

Suicide in South Korea: Revisiting Durkheim's *Suicide*

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*The suicide rate in South Korea has been steadily increasing for the past twenty years and has become a major societal issue. Accordingly, the phenomenon has drawn the attention of researchers from many different perspectives that have looked to a variety of causes. Efforts to understand the trends from a sociological perspective, however, are scarce. One notable exception is Ben Park's (2012) cohort theory of "collective cultural ambivalence". Drawing from Durkheim's concept of anomie, Park argues that in Korea the simultaneous and competing existence of traditional Confucianism and Western Individualism is causing pathological cultural ambivalence, a state of anomie, and increasing rates of suicide. The theory of cultural ambivalence, however, conflates Durkheim's conceptual distinctions between social regulation/integration and anomic/egoistic suicides. By revisiting the original formulations in *Suicide*, this essay offers a Durkheimian interpretation and explanation for suicide trends and patterns by drawing from Park's cohort theory of cultural ambivalence, examining current research on suicide in Korea, and using data from the fifth wave of the World Values Survey (2014). Along with Park's emphasis on anomie, I argue that egoism and social integration are important considerations distinct from social regulation for understanding the increasing rates of suicide in South Korea.*

KEYWORDS: Suicide; Anomie; Durkheim; South Korea; Collectivism

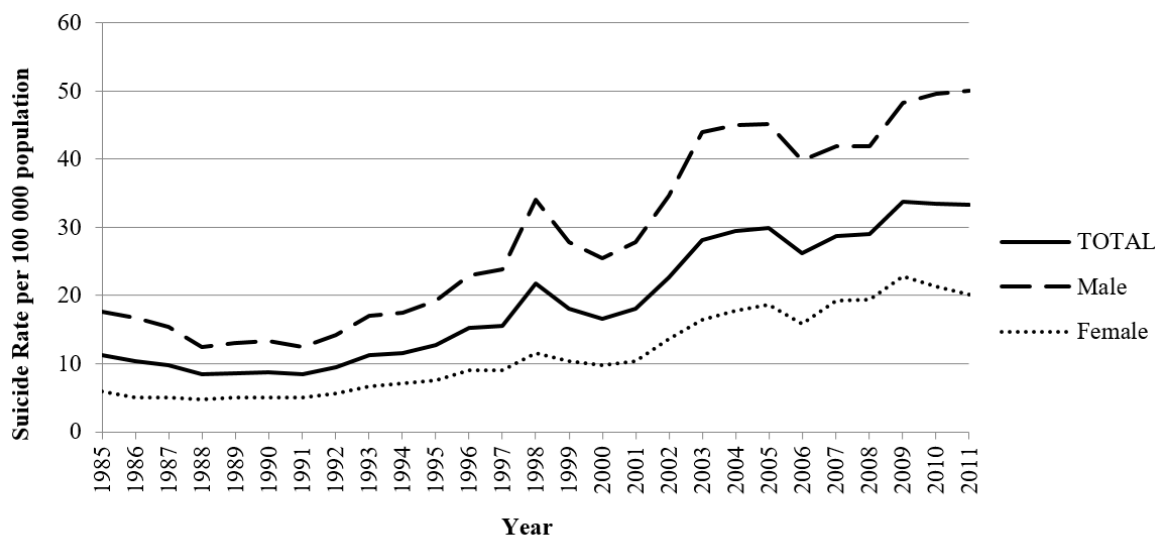
INTRODUCTION

The suicide rate in South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea) has been steadily increasing for the past twenty years, and has become a major social issue in the country. Accordingly, the phenomenon has drawn the attention of researchers who have attempted to explain the trend from many different perspectives and by looking to a variety of causes. Although researchers have attributed the rising suicide rate to several factors, efforts to synthesize and understand the trends from a sociological perspective are scarce. A more theoretically informed attempt to understand the patterns and social causes of suicide in Korea is, therefore, warranted. By revisiting *Suicide* (1951), Émile Durkheim's seminal work on the study of suicide, this essay attempts to offer a more sociological explanation for the trends and patterns in suicide by examining the social context of contemporary Korea. Specifically, I draw from Park's (2012) observations that although rates of suicide have increased, gender differences in these rates have declined in recent cohorts. I then use data from the World Values Survey (2014) and Durkheim's original formulation of anomic and egoistic suicides to argue that decreasing rates of collectivism and increasing rates of individualism amongst

younger cohorts of Koreans (aged 20-39), especially younger women, may explain the contemporary trends in Korean suicide rates.

SUICIDE IN CONTEMPORARY KOREA

The suicide rate in Korea has generally been increasing since 1990 (Figure 1). In contrast to other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries where suicide rates have generally been declining, the Korean suicide rate increased from 8.8 to 33.3 per 100,000 population from 1990 to 2011 (OECD, 2013). The prevalence of suicide in Korea is also remarkable. In 2011, there were 15,906 suicides, translating into nearly one suicide every half hour (Statistics Korea, 2011). Furthermore, suicide was the number one cause of death among people under 40 years of age in 2011 and the number four cause overall (Statistics Korea, 2011). The high rate of suicide in modern Korea is particularly noteworthy due to the magnitude of its increase. Korea currently has the highest suicide rate of all OECD countries, with a rate nearly three times the OECD average. In 1990, however, Korea ranked eighth lowest, with a suicide rate less than half of the OECD average (OECD, 2013). At the country level, then, high rates of suicide are a common, important, and an increasing social reality.

Figure 1: Age-Standardized Suicide Rate per 100,000 population, South Korea, 1985-2011

Source: Health Database 2013, OECD

Cross-national studies that have included Korea have found that a variety of macro-level factors influence suicide rates, including income inequality (Helliwell, 2007), aggregate unemployment rates (Huang, 1996), globalisation (Milner, McClure, Sun, & De Leo, 2011), individualization (Lenzi, Colucci, & Minas, 2012), and ethnic heterogeneity (Neumayer, 2003) to name just a few. While the results of cross-national analyses are informative, they investigate many nations simultaneously and do not contribute a great deal to the explanation of the specific case of Korea. For instance, Milner and colleagues (2011) examined the effect of globalisation on suicide rates by constructing a “globalisation index” that captured a country’s integration into the world market, levels of migration, and global communication. They found that higher scores on their “globalisation index” were associated with higher suicide rates. Their finding, however, lacked predictive validity since one would expect Korea to have one of the highest globalisation scores due to their high suicide rate; this was not the case (Milner et al., 2011). Cross-national studies of this nature are useful, but often fail to explain particular cases. Furthermore, aggregate studies provide little in terms of explaining *why* suicide rates in Korea are increasing. For instance, what is the mechanism connecting increases in globalisation, changes in society, and individual experiences that result in more suicide? Alternatively, Durkheim’s within-group, time-series approach may offer a more fruitful method for understanding the causal mechanisms contributing to the particular case of Korea.

The intent of raising prior cross-national studies here is not to dismiss them as irrelevant. On the contrary, comparing Korea to other nations can help illuminate the unique idiosyncrasies that are characteristic to Korea while demonstrating broader factors that are relevant net of the contexts of specific countries. Durkheim’s own analyses were largely based on comparing the suicide rates of socially different geographic groups. To explain the high and increasing rate of suicide in Korea, however, requires supplementing these cross-national analyses by delving deeper into the cultural and socio-historical context of Korea. In this paper, I will use between-group variation in suicide rates in Korea to support an explanation that draws from the framework of Durkheim’s original theory of suicide.

DURKHEIM’S THEORY OF SUICIDE

Émile Durkheim’s *Suicide* has been described as “one of the two or three most important and influential works ever published in the social sciences and is considered the seminal work on suicide” and its influence “has not diminished or become lost with time” (Lester, 1994, p. xi). Although it remains actively discussed, Durkheim’s thesis has accrued much criticism and scrutiny for its conceptual flaws, lack of testability, as well as the presentation and validity of the statistical data (Breault, 1986; Lukes, 1973; Pope, 1976). The general theoretical framework has, however, been widely applied and has contributed greatly to the understanding of the social causes of suicide (Lenzi et al., 2012).

By compartmentalizing some of Durkheim's theoretical deficiencies and untenable assumptions, his theory of suicide can be used in fruitful ways to further our understanding of suicide rates. Durkheim's theory of suicide has been explained countless times in the past in ways far more concise and thorough than could be attempted here. That said, the foundations of Durkheim's theory that are most relevant for understanding patterns of suicide in Korea will briefly be reviewed.

Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide was founded on two dimensions: social regulation and social integration. Durkheim's concept of social regulation was based on his assumptions of human nature. He argued that in humans, the desire and capacity to satisfy needs is unlimited because "nothing appears in man's organic nor in his psychological constitution which sets a limit to such tendencies" (Durkheim, 1951, p. 247). This insatiability is a source of torment for the individual and condemns them to a "state of perpetual unhappiness" (p. 248). For the well-being of individuals, then, their passions, goals, and desires must be regulated and restrained. He argued that "society alone can play this moderating role; for it is the only moral power superior to the individual, the authority of which he accepts" (p. 249). A just and legitimate society organically determines a "scale" of the relative value of each position in society and the appropriate rewards that can be expected. Although this scale is sensitive to changes in the economic and moral ideals of a society, individual well-being is dependent on the acceptance of society's regulations. When social regulation is lacking, which Durkheim termed a state of *anomie*, individuals feel the torture of unsatisfied passions and are more prone to suicide. Suicides of this type that are caused by insufficient social regulation were classified by Durkheim as *Anomic suicides*.

While social regulation refers to society's control over the individual, social integration refers to the individual's bonds and connections to society. Durkheim (1951) explained that strongly integrated social groups have a protective effect against suicide because they provide common meanings, values, and purpose for the individual. He examined Catholics and Protestants and found that higher rates of suicides characterized the latter group. Although both religions prohibited suicide, Protestants had a higher propensity for free inquiry, reflection, and the pursuit of knowledge, as evidenced by their higher levels of education. This was not the effect of greater education *per se*; free inquiry and the pursuit of knowledge promoted reflection and

individualism, which tended to diminish their social integration. He wrote that "the greater concessions a confessional group makes to individual judgement, the less it dominates lives, the less its cohesion and vitality" (p. 159) and therefore, "man seeks to learn and man kills himself because of the loss of cohesion in his religious society" (p. 169). It is critical to note that for Durkheim, it was excessive individualism that caused a decline in social integration. The Jews, for instance, were relatively highly educated, yet did not experience high rates of suicide. Durkheim argued that the general hostility that the Jews experienced forced them into tighter and more cohesive collectives. Although their pursuit of knowledge was high, their levels of integration were also high, contributing to their lower rates of suicide.

The effect of political movements and popular wars was also had similar protective effects against suicide. Durkheim (1951) argued that collective social movements created stronger integration in society because they engendered collective sentiments like patriotism and partisan fervor. Not only was the intensity of integration important, but greater numbers of bonds also increased social integration. Durkheim found that family was another collective that provided a source of integration. He explained that "domestic society, like religious society is a powerful counteragent against suicide. . . this immunity even increases with the density of the family, that is with the increase in the number of its elements" (p. 198). The greater the breadth and depth of an individual's bonds to collective society, therefore, protect them against suicide. Thus, Durkheim argued that excessive individualism prohibits strong social integration and causes suicides. Suicides of this type were classified as *Egoistic suicides*.

Although Durkheim (1951) noted that anomic and egoistic suicides likely share "kindred ties", he maintained that they were distinct types of suicides caused by distinct social causes. Hamlin and Brym (2006) took issue with this conceptual distinction. They argued that social integration and regulation are not independent social dimensions; individuals need to integrate in order to be regulated. Thus, Durkheim's mono-causal approach to identifying different forms of suicide was deficient because it was incapable of incorporating a variety of causes and therefore incapable of explaining mixed-types like anomic-egoistic suicides. To understand suicide, the authors argued that a multi-causal approach that considers different levels of society simultaneously is necessary (Hamlin & Brym, 2006). Considering the multitude of social

changes that Korea has experienced, interpreting multiple causes of suicides, for instance from both excessive levels of anomie and individualism, will enhance and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the rates of suicide in Korea.

THE 1997-1998 ECONOMIC CRISIS

In the late 1990s, several East and Southeast Asian countries experienced a major economic crisis. Korea was one of the countries most affected by the crisis; the economic and structural changes caused by the crisis were accordingly rapid and large (Chang, Gunnell, Sterne, Lu, & Cheng, 2009). Since the Korean War in 1950-1953, the Korean economy had experienced uninterrupted growth at unprecedented speeds that brought overall improvements to material conditions (Kim, Kim, Kawachi, & Cho, 2011). At the peak of the crisis, however, Korea experienced major economic declines: the GDP growth rate fell from 5-10 percent to -6.7 percent, the unemployment rate increased over 300 percent, household income declined 6.7 percent, and income inequality increased from a Gini coefficient of 0.298 to 0.358 between 1996 and 2000 (Khang, Lynch, & Kaplan, 2005). Although the economic crisis had major effects, the Korean economy did begin to show signs of recovery by 2001.

Due to the magnitude of the economic crisis, several researchers have investigated its impact on suicide rates in East/Southeast Asia broadly, and South Korea specifically (Chang et al., 2009). Indeed, the economic crisis is one of the most popularly cited influences on the suicide rates in Korea. These studies have found that the spike in suicide rates that peaked in 1998 (Figure 1) can largely be attributed to the effects of the economic crisis on unemployment rates, income inequality, poverty, and neo-liberal restructuring (Chang et al., 2009; Khang et al., 2005; Kim, Song, Yi, Chung, & Nam, 2004). Younger, particularly working age individuals seem to have been the most affected by the economic crisis, as evidenced by the steeper increase in suicide rates for young adults between 1997 to 2000 compared to the elderly (Khang et al., 2005). Lee and colleagues (2010) argued that the economic crisis significantly increased income inequality and social stratification, which has broken down the social fabric of the country by dividing the society along class lines. Based on the results of these studies, there is considerable evidence that the economic crisis of the late 1990s was associated with the spike in the Korean suicide rate.

Durkheim (1951) acknowledged that periods of economic crisis have an “aggravating effect” on suicide rates (p. 241). Yet, he argued suicides do not increase in times of economic crises simply because of increases in poverty, unemployment, nor from the general worsening of material well-being. If these were the causes of increases in suicide, then increases in economic prosperity should have the opposite effect. He found, however, that suicide rates increased when there were abrupt improvements in a country’s prosperity as well. Furthermore, he found that stable economic depression was not associated with high suicide rates. Based on his findings, he dismissed the notion that economic crises increased suicide due to an increase in poverty. Instead, he suggested that:

... it is because they are crises, that is, disturbances of the collective order. . . [w]henver serious readjustments take place in the social order, whether or not due to a sudden growth or to an unexpected catastrophe, men are more inclined to self-destruction (Durkheim, 1951, p. 246).

The economic crisis that Korea experienced in the late 1990s was accompanied by a variety of economic and structural changes that can be considered a disturbance to the equilibrium of the social order. Durkheim argued that in such circumstances of abrupt change, society is “momentarily” incapable of regulating the needs of individuals (p. 252).

Although the Korean economic crisis and the associated spike in suicides fit well with Durkheim’s theory, suicide rates actually began to increase nearly a decade *before* and continued to increase over a decade *after* the economic crisis. The economic crisis itself, although found to be associated with a spike in the suicide rate around 1998, cannot explain the broader increasing trend. Based on Durkheim’s theory, furthermore, suicide rates after an economic crisis were expected to decline due to the return to an equilibrium of the social order. Yet, suicide rates continued to increase in Korea for over a decade after the economic crisis. It is difficult to argue, then, that the rise in suicide rate associated with the temporary economic crisis subsequently fell because social regulation was re-established. Instead, it is likely that an equilibrium of social regulation has not been achieved since the early 1990s and the economic crisis, although significant, was only an aggravating factor for a relatively brief period of time. Explanations for the trends in suicide rates must, therefore, look to broader, more long-term causes.

Several studies have looked to a number of factors through a variety of perspectives in an attempt to identify other causes of the long-term increases in the Korean suicide. Researchers have explained variation in the suicide rate using factors like gender, age, education, family and marital structure, residential geography, civic participation, social support, and even seasonal temperature (Im et al., 2011; Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2011; Kim et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2009; Park & Lester, 2006; Park & Lester 2012; Park, Cho, & Moon, 2010; Ra & Cho, 2013). Although several studies have found evidence of specific causes of suicide, few attempts have been made to synthesize these findings into an overall theoretical explanation of the high and increasing rates of suicides in Korea. One notable exception is a recent chapter by Ben Park (2012) where he introduced a cohort theory of “collective cultural ambivalence” to explain the broad patterns of suicide in Korea. Drawing from Durkheim’s (1951) original theory of suicide, the following discussion assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Park’s (2012) attempt to understand the high rates of suicide in contemporary Korea.

CONFUCIAN COLLECTIVISM AND WESTERN INDIVIDUALISM

Park (2012) argued that culture is a dynamic force that changes in response to the socioeconomic, politico-historical, and even technological milieu of society. As culture evolves, people are forced to adapt to and adopt new values while discarding traditional ones. Drawing from Durkheim’s concept of anomie, Park suggested that the blurring of old and new values caused “collective cultural ambivalence”. In Korea, he argued there has been a blurring of values and norms as traditional Confucian culture has given way to western individualism. These cultural changes have increased the assimilation of western values, which have eroded the strength of individual bonds and ties to social groups. Park contended that this has produced an anomic pathological social condition in Korea where individuals are unclear as to the normative expectations regarding aspirations, expectations, and behaviours.

Several other researchers have also invoked the country-level shift from traditional collectivism to western individualism in Korea as an important influence on the rising rates of suicide (e.g. Im et al., 2011; Kwon, Chun, & Cho, 2009; Lee, Hong, & Espelage, 2010). These studies have generally suggested that traditional Korean culture, which was based on Confucian values, emphasized the collective over the individual. Since

the industrialization of Korea in the 1960s, there has been greater emphasis placed on western values that have promoted individualistic cultural values. These studies, however, generally have raised the notion of a cultural transition without much elaboration. Furthermore, they argued that the cultural change itself is the important driving force. Park, however, extended on this area of work by arguing that suicides are not simply due to a change from one set of values to another. He instead drew on Durkheim’s concept of anomie and argued that the simultaneous and competing existence of Confucian collectivism and western individualism is causing pathological cultural ambivalence and provoking suicides. Although Park’s efforts are one of the few attempts to engage with and apply Durkheim’s theory to understand the Korean case, the notion of cultural ambivalence conflates Durkheim’s conceptual distinctions between social regulation/integration and anomic/egoistic suicides. Park’s concept of cultural ambivalence, therefore, requires further scrutiny and clarification.

To recall, Durkheim (1951) argued that insufficient social integration is evidenced by greater values of individualism. When individuals are afflicted with excessive individualism, the strength of ties to and participation in social groups are weakened and, therefore, so are traditional sources of meaning. This lack of meaning causes egoistic suicides. Insufficient levels of social regulation, on the other hand, promote suicide due to the lack of clear constraints and proscriptions on acceptable desires, goals, and passions. Individuals are sensitive to these regulations and if they are weak or unclear, individuals are prone to anomic suicides.

Although Durkheim (1951) explained that anomic conditions may be “normal” in the spheres of trade and industry, social deregulation is generally prone to occur in times of rapid macro-economic and social change. During the past few decades, Korea has experienced major and relatively rapid changes to the material conditions of life, which have made traditional collectivist norms seem irrelevant in the public sphere of modern society (Kim et al., 2011). In place of collectivism, western individualism has been embraced by much of the Korean society (Park, 2012). The erosion of traditional Confucianism is similar to Durkheim’s account of the erosion of the power of religion, government, and occupational guilds in regulating the appetites of individuals. This erosion, Durkheim argued, was because of deregulated economic progress in the spheres of trade and industry. The decline of social regulation over the pursuit of economic progress fueled the pursuit of

economic gain. The success of this program further fueled the excitement and greed of trade and industry to seek further gain. This state of excitement caused by a lack of social regulation creates unlimited goals and aspirations. Durkheim proposed, therefore, that setbacks for individuals with unregulated aspirations can be even worse than for similar setbacks experienced by regulated individuals. Durkheim would predict that the rapid macro-economic changes experienced by Korea in only a few decades would create a state of anomie and, therefore, higher rates of anomic suicide nationally.

Hamlin and Brym (2006) pointed out that Durkheim's etiological classification of suicide types did not permit the existence of "mixed-types" of suicide that are caused, for instance, by high levels of social regulation and low levels of social integration. On the other hand, his morphological classification did allow for mixed-types of suicides; however, Durkheim did not explain how social forces create mixed-type suicides, instead assuming they result from individual dispositions and psychological states alone (Hamlin & Brym, 2006). To correct this deficiency, Hamlin and Brym (2006) argued that cultural values are important influences on individual psychological states that can provide the causal link between the social and the individual. In the case of Korea, Park's (2012) concept of cultural ambivalence offers a further elaboration of the importance of culture within the mechanism between rapid macro-economic change, anomie, and suicide. He suggested that the simultaneous existence of collectivistic and individualistic values creates anomic conditions that promote suicide.

It should be noted that Park's (2012) interpretation of Durkheim's concept of anomie differs from that of others (e.g., Graeff & Mehlkop, 2007). Some have interpreted Durkheim's (1951) concept of anomie to refer to a state of moral vacuum or where agreed-upon norms disappear in response to macro-social changes. To the contrary, Mestrovic and Lorenzo (2008) argued that the "normlessness" version of anomie that has been popularized was a product of the structural functionalists, notably Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton. They contended that Durkheim's original intent was to depict anomie as "a general societal condition of *dérèglement* or derangement" (p. 182). This Durkheimian conception of anomie referred to a state of confusion regarding existing norms—a state that was not simply based on confusion on the part of individuals, but was created by the institutional confusion of several layers of competing and contradictory norms. Considering the con-

flicting collectivistic and individualistic sets of norms outlined by Park, the original Durkheimian conception of anomie as a state of confusion is the appropriate interpretation to apply in the Korean context. Although collectivism and individualism refer to Durkheim's dimension of social integration, Park focused on the dimension of social regulation and the anomie that was caused by the simultaneous existence of two sets of cultural norms.

Park (2012) argued that Confucianism was an important cultural influence that bonded people together. Western values of individualism, however, have gained influence through the rapid integration of the global economic system, increases in consumerism, technological advancement, and improved material conditions. Confucian values, Park suggested, still exert a significant influence, particularly in the realm of interpersonal relationships and in the family. He noted that personal network systems derived from university alumni groups and military service are critical for contemporary Koreans. These groups are relics of the mutual-help and cooperation ethics of Confucianism that began over four centuries ago. In the past, these groups had the primary goal of integrating members of similar classes to help one another economically while creating strong interpersonal social bonds. Today, these groups serve similar purposes in terms of social integration and bonding, but to a lesser extent. Their primary function is to serve the individualistic purposes of economic gain for the individual by increasing the number and variety of connections. As these groups illustrate, collective and individualistic values exist simultaneously in contemporary Korea.

The contemporary Korean family has also incorporated collective and individualistic tendencies that present individuals with competing values. Traditional Confucianism emphasized familism, which prioritized the interests of the family over the individual. The traditional family, which also tended to be larger, provided a sense of identity through successive generations by creating a large and fundamental social unit that provided emotional functions and acted similarly to a community (Park, 2012). Park contended that the values of the Korean family have evolved from community-oriented, cooperative familism to modern, competitive familism. This form still places priority on the family over the individual, but uses the extended kinship network primarily for economic and instrumental purposes over identity functions. Individuals, therefore, are pressured to focus on individual economic gain for the benefit of their immediate family

unit rather than an extended kin network. As with the social groups discussed above, individuals are faced with both individualistic and collectivistic values in the domestic setting.

Based on these changes to interpersonal relationships, contemporary Koreans are faced with the values of Confucian collectivism and western individualism simultaneously. The competing and conflicting existence of two sets of values and normative expectations, Park argued, creates collective cultural ambivalence because individuals are forced to deal with the tensions between collectivism and individualism. This cultural ambivalence creates individual distress that increases anomie as well as the likelihood of suicide. Increasing cultural ambivalence has, therefore, likely contributed to the increasing suicide rates in Korea at the country level. As the first concerted attempt to understand suicide in contemporary Korea using a broader, sociological perspective, Park's notion of collective cultural ambivalence is an important and admirable step. More conceptual as well as empirical clarification, however, is necessary.

Implicitly, Park (2012) acknowledged that the increase of western individualism was associated with a decline in social integration. Durkheim would argue that this would promote egoistic suicides. Park does not, however, fully engage with the dimension of social integration, nor the possibility of egoistic suicides in Korea. Instead, he focused on the cultural conflicts that the simultaneous existence of collectivism and individualism created, which he argued resulted in an anomic state and anomic suicides. Egoistic suicides should, however, be common in Korea considering the strong influence of western individualism that Park outlined. This possibility can be further illuminated through closer examination of Park's findings. He presented the suicide rates of the elderly (60+), older adults (40-59), younger adults (25-29), and youth (15-24) for males and females as well as the total suicide rate from 1989 to 2009. Suicide rates for both genders and all age groups have generally increased, particularly after 2000. It is important to note, however, that gender differences in suicide rates have been decreasing for the last few decades (Kim et al., 2011). The narrowing of the gender gap, though, has not been uniformly experienced across all age groups. Younger women are especially more likely to commit suicide than ever before (Kwon et al., 2009). Park (2012) similarly found that the gender gap in suicide rates has been declining for successively younger age groups. In 2009, elderly men had a suicide rate 2.4 times the rate

of elderly women. For older adults, younger adults, and the youth, the male suicide rate was 2.7, 1.2, and 1.1 times higher than that of women, respectively.

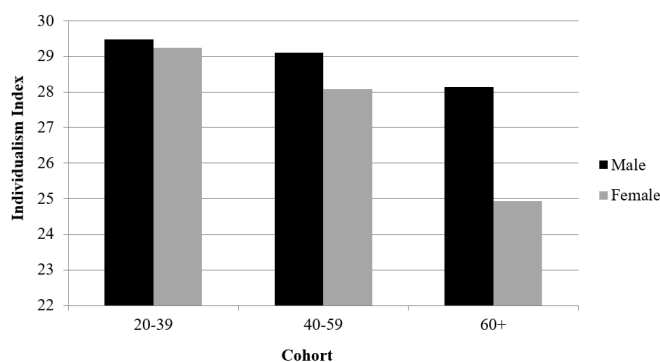
Although Park (2012) did not attempt to explain these between-group trends, integrating more of Durkheim's dimension of social integration into Park's concept of cultural ambivalence may provide a possible explanation. The effect of the increased salience of western individualism and the decline of traditional collectivism in Korea did not only produce anomie. In fact, increasing individualism and the decline of traditional collectivism is the very process argued by Durkheim to produce egoistic suicides. Why Park did not incorporate egoism into his concept of cultural ambivalence is uncertain, but it may be due to the rapid change between the two cultural sets of values. Park may have wanted to highlight the particularly anomic effects that the existence of two competing cultures have had on the rates of suicide in Korea. Regardless, examining the effects of increasing western individualism may further our understanding of the suicide rates in Korea.

INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM IN CONTEMPORARY KOREA

Several authors have noted the increased participation of women in the public sphere in Korea. They have contended that despite important forms of gender discrimination that persist in Korea, female labour force participation has been sharply increasing, particularly since the Korean War (Kim et al., 2011; Lee & Chung, 2010). Female educational attainment has also been increasing at an even greater rate than that of males (Lee et al., 2009). Increased female participation in the Korean public sphere is likely a product of increasing assimilation of western values of meritocracy, competition, individualism, and gender equality brought by the globalisation of Korea's economy (Milner et al., 2011; Park, 2012). These patterns suggest that younger generations (i.e., cohorts born since the 1970s), which have been exposed to greater globalisation, should have also assimilated western values of individualism to a greater extent. Since younger women are more likely to be individualistic than older women, they should also be more likely to engage with the public sphere and, consequently, exhibit suicide rates more like that of similarly aged men. Although this line of argument is consistent with the narrowing gender gap in suicide that Park (2012) found, it is important to assess whether younger Koreans, and younger Korean women

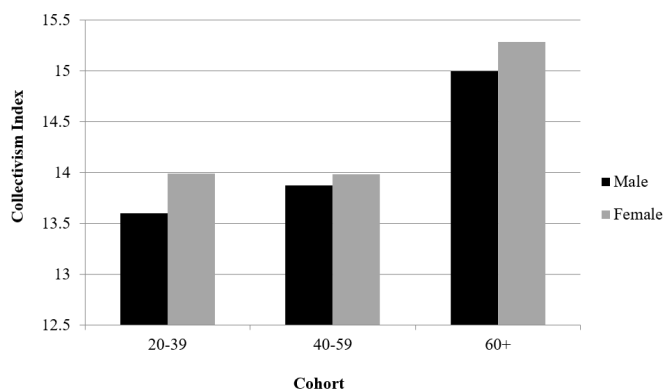
in particular, actually hold more individualistic values. Drawing from the fifth wave of the World Values Survey (2014) collected in Korea during 2005 ($n=1200$), I constructed individualism and collectivism indices to assess whether the salience of these two sets of values differed between older and younger Korean men and women.¹ The results of this effort are presented below in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2: Individualism Index, by Cohort, by Sex, Korea, 2005



Source: World Values Survey (2014)

Figure 3: Collectivism Index, by Cohort, by Sex, Korea, 2005



Source: World Values Survey (2014)

Individualistic values are highest among the youngest age group (20-39) and decrease in successively older age groups. This pattern was statistically significant for the whole sample as well as for men and women separately. Furthermore, collectivist values were lowest for the youngest cohort and increased in successively older age groups. Like individualism,

these trends were statistically significant for the whole sample as well as when men and women were analyzed separately. Importantly, in the youngest cohorts, men and women did not differ significantly in either individualism nor collectivism. Significant gender differences in individualism were, however, found in older adults and the elderly. These patterns suggest that in older cohorts, men were significantly more individualistic than women while in younger cohorts, there is little gender variation in individualistic or collectivistic values. Considering the greater gender differences in suicide rates of older age-groups, the gender differences in individualistic values suggest that many of the male suicides contributing to their higher rates may be a result of egoistic, rather than anomic, suicides. In younger cohorts, where individualistic values have been assimilated at higher levels across both genders, the narrowing gender gap suggests that women are becoming more like men, at least in terms of their proclivity for suicide.

The age and gender patterns of individualism from the World Values Survey (2014) and the suicide rate patterns presented by Park (2012) suggest that more attention to Durkheim's dimension of social integration can contribute to the understanding of suicide in Korea. Durkheim (1951) argued that excessive individualism causes less social integration, egoism, and egoistic suicides. In Korea, when men and women differed most in terms of individualistic values (older Koreans), they also differed the most in terms of suicide rates. When individualism between men and women were most similar (younger Koreans), their suicide rates were also similar. These patterns suggest that revisiting Durkheim's concepts of social integration and egoistic suicides could help to further explain the high rates of suicide in Korea, particularly by examining differences in rates of suicide by age and gender.

An important correction to Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide is necessary before applying it to understand the suicide rates in Korea. In Durkheim's original formulation, he assumed that women were asocial beings and, therefore, cannot suffer the ill consequences of social maladies. Durkheim found that marriage was *negatively* related to the suicide rate of men while divorce was *positively* related to suicide. Conversely, he found the opposite pattern for women; marriage

¹Please refer to the Appendix for a description of the construction of the individualism and collectivism indices. I attempted to maintain comparability with Park's (2012) age groupings, but the South Korean World Values Survey's lower age cut-off was 20. I, therefore, collapsed Park's two youngest groups (ages 15-24 and 25-39) into a single group (age 20-39).

and divorce were *positively* and *negatively* related to the suicide rate of women, respectively. To explain this pattern, Durkheim argued that men and women had conflicting and contrasting sexual interests. Due to their social nature, marriage confers sexual regulation for men that prevents sexual anomie, limiting potentially unfulfilled desires and preventing suicides. For asocial women, however, marriage represents unnecessary social regulation of their already biologically regulated sexuality. The Durkheimian explanation of the differential experiences of men and women is, however, based on the assumption of the asocial nature of women. It is due to this “natural” predisposition of women that they are both confined to the private sphere and immune to social forces. Although the female rate of suicide in Korea has generally been far lower than that of men, they have varied in tandem over time. Explaining suicide rates using social forces, then, presupposes that the female suicide rate is also susceptible to the influence of broader social forces. Durkheim’s assumption regarding the asocial nature of women, therefore, represents another deficiency that needs to be compartmentalized.

Lehmann (1995) offered a compromise to overcome this deficiency. She argued that in *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim theorized that the natural evolution of society engenders the social division of labour due to the pressure of resource scarcity produced by population growth. As the functional specialization of individuals and the structural differentiation of society progresses, it creates functional interdependence and organic social solidarity. These social forces act upon “social individuals” in society. Here, individuals refers to men in the public social sphere. Lehmann argued, however, that we can correct this error by subsuming or assimilating women into the Durkheimian category of the generic social individual. This correction offers the ability to overcome Durkheim’s untenable assumption of the asocial nature of women, and permits social forces to be used to understand the suicide rates of women.

Taking Lehmann’s (1995) suggestion and subsuming both Korean men and women into a category of generic social individuals, important modifications to Durkheim’s (1951) theory can be elaborated using the case of Korea. When Durkheim encountered gender differences in the effects of social forces on suicide rates, he explained the patterns using his assumptions of the social and asocial natures of men and women. In the case of Korea, it seems that the gender differences in rates of suicide can more aptly be explained by exam-

ining individualistic values and participation in the public sphere. Men, who have always participated in the Korean public sphere, have also been susceptible to the influence of social forces. In Korea, it has been argued that these social forces have increased social currents of both anomie and egoism and, therefore, anomic and egoistic suicides. Regardless of the level of female participation in the public sphere, female suicide rates have also changed in tandem with that of males. Furthermore, as female participation in the public sphere has increased in the last few generations, they have also assimilated more individualistic ideals, which may have contributed to their increasing rates of suicide that are also becoming more like that of men. Overall, Korean women’s sensitivity to the effects of social forces on suicides appears to demonstrate that women are as social as men, which runs contrary to Durkheim’s original observations (Lehmann, 1995).

CONCLUSION

Korea’s high and increasing rate of suicide has drawn the attention of many scholars, but this area of research has largely been dominated by medical, psychological, and economic perspectives. Although Durkheim’s (1951) study of suicide has been described as “one of the two or three most important and influential works ever published in the social sciences”, explanations of Korea’s suicide rate have lacked sociological perspectives (Lester, 1994, p. xi). One notable exception is Park’s (2012) theory of collective “cultural ambivalence”, which explains that during recent periods of rapid change, Korean society has been unable to keep pace and maintain social norms. At the same time, macro-level changes in Korea have created an anomic state because of the existence of two simultaneous but competing sets of values: western individualism and traditional collectivism. By explicitly engaging with Durkheim’s concepts of social integration and egoistic suicide, the range of effects of the coexistence of individualism and collectivism in Korea can be further elucidated. As I have argued in this paper, increasing levels of individualism and decreasing levels of collectivism not only contribute to collective cultural ambivalence and anomic suicides, but likely also create excessive levels of egoism and egoistic suicides. I suggest, therefore, that revisiting Durkheim’s original formulations in *Suicide* (1951), can further our understanding of suicide in contemporary Korea and, most optimistically, help reduce it.

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APPENDIX

Using the Korean sample of the fifth wave of the World Values Survey (2014), which was collected in 2005 ($n = 1200$), an individualism index and a collectivism index were constructed by examining prior literature that has attempted to measure these constructs and using similar approaches (Inglehart & Oyserman, 2004; Steele & Lynch, 2013; Welzel, 2009). The codebook was also reviewed to find other questions that may have tapped the concepts of individualism and collectivism. The individualism index was constructed by summing individual responses (higher scores refer to higher individualism) to the following questions:

QUESTION	MIN	MAX
We need larger income differences as incentives for individual effort	1	10
Competition is good. It stimulates people to work hard and develop new ideas	1	10
People shape their fate themselves	1	10
I feel that I have a great deal of choice and control over the way your life turns out	1	10
It is important to me to think up new ideas and be creative; to do things my own way	1	6
I seek to be myself rather than to follow others	1	4
I decide my goals in life by myself	1	4
INDIVIDUALISM INDEX	1	54

The collectivism index was constructed by summing individual responses (higher scores refer to higher collectivism) to the following questions:

QUESTION	MIN	MAX
The government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for	1	10
Children should be encouraged to learn tolerance and respect for other people	1	2
Children should be encouraged to learn unselfishness	1	2
Children should be encouraged to learn obedience	1	2
It is important to me to help the people nearby; to care for their well-being	1	6
Tradition is important to me; to follow the customs handed down by one's religion or family	1	6
One of my main goals in life has been to make my parents proud	1	4
I make a lot of effort to live up to what my friends expect	1	4
COLLECTIVISM INDEX	1	36