel like a never ending competition for something they've been promised ever since they were children, but never really got to witness. This then produces the question of, what's the point of continuing to search for the end to this burdensome road to success if there's no real light at the end of the tunnel? As a result, the feeling of loneliness and doubt of self-worth come into play, feeding the feeling of depression and thoughts of suicide. Wondering what the future holds in such a competitive society creates high levels of anxiety and depression, and is the reason for so many of the instances of suicide among adults in their country.

While trying to survive in this society, South Koreans once again have to give up the majority of their lives to the dedication of their work. Since they are once again put into an involuntary competition as they had as students, the adults in this country must work overtime in order to be viewed as superior to their equals according to the standards of their authority figures. Quartz reported statistics from the OECD that South Korea had the second most employees working over 50+ hours at 20.8%, almost doubling the rate of the U.S. at 11.4% (fig. 1). Much like what these subjects had gone through during their years of schooling, they now face the same overwhelming issue of an almost constant work schedule, however, South Korea's National Assembly is passing a law to minimize the required work-hour week at 52 hours maximum. This law mirrors the studying curfew that has been created for students in hopes to raise their levels of happiness and health among the citizens. An additional reason for such a high work-hour rate may have to do with the encouragement of after-hour working by many of the superiors at the company branches in South Korea. Even if the employees aren't really showing results from doing this, their bosses still praise many of their employees for staying late, meaning, even if an employee isn't actually doing any work but is staying at the office late, to the boss' knowledge the employee must be a hard worker. So, because this

society is so competitive and are afraid of losing their jobs, they work overtime even when they don't have any additional work to do because they are afraid they'll appear to be slacking in the eyes of their superiors. Although, for many employed citizens, the amount of hours spent at the office is not just something of smoke and mirrors. They are presented with workload after workload and grind themselves to the bone in order to make a living in this country. Employees push themselves to the edge in order to get closer to success and, much like when they were students, they allow themselves only a little time in their day to fit in eating, sleeping, and socializing. Doing so not only creates anxiety and thoughts of suicide but other major health problems as well such as anemia, heart attack, stroke, and heart disease among many other health issues. Since this lifestyle of work first, happiness later is something that is practiced for years on end, it is an even higher possibility for these health issues to occur and in even stronger forms. Unfortunately, since they feel that they are stuck in the constant motion of work, like a hamster in a wheel they continue to run even though they know that the wheel won't stop unless they do. For the fear of what will happen if and when they stop, they think they can't and the pressure just begins to feel tiresome for many individuals.

With the mixture of the heavy workload and the mental and physical downfalls that occur from it, for many South Korean citizens this ultimately leads to alcoholism. Ana Singh at Berkeley Political Review supplies the information that, "Self-medication takes on many forms in Korea ... of these, alcohol abuse is the most common and the deadliest." Furthering how, "Heavy drinking in South Korea is directly tied to its culture of hard work," which varies from using it as a coping mechanism from hardship and a social activity to relieve stress (par. 8). In South Korea, it is normal for colleagues and individuals to go out often after work hours to binge-drink and it comes with a price. This activity may release some of their stress they've faced throughout the day, however, it only masks the true issues that lie underneath and even

consequently creates more. Singh says, “While deadly, alcohol abuse is seen as more socially acceptable than psychiatric visits to treat mental illnesses,” which is giving credit to alcoholism as one of the main culprits to adult suicides while giving examples of how much of a taboo mental illness has grown to be in this country (par. 8). The issue of the over-consumption of alcohol in South Korea is something that goes unnoticed at times, even for some of Korea’s own citizens. However, in 2013, the NCBI had said, “Alcoholism is becoming one of the most serious issues in Korea,” which proves that, while the country is trying to resolve the issue, it’s still a problem that hasn’t gone away and continues to feed their title as the second highest rates of suicide among OECD countries (par. 1). As separate instances, these different scenarios South Korean adults go through may look miniscule in the eyes of many, but when they pile up upon one single person, it could become the straw that breaks the camel’s back. As a downhill spiral effect, the mixture of the overconsumption of alcohol and the high levels of stress can bring on even more additional issues including the alteration of the mind which can lead to physical abuse within the household and fatal accidents such as car crashes. Among health risks, a constant overconsumption of alcohol can cause liver disease, various types of cancers, and nerve damage just to name a few. The country may be attempting to encourage other forms of stress relief involving outdoor activities and other forms of social interaction, this is just covering up the real issues that are going on in this society. This unhealthy coping mechanism may be replaced with a better one, but the question remains, *why is there a need for a coping mechanism?* The answer, boldly standing yet neglectfully acknowledged by those with higher power, remains upon the standards and morals of the society.

While these statements are factual, many would focus on other methods of treating this issue. Samsung Medical Center Psychiatrist, Jeon Hong-Jin stresses that “when someone with severe depression doesn’t know he is clinically depressed, it’s more likely that he would find his

situation hopeless and take his own life. Being diagnosed can give a sense of control, because once you are diagnosed you can learn that there are treatment options available for you to get better,” which would imply that being aware of the mental state they are in and seeking help for their mental struggles will give them a sense of power over it, in order to overcome it (par. 10). Being aware of mental instability and suicide are extremely important factors in life, especially when one falls victim to these issues. Dr. Jeon would concede that the problem with this is the stigma that surrounds mental health in the country. Anxiety and depression are said to be kept hidden in South Korea as if they are some sort of contagious disease or someone must be mentally insane in order to be feeling these sorts of emotions. For the worrisome thought of being judged and abandoned by those around them and losing honor and face, people in South Korea who suffer from these burdens continue to keep them hidden. As a consequence to this taboo, keeping their emotions locked up just helps to feed the feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and depression which can heighten the thoughts of suicide. Because there is such a stigma in this fact of life it would take quite a while for an acceptance of what really can go on inside a person’s mind. Mental health has been seen as a taboo for decades and it’s not just going to go away within a few years. I may agree that the understanding and treatment of mental health could be very important tools in decreasing the suicide rate, however, there are many factors to consider in this as well. During a study conducted by the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) on the question of “Can We Really Prevent Suicide?” they ended with the conclusion that “given the complexity of identifying and managing suicide risk, a combination of interventions at a several levels will be required in order to implement an efficacious, comprehensive prevention program,” that gives the feeling that depression and suicide are very complex things that would take many different types of treatments and prevention methods in order to get a handle of (par. 35). Because the human mind is so intricate, it requires numerous

types of treatment in order to get better control of a wider number of patients' mental health which again would take time to get a hold of.

Although this all may be true, many critics would still press that mental treatment is the sole method to diminishing feelings of anxiety and depression. I'd also like to stress that, while seeking treatment may offer some of the patients a feeling of hope and a sense of control, this would only bandage and somewhat treat the infectious issue that is causing irritation among the majority of the South Korean citizens. As proven, society's overbearing expectations and work ethics are huge trigger factors in the emotional instances of anxiety and depression and the thoughts and attempts of suicide. Treatment may prolong their worries, but at some point they will have to face them again, whether it's a student and their practically round-the-clock studying, or an adult and their piling workload. There's times when the medication doesn't work, the reassuring words by the doctors are too distant in their mind to be audible, and the issues come back to the surface. By no means am I discouraging any individual from seeking professional help, but as an entire society a larger idea of what will successfully help solve this issue South Korea is faced with. Among South Korean society the issue of stress, depression, and suicidal tendencies would appear to be visible in an extremely wide age group from elementary students to the elderly and spreads among all economic statuses. It cannot be hidden or ignored and it isn't something that can just be resolved with a single method or change in society, all aspects need to be covered from multiple angles and with the cooperation of the citizens. Instead of relying on mental health treatment, South Korea should use it as a tool while fixing the bigger issues. Encouraging mental treatment would help prolong an amount of people from taking a step closer to the edge as it will also allow a bit more time to fix the ethics and morals of society. As an additional result, mental health will also begin to dissolve the stigma surrounding it.

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