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A matter of life and death:
A Durkheimian analysis of South Korea’s suicide epidemic

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (Research)

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2014
To the thousands of South Koreans who take their own lives every year
and the loved ones they leave behind
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Dr Gyu-Jin Hwang for his willingness to take on the supervision of this project. His gentle guidance and constructive feedback have been invaluable.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my family for their unwavering patience, support, and encouragement throughout the preparation of this thesis.
Suicide has become a major social and public health issue in South Korea. The country has experienced a threefold increase in the suicide rate since the 1990s and now has the highest rate in the OECD. The contemporary study of suicide is dominated by the medical and behavioural sciences, and the phenomenon is largely framed and understood as an individual-level issue. However, rapid social change in South Korea since the mid-twentieth century suggests that the problem has social origins. Neoliberal structural reforms in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis have transformed South Korean society, resulting in a considerable rise in social inequality. This study adopts a sociological perspective to suicide in South Korea. Following Durkheim’s (1952 [1897]) two-dimensional theoretical framework, the study examines the origins of the present suicide epidemic. The findings suggest that Durkheim’s sociological theory of suicide provides a plausible explanation for the unprecedented increase in South Korea’s suicide rate. The study argues that, in addition to traditional clinical approaches to suicide prevention, a macro-social approach is required to reduce South Korea’s suicide rate over the long term.
1 INTRODUCTION

Suicide is attracting increasing attention as a major social and public health issue in South Korea (hereafter, Korea). The Northeast Asian nation, home to 50 million people, holds two dubious honours among Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries: (i) the highest suicide rate; and (ii) the greatest increase in the suicide rate (OECD, 2014a). Korea’s suicide rate was 28.1 per 100,000 population in 2012, representing a threefold increase on the figure twenty years earlier (see Figure 1.1) and the loss of over 14,000 lives (Statistics Korea, 2013a). The situation in Korea contrasts starkly with an overall decline in suicide rates among OECD members during the same period (OECD, 2014a). Such a marked discrepancy warrants closer investigation. The obvious questions are: Why has suicide increased so dramatically in Korea in a relatively short period of time? What can be done to reduce the suicide rate?

The contemporary study of suicide is dominated by the medical and behavioural sciences, and the phenomenon is largely framed and understood as an individual-level problem, despite the acknowledgement of social and contextual factors. Consequently, suicide prevention models tend to focus on high-risk individuals and neglect social and ecological determinants (Wray, Colen, & Pescosolido, 2011). Numerous studies have been conducted on various aspects of Korea’s suicide epidemic, but few have analysed the problem in the context of the nation’s remarkable social transition since the mid-twentieth century. This thesis adopts a sociological approach to the study of suicide in Korea. Although a number of studies have suggested that Durkheim’s (1952 [1897]) sociological theory of suicide is helpful in understanding the increase in Korea (e.g., Park, B. C. B., 2013; Park & Lester, 2008), no study, to the best of my knowledge, has systematically applied the complete workings of Durkheim’s two-dimensional theoretical framework.

The purpose of this thesis is to utilise Durkheim’s dual concepts of social integration and social regulation to examine the social origins of Korea’s suicide epidemic. If Durkheim’s theory can be shown to be applicable to the Korean context, this has important implications for the development of effective suicide prevention strategies.
1.1 Scope of the problem: Epidemiology of suicide in Korea

In contrast to neighbouring Japan, suicide was a foreign concept in Korea until relatively recently. While the suicide rate began to increase gradually in the early 1990s, it surged in 1998 as the immediate effects of the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis rippled across society (Chang, Gunnell, Sterne, Lu, & Cheng, 2009; Khang, Lynch, & Kaplan, 2005). As Figure 1.1 indicates, the rate subsequently dropped as the nation’s economy began to recover, but by 2003 it had surpassed the peak observed during the height of the crisis and continued to climb. The suicide rate surged again in 2009, suggesting a link to the global financial crisis of 2008 (Chan et al., 2014). It dropped back slightly in 2012 – only the second fall since 2000. Since 2007, suicide has been the fourth leading cause of death in Korea (Statistics Korea, 2013a), and therefore represents a significant public health issue. Moreover, the official figures may be conservative given that suicides are often underreported in countries such as Korea where a strong social stigma is attached to the act (OECD, 2014a; Park, B. C. B., 2013). The unabated increase in Korea, despite economic recovery, indicates that the present suicide epidemic is not a temporary phenomenon, and the explanation for its origins is likely to be considerably more complex than economic conditions alone.

![Figure 1.1 Suicide rate (per 100,000), Korea, 1992-2012. Source: Statistics Korea (2013a).]

Suicide rates are typically separated by age and gender to give a clearer indication of the subgroups of the population at greatest risk. Suicide is the leading cause of death in the 10-19,
20-29, and 30-39 age groups and the second leading cause of death in the 40-49 and 50-59 age groups (Statistics Korea, 2013b). As Figure 1.2 indicates, the gender-standardised suicide rate in Korea increases with age, with the steepest rise occurring over the age of 70 (Statistics Korea, 2013b). Conflicting trends have been observed in absolute\(^1\) and proportional\(^2\) suicide rates according to age. Between 1986 and 2005 – a period characterised by economic development, crisis, and recovery – the absolute rate showed greatest increase in the over-65 category, while the proportional rate showed greatest increase among those under 45 (Kwon, Chun, & Cho, 2009). Numerous studies have attempted to identify age-specific risk factors. Suicide is the leading cause of death in Korean youth, with significant increases observed in both genders between 2001 and 2009 (Park, Im, & Ratcliff, 2014). Academic stress (Ahn & Baek, 2013), peer victimisation, internet addiction, and relationship problems are among the most prevalent risk factors reported (Lee, Hong, & Espelage, 2010). In older age groups, studies have tended to focus on the relationship between socio-demographic indicators and suicide. Low socioeconomic status has been strongly associated with suicide (Kim, Jung-Choi, Jun, & Kawachi, 2010), with the unmarried and those residing in rural areas at greater risk (Kim et al., 2006). The provinces of Gangwon and Chungcheong-nam recorded the highest suicide rates in 2011 (Statistics Korea, 2012). The elderly represent the most disadvantaged and vulnerable members of contemporary Korean society and have experienced the greatest increase and highest rates of suicide (Kim et al., 2010; Park, B. C. B., 2013). Chronic ill-health, financial hardship, and the weakening support of the extended family have been identified as major contributing factors in this age category. While the elderly exhibit the highest rates of suicide, this should not mask the fact that the largest number of annual suicide deaths occurs in the 40-59 age group, accounting for nearly 40 percent of all suicides in 2012 (Statistics Korea, 2013b). Clearly, suicide in Korea is not concentrated in a single subgroup of the population. Rather, it is a broader, society-wide problem.

\(^1\) Number of suicide deaths per 100,000 population  
\(^2\) Number of suicide deaths as a proportion of total mortality
One of the most well-established indicators of suicide risk is gender. Korean data is consistent with the widely observed phenomenon that rates of completed suicide are higher in men (OECD, 2013b), while non-fatal suicide attempts are higher in women (Hur et al., 2008). However, the age-standardised ratio of male to female suicides dropped from 2.3 to 1.8 between 2000 and 2009, highlighting a narrowing gender gap (Ahn, Park, Ha, Choi, & Hong, 2012). While a ratio between 1 and 2 is not uncommon in Asia, it is generally between 3 and 4 in Western countries (Chen, Wu, Yousuf, & Yip, 2012). The convergence in Korea is particularly evident in adolescents (1.17) and young adults (1.55) (Statistics Korea, 2013b). In 2005 and 2007, the female suicide rate for the 15-24 age group surpassed that of males (Park, B. C. B., 2013). Korea not only has the highest rate of completed suicide among women in OECD nations, but the figure is almost twice that of the next highest country, Japan (OECD, 2013b). Thus, self-destructive behaviour in the Korean female population is an increasing concern and warrants further investigation.

Suicide is inextricably linked with mental health, and research suggests that, globally, over 90 percent of cases occur in the context of a diagnosable psychiatric disorder. Mood disorders, principally major depressive disorder and bipolar disorder, comprise the largest single diagnostic group and are associated with approximately 60 percent of suicides (Mann et al., 2005). Mental illness carries considerable social stigma in Korea, and reluctance to seek treatment is an important public health issue (Cho et al., 2009). However, as Kim et al. (2010) point out, “it is implausible that clinical depression is a cause of suicide epidemic in a short
time at a population level” (p. 1260). They suggest that depression is likely to be an intermediary outcome of psychosocial distress linked to social conditions. It is therefore imperative that an examination of Korea’s suicide epidemic focus not on the psychopathological characteristics of individuals, but broader social explanations.

1.2 The social dimension of suicide

Suicide is a multifaceted and tragic phenomenon of human behaviour which, despite considerable scholarly attention, remains poorly understood (Nock, Borges, & Ono, 2012). There is general consensus on the basic definition of suicide as an intentional self-inflicted act resulting in death (Maris, Berman, & Silverman, 2000); however, the aetiology of suicide is extremely complex and widely debated. There is no one reason why an individual chooses to end his or her life. Suicide is best understood as the result of the convergence of multiple predisposing and precipitating risk factors in the absence of multiple protective factors (Vaillant & Blumenthal, 1990). In her “overlap model” (see Figure 1.3), Blumenthal (1990) conceptualised suicide risk as the intersection of five overlapping domains, namely psychiatric disorder, biological factors, family history and genetics, personality traits, and psychosocial milieu (life events, environmental factors and medical illness). The model posits that the presence of contributory factors from each of the domains increases the risk of suicide.

![Overlap model for suicide risk (five domains). Source: Blumenthal (1990, p. 693).](image)

**Figure 1.3** Overlap model for suicide risk (five domains). Source: Blumenthal (1990, p. 693).
Due to its multidimensional nature, suicide is viewed differently according to the disciplinary lens applied. Psychologist and “father of contemporary suicidology” (Leenaars, 1993), Edwin Shneidman, viewed suicide primarily as a product of what he referred to as psychache or intolerable psychological pain. According to Shneidman (1993), “in the distillation of each suicidal event, its essential element is a psychological one; that is to say, each suicidal drama occurs in the mind of a unique individual” (p. 3). From a psychiatric perspective, the aetiology of suicide is in the brain. Given the prevalence of psychiatric disorders in suicide victims, suicide is seen as a result of neurobiological abnormalities, particularly of the serotonergic system (Mann, 1998). Although now dominated by various disciplines allied to medicine, the study of suicide has a longstanding association with sociology (Fincham, Langer, Scourfield, & Shiner, 2011), and it is widely acknowledged that social characteristics exert a strong influence on the occurrence of self-destructive behaviour. Unlike psychological and psychiatric perspectives, the sociological study of suicide contends that the phenomenon cannot be explained solely in terms of individual psychopathology. Sociology does not attempt to account for all aspects of suicide; rather, it is concerned with the distribution and underlying social causation. Sociologists are primarily interested in aggregate-level suicide rates and the macro-social structures that influence them.

Without question, the most influential sociological perspective on suicide is that of nineteenth-century French social theorist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Durkheim (1952) rejected psychological and psychiatric explanations as ‘reductionist’ and argued that the ostensibly individual act of suicide must be understood within its broader social context. Arguing that the aetiology of suicide is to be found in the social structure in which the individual exists, Durkheim posited that the suicide rate of a given population is determined by two social conditions – integration and regulation. According to Durkheim, decreasing levels of social integration and social regulation erode the bond between individual and society, rendering life less meaningful and increasing the risk of suicide. Durkheim proposed a fourfold typology of suicide based on the polar extremes of his two causal variables, but was primarily concerned with the types arising from insufficient integration and regulation, which he referred to as egoistic and anomie suicide, respectively. It is important to appreciate the socio-historical context in which Durkheim was writing. In the late 1800s, Europe was well on its way to entering the modern era, a process which had seen society largely transform from agrarian to industrial, rural to urban, and collective to individualistic. Traditional forms of social organisation (e.g., the extended family, religious affiliation) were
deteriorating and new ones (e.g., the workplace) emerging. Such social transition came at considerable individual cost, and suicide rates were increasing (Pescosolido, 1994). Durkheim sought to explain the phenomenon by examining the relationship between the individual and the moral order of society. Thus, Durkheim’s theory is particularly relevant to societies undergoing change. Despite its flaws and the passage of time, Durkheim’s theory of suicide has remained remarkably influential in contemporary sociological research and provides a powerful conceptual framework within which to analyse the present-day suicide epidemic in Korea.

1.3 Social change in Korea

The modernisation process began in Korea much later than Europe – some sixty years after Durkheim’s work – but in a highly condensed manner. Following a turbulent period of colonisation, war, and military rule, Korea witnessed social change on an internationally unprecedented scale as it rapidly industrialised and urbanised in the latter half of the twentieth century – the so-called compressed modernity (Chang, 1999, 2010). In the three to four decades between the 1960s and 1990s, Korean society underwent the same stages of modernisation that Western societies had taken one or two centuries to pass through. The concept of compressed modernity has been used to explain various aspects and problems unique to Korean society (Chang, 2010). Courtesy of its Confucian heritage, Korea has a long history of family-centeredness, and the family was instrumental in the process of compressed modernity. Many macrostructural aspects of Korean society are explicable only by taking the family into account (Chang, 1997).

In more recent years, the impact of globalisation has presented new challenges. The 1997 Asian financial crisis and the neoliberal structural reforms that followed have had a profound effect on Korean society. So great has been their influence, in fact, that it has been suggested that Korea’s post-crisis transformation has been even swifter than the country’s miraculous industrial transformation (Lim & Jang, 2006). It is widely acknowledged that the neoliberal response to the crisis has left various detrimental effects on Korean society (e.g., Kim, 2004; Yang, 2009). Strong labour market duality has polarised society, exacerbating income inequality and increasing poverty (Shin, 2013), while the country’s underdeveloped social security system is proving relatively ineffective in responding to economic and social change (Phillips & Jung, 2013). Moreover, rising economic inequality is feeding into the country’s
ultra-competitive and increasingly costly educational system, threatening opportunities for class mobility (Chang, 2010). The social conditions prevailing in Korean society must be seen as being intrinsically related to population health (Link & Phelan, 1995).

1.4 Research questions

Applying the dual dimensions of Durkheim’s (1952) theoretical framework to analyse the social origins of Korea’s suicide epidemic, this thesis considers the following research questions:

(i) Does Durkheim’s theory adequately explain the increase in Korea’s suicide rate?
(ii) If so, what are the implications for the prevention of suicide?

1.5 Structure of thesis

Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on the sociology of suicide and recent social change in Korea. Following a detailed analysis of Durkheim’s theoretical framework, it examines the impact of rapid social change in Korea since the mid-twentieth century. Chapter 3 focuses on Durkheim’s concept of social integration in the Korean context. Taking the family as the unit of analysis, it examines the impact of modernisation and globalisation on Korean society and the implications for suicide risk in terms of increasing egoism. Chapter 4 focuses on Durkheim’s second and oft neglected dimension of social regulation by examining the presence of chronic anomie in contemporary Korean social structure. Chapter 5 considers the collision of egoistic and anomic ‘currents’ as an explanation for the surge in suicides witnessed since the late 1990s and discusses the need for macro-level strategies to lower the suicide rate. Chapter 6 briefly discusses limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section reviews the literature on Durkheim’s theory of suicide, while the second examines the literature relevant to the Korean context, in particular that relating to the impact of social change arising from the processes of modernisation and globalisation.

2.2 Durkheim’s theory of suicide

The study of the factors driving human beings to self-destruction has fascinated scholars for centuries. Although the investigation of the social dimension of suicide was not original with him, Durkheim was the first to propose a coherent sociological theory of suicide, one that has irrefutably dominated the field ever since. His seminal work on the subject, *Le Suicide* – regarded by many as one of the most important and influential works of social science ever written (e.g., Merton, 1968) – was first published in French in 1897, but surprisingly not released in English until 1951. Pescosolido (1994) notes that “as a piece of theoretical, methodological and empirical work [, *Le Suicide*] continues to hold court among sociologists” and that “its overall elegance and theoretical power are stunning and durable” (p. 265). *Le Suicide* represented more than a study of the social causation of suicide, it was part of Durkheim’s broader agenda to establish sociology as an independent academic discipline. In line with this aim, the work was among the first modern examples of consistent and organised use of statistical method in social investigation (Simpson, 1952).

Central to Durkheim’s arguments in *Le Suicide* are his views on individualism. The concept of individualism – the process of political, social, and economic separation of individuals from larger social wholes – had become a major issue by the time of the French Revolution (1789-1799). While French society had endorsed the concept of the individual at the political level, there was growing sentiment that the progressive focus on the individual jeopardised the greater collective interests of society and posed a threat to aggregate social maintenance. Individualism represented autonomy, freedom, and lack of restraint from collective social rules and was viewed by many as a social and political crisis. Like other social thinkers of the period, Durkheim was opposed to utilitarian doctrine which placed the individual at the
centre of social life. In attacking utilitarianism, Durkheim sought to demonstrate the superiority of society over the individual (Morrison, 1995).

Like others before him, Durkheim noted that each society has its own characteristic suicide rate (the “social suicide rate”) that exhibits considerable consistency and regularity over time. Moreover, trends in rates are not random fluctuations, but patterned movements. Durkheim was interested in identifying the forces behind the increase in national suicide rates in nineteenth-century Europe coincident with modernisation. His thesis was premised on the fact that there is an essential distinction between the explanation of variation in social suicide rates and the aetiology of individual cases of suicide (Giddens, 1971b). While acknowledging the relevance of psychopathology in individual cases, Durkheim considered such explanations as ‘reductionist’ and began his study by rejecting various non-social factors – namely, psychopathology, physical environment, and imitation (or social contagion) – in the explanation of the variation in the statistical distribution of suicide. The suicide rate, Durkheim argued, is a social phenomenon and therefore cannot be understood in terms of individual motives. The causes of variation in social suicide rates are to be found “in the nature of the societies themselves” (1952, p. 299). A society’s inclination towards suicide is “a function of the ‘collective conscience’ or the shared beliefs and sentiments that bind people together and from which each individual conscience draws its moral sustenance” (Fincham et al., 2011, p. 10). The mechanisms of the collective conscience are therefore related to social solidarity and the social bond. An increase in the suicide rate is symptomatic of the weakening of the collective conscience and the growth of individualism. Durkheim (1952) argued:

The social suicide-rate can be explained only sociologically. At any given moment the moral constitution of society establishes the contingent of voluntary deaths. There is, therefore, for each people a collective force of a definite amount of energy, impelling men to self-destruction. The victim’s acts which at first seem to express only his personal temperament are really the supplement and prolongation of a social condition which they express externally. (p. 299)

For Durkheim then, the suicide rate is “a ‘collective representation’ that is admittedly founded in individual suicides, but at the same time transcends them” (Maris et al., 2000, p. 242). The suicide rate is therefore “not simply a sum of independent units, a collective total,
but is itself a new fact *sui generis*, with its own unity, individuality and consequently its own nature” (Durkheim, 1952, p. 46).

Durkheim conceived of man as having a dual nature, or *homo duplex*, composed of physical (individual) and social parts. The physical component consists of a biological base with insatiable desires, upon which the social component is superimposed. There is perpetual tension between the two, with the social component keeping the physical in check. The (ongoing) socialisation process determines the relation of the physical to the social for any individual or group of individuals (Hynes, 1975). Durkheim believed that socialisation constrains individuals in two ways: (i) by attaching them to socially-given purposes and ideals (integration); and (ii) by moderating their (potentially infinite) desires and aspirations (regulation) (Lukes, 1973; Taylor, 1982). This conceptualisation led to Durkheim’s two independent variables, *social integration* and *social regulation*, which together determine the suicide rate of a given population. Perhaps the greatest criticism of Durkheim’s work, however, lies in his failure to adequately define these two abstract notions. The absence of a precise operational definition has attracted criticism from empiricists who claim the theory cannot be defensibly tested (e.g., Gibbs, 1994), while the lack of a clear distinction between the two concepts has frustrated theorists (e.g., Pope, 1975).

Durkheim proposed a fourfold typology of suicide characterised by insufficiency or excess in the two causal variables. He referred to insufficient levels of integration and regulation as *egoism* and *anomie*, respectively, while excessive integration and regulation were referred to as *altruism* and *fatalism*, respectively. Durkheim argued that the suicide rate would be high in societies where such conditions exist, but noted that altruism and fatalism are rare in modern society. In fact, Durkheim’s discussion of fatalism was relegated to a footnote and appears to have been included purely in the interests of completeness. Although Durkheim did not name them, *moderate* levels of both integration and regulation are considered optimal in protecting individuals from suicidal impulses (Pescosolido, 1994). Hynes (1975) argued that Durkheim’s typology of suicide derived from his conception of man as *homo duplex*. As Taylor (1994) notes:

The key concept of integration, rather than being some empiricist notion of the amount or strength of the “social support” an individual can draw on, is the theoretical concept of harmony between the antagonistic poles of [man’s *homo duplex* nature]. Therefore, the sources of psychological distress that give rise … to suicide, come either from
excessive repression of the individual nature by the social (altruism, fatalism), or from the social nature being eclipsed by the individual (egoism, anomie). (p. 4)

If we accept the quadratic relationship between Durkheim’s two causal variables and the social suicide rate (Pescosolido, 1994), we can conceptualise Durkheim’s theory in the form of an elliptic paraboloid (see Figure 2.1). With social integration on the $x$-axis, social regulation on the $y$-axis, and the social suicide rate – the dependent variable – on the $z$-axis, the vertex of the paraboloid represents optimal quantities of integration and regulation and thus the suicide rate is at its minimum value, $C$ (the national suicide rate is never zero). As integration and regulation increase (greater positive magnitude) and decrease (greater negative magnitude), the suicide rate increases correspondingly. Durkheim was primarily concerned with the types of suicide prevalent in modern industrial society; therefore, the region of the Cartesian plane representing the intersection of egoism and anomie will be the focus of this thesis.

![Figure 2.1 A three-dimensional interpretation of Durkheim’s theory of suicide.](image)

Industrialisation was viewed as the primary source of egoistic and anomic currents in society. The growth of industrial society had seen the economy dominate other social institutions, placing self-interest and economic gain over collective interests. The modernisation process had advanced individualism, accelerated social fragmentation, and weakened the bonds between individual and society (Morrison, 1995). The resulting social structure gave rise to Durkheim’s two main types of suicide occurring in modern society: egoistic suicide and anomie suicide.
Social integration refers to the strength of the social bonds attaching individuals to society. The concept of integration encapsulates the sense of social belonging and inclusion, and the emotional support that stems from social ties. Well-integrated groups are characterised by stable, durable, and cohesive social ties. Individuals in such groups are well-supported, particularly during times of personal crisis, thereby reducing their vulnerability to suicide. In modern terms, social integration has been variously conceptualised as social isolation, social cohesion, and social support (Wray et al., 2011). After a detailed statistical analysis of the role of integration in religious, domestic (family), and political domains, Durkheim famously concluded that “suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual forms a part” (1952, p. 209). According to Taylor (1982), the statement is “the closest sociology has come to generating a [scientific] law-like proposition” (p. 27). Of Durkheim’s two explanatory variables, social integration has been widely interpreted by commentators as the predominant one. As Besnard (2000b) observes, “[Le Suicide] was received selectively, with marked preference given to Durkheim’s theory of integration” (p. 116).

Durkheim used the term egoism to refer to a state of insufficient social integration. Egoism may be described as the process by which individuals become detached from society. It results from the weakening of the social fabric and is characterised by excessive self-reflection and a withdrawal from the outside world. When egoism occurs, individual goals replace the common goals and purposes of society, and individuals rely more on themselves and withdraw their allegiance from collective life (Morrison, 1995). Egoism, according to Durkheim, is largely an unavoidable consequence of the growth of moral individualism in modern societies. Where society places primary value on individual freedom and self-fulfilment, an increase in egoism is inevitable (Giddens, 1971b). When individuals become detached from society, they are less restrained from the suicidal impulse. In the case of egoistic suicide, “the bond attaching man to life relaxes because that attaching him to society is itself slack” (Durkheim, 1952, pp. 214-215).

Durkheim devoted a majority of his statistical analysis of social integration to the domain of the family. Noting that suicide rates are higher in the unmarried (single, divorced, and widowed) than the married of the same age group, he contended that marriage exercises a protective influence against egoism. However, the relative immunity of the married, he
argued, is due to the larger family group (spouse and children) rather than the conjugal relation itself. Durkheim noted further, the greater the density (size) of the family, the greater the protection it provides. In other words, the presence of children is the key to the protection offered by the family environment. Thus, the degree of integration of a group is related to the number of social ties which bind individuals together (Giddens, 1971b).

2.2.2 Social regulation and anomic suicide

Durkheim’s second causal variable, social regulation, refers to the moderation of individuals’ desires and aspirations by social norms and values. By defining what is appropriate and legitimate, social norms govern the objectives and motivations of individuals, thereby restricting their (potentially limitless) aspirations (Giddens, 1971a). Durkheim believed that a discrepancy between individuals’ aspirations and the means for attaining them led to disappointment, frustration, and ultimately feelings of failure and despair. Human beings, he noted, have a greater sense of wellbeing when “[their] needs are sufficiently proportioned to [their] means” (1952, p. 246). As human nature is incapable of setting limits on desires, society alone must impose material restraint and external regulation on the individual. Durkheim used the term *anomie* to refer to the condition where the regulatory powers imposed by society are weakened. Anomie is a complex concept. Willis (1982) argues that discussion of anomie by Durkheimian scholars reflects a “sizeable disagreement” and that there is a “confusion and vagueness inherent in most interpretations of anomie” (p. 106). Besnard (1988), an authority on anomie, defines it as:

A situation characterized by indeterminate goals and unlimited aspirations, the disorientation or vertigo created by confrontation with an excessive widening of the horizons of the possible, in a context of expansion or increasing upward mobility. It is loss in the infinity of desires. (p. 93)

Historically, social institutions such as religion had set moral restraints on individual appetites. The development of industrial society, however, resulted in a general loosening of social restraint as economic life displaced the regulatory functions of other social institutions. Restraint and limitation of desire were incompatible with modern economic competition, as capitalism had demonstrated that desires were attainable with sufficient motivation and effort (Morrison, 1995). Durkheim identified rapid economic fluctuation as the primary source of
anomie. Whenever an abrupt shift in social stability occurs, society is unable to exercise its regulatory function and thus cannot act as a source of restraint on individual desires. Such circumstances place individuals in a situation where the norms that had previously regulated their activity are no longer appropriate to their changed conditions. Durkheim drew on the family as another source of anomie, arguing that divorce disrupts the regulative influence imposed on the individual by marriage. This is particularly true of men, he claimed, who benefit more from the regulatory effects of marriage than women. In societies where divorce is legally sanctioned and commonplace, the regulatory function of marriage is substantially weakened.

Durkheim made a distinction between acute or transitory anomie, and chronic or institutionalised anomie (Besnard, 1988). The former refers to an abrupt change in social stability, such as economic crisis, which has a short-term effect on the suicide rate but is not a constant factor. Durkheim was more concerned with the latter, however, which he viewed as an omnipresent condition of modern society due, as Taylor (1982) puts it, to “social existence … no longer [being] ruled by custom and tradition, and individuals [being] increasingly placed into situations of competition with one another” (p. 15). As individuals demand more from life, they are more likely to suffer from an imbalance between their goals and the means for achieving them. The resultant dissatisfaction is conducive to an increase in the suicidal impulse. Besnard (1988) argues that anomie lies at the heart of the value system of modern society; it is embedded in its institutions (e.g., divorce) and functioning (e.g., competition in an ever expanding market). Moreover, he notes that chronic anomie is not a result of the provisional absence of social norms, but rather the presence in modern society of “the doctrine of constant progress” or the necessity for a person to continually advance towards an indefinite goal (p. 92).

Despite the perceived secondary status of social regulation in his theory of suicide, the concept of anomie is one of Durkheim’s most significant and enduring contributions to scholarship. Forty years after the publication of Durkheim’s theory in Le Suicide, American sociologist Robert Merton (1938, 1968) developed the notion of goal-means discrepancy to explain the structural sources of deviant behaviour. Following Merton’s seminal work, anomie theory dominated the criminology literature in the mid-twentieth century. Although it subsequently entered a period of decline, theoretical and empirical work on anomie continues to the present day. As Passas (1997) notes, “the anomie tradition is best conceived as an evolving research program or paradigm that keeps generating theoretical elaborations,
research puzzles, and policy ideas by drawing attention to the consequences of structural problems” (p. 62).

2.2.2.1 Discrepancy between cultural goals and institutional means

Merton’s elaboration of anomie provides a particularly useful insight into the sources of chronic anomie in contemporary Korean society. Merton (1968) made a clear analytical distinction between the cultural structure and social structure in which individuals exist. He defined cultural structure as the “organized set of normative values governing behaviour which is common to members of a designated society or group,” while social structure refers to the “organized set of social relationships in which members of the society or group are variously implicated” (p. 216). The mechanisms linking these structures are social institutions (Rosenfeld & Messner, 1997). Within the respective structures are two salient elements which Merton referred to as “cultural goals” and “institutional norms.” Cultural, or culturally defined, goals are those goals regarded as “legitimate objectives for all or for diversely located members of the society,” which “comprise a frame of aspirational reference” (pp. 186-187). Every social group, Merton noted, “invariably couples its cultural objectives with regulations, rooted in the mores or institutions, of allowable procedures for moving towards these objectives” (p. 187). An effective equilibrium between the cultural and social structures can be maintained provided that individuals conforming to both constraints derive satisfaction from both the product (attainment of the cultural goal) and the process. In the case of the process, “continuing satisfactions must derive from sheer participation in a competitive order as well as from eclipsing one’s competitors” (p. 188).

While noting that cultural goals and institutionalised norms “operate jointly to shape prevailing practices” (p. 187), Merton argued that the cultural emphasis placed upon certain goals varies independently of the degree of emphasis upon institutionalised means. At times, a society may place a heavy or even exclusive emphasis on the value of a particular (typically success-oriented) goal with relatively little regard to the institutionally prescribed means of striving for that goal. In this case, the cultural and social structures are said to be “malintegrated” and work at odds with one another. Following Durkheim, Merton hypothesised that “an acute disjunction between the cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accord with them” produces anomie (p. 216). Merton’s principal argument was that such social conditions exert a pressure (or strain)
that drives certain individuals to engage in deviant behaviour. This phenomenon has been referred to as strain theory by later scholars. Thus, while both Durkheim and Merton were concerned with a breakdown in social regulation, Merton focused on society’s encouragement of lofty goals in a context where prevailing norms act as a barrier to their attainment, while Durkheim primarily concentrated on society’s failure to regulate individual goals (Agnew, 1997).

Merton argued that his native America exemplified a “malintegrated” society. Noting the equation of financial wealth with success, Merton used “monetary success” as an example of a goal firmly entrenched in contemporary American culture. Moreover, he pointed out the indefiniteness of its attainment, “in the American Dream there is no final stopping point” (p. 190). He stressed, however, that financial success is just one of the possible goals valued by society, and that the strain towards anomie may be produced by any goal in which society places a high premium on its achievement. Merton argued that achievement of such dominant cultural goals is a socially defined expectation that is deemed appropriate for all members of society, irrespective of individual circumstances. Every social system, Merton noted, provides opportunities for success, but access to these opportunities is strongly influenced by an individual’s “status set,” which includes such attributes as age, gender, education, occupation, place of residence, etc. Clearly, attainment of success-oriented goals may be readily possible for certain members of the social strata, yet difficult or impossible for others.

Inherent in the process of pursuing culturally prescribed goals are the pressure of competition and the possibility of failure, both of which are likely to intensify in societies such as Korea with high population density. Merton noted the pressure on individuals to succeed, and that success or failure is likely to be viewed as the result of personal characteristics. Failure, he pointed out, represents defeat on two levels: the defeat of being left behind in the race for success, and the defeat of not possessing the qualities required for success. A “psychic toll” is exacted on those who do not measure up (p. 223). Although Merton was interested in the relationship between anomie and deviant behaviour in general rather than suicide per se, his theory on the imbalance between culturally defined goals and institutionalised means is consistent with Durkheim’s notion of anomic suicide, and the two theories may be considered to be complementary (Agnew, 1997). Suicide may be viewed as a type of deviant behaviour whereby the frustration and despair in failing to achieve culturally prescribed goals is directed towards the self.
2.2.3 Relationship between integration and regulation

Clearly there is some degree of overlap in the mechanisms promoting integration and regulation. For example, Durkheim posited that the institution of marriage exerts both an integrative and regulative influence on the individual. Conversely, it seems logical that if an individual is insufficiently integrated in society, then (s)he is unlikely to be subject to society’s regulatory effects. While acknowledging similarities between egoistic (insufficient integration) and anomic (insufficient regulation) suicide, Durkheim insisted they are independent of each other:

Both spring from society’s insufficient presence in individuals. But the sphere of its absence is not the same in both cases. In egoistic suicide it is deficient in truly collective activity, thus depriving the latter of object and meaning. In anomic suicide, society’s influence is lacking in the basically individual passions, thus leaving them without a check-rein … We may offer society everything social in us, and still be unable to control our desires; one may live in an anomic state without being egoistic, and vice versa. (1952, p. 258)

After establishing his aetiological typology of suicide, Durkheim examined the manifestation of the various types in individuals. It is here that he more readily acknowledged the “peculiar affinity” between egoism and anomie, noting:

They are usually merely two different aspects of one social state; thus it is not surprising that they should be found in the same individual. It is, indeed, almost inevitable that the egoist should have some tendency to non-regulation; for, since he is detached from society, it has not sufficient hold upon him to regulate him. (1952, p. 288)

When manifested in individuals, Durkheim explained, the aetiological types often combine with one another, giving rise to composite or mixed varieties, such as ego-anomic.

The relationship between Durkheim’s causal variables is perhaps the most vigorously debated aspect of his theory. Scholars have pointed out Durkheim’s failure to provide an adequate theoretical distinction between the two concepts, but have not agreed on a viable alternate explanation (Pope, 1975). Noting the similarities between the two, several commentators have contended that the concepts are indistinguishable. Johnson (1965) argued that anomie is, by definition, one characteristic of egoism. In other words, where individuals are not sufficiently integrated in society, they cannot be sufficiently regulated by society. After
eliminating altruism and fatalism from Durkheim’s theory, Johnson posited that anomie and egoism not only coincide empirically, but are identical. He consequently simplified the two-dimensional theory to a single cause: “the higher the level of egoism (anomie) prevailing in a society, group, or social condition, the higher the suicide rate” (p. 886). However, Johnson’s reformulation has been criticised as overly simplistic in that it “rob[s] the theory of much of its explanatory power” (Taylor, 1982, p. 16).

Giddens (1971a) proposed distinguishing the concepts of egoism and anomie by referring to egoism as the degree of social integration and structural anomie as the degree of normative integration within a social system. While acknowledging the limited extent of empirical variation between the two dimensions, Giddens insisted that “a low degree of social integration … is not incompatible with a high degree of normative integration, nor vice versa” (p. 100). Noting Durkheim’s use of religion, family, and the polity as indices of integration, Hynes (1975) suggested that integration relates to states of society, whereas regulation relates to changes in states of society, such as rapid economic fluctuation and divorce. Hynes noted further: “whether anomie and egoism are empirically distinct as social states, and whether their contribution to the total suicide rate are separable (analytically – there is never a pure type of suicide), are empirical questions” (p. 97).

2.2.4 Interaction of integration and regulation

For Durkheim, the suicide rate can be explained in terms of a ‘collective force’ made up of egoistic, anomic, and – to a lesser extent – altruistic and fatalistic currents running through society. Such currents are necessarily present in all societies, but it is the balance of these “suicidogenic currents” that determines the suicide rate of a society at any given time. When the polar opposite forces of Durkheim’s two causal variables are in a state of dynamic equilibrium, individuals are relatively protected from suicide. It is a change in strength of one or more of these forces, thereby upsetting the state of equilibrium, that is primary in the social causation of suicide (Taylor, 1982). Pescosolido (1994) conceptualised the interaction of Durkheim’s dual dimensions in the form of a topographical social safety net. With integration and regulation representing the length and breadth, the threads of the safety net are furthest apart at the extremes of egoism (low integration) and anomie (low regulation). When individuals exist in social structures with insufficient integration and/or regulation, they slip through the gaps in the net, and suicides may occur. The centre of the net represents a social
structure with optimal levels of integration and regulation, where individuals may be safely ‘caught’ and restrained from suicidal impulses.

Some commentators have noted that Durkheim never explicitly stated the cross-cutting nature of the dual dimensions of integration and regulation. Johnson (1965) pointed out that Durkheim “seldom locates a group on both dimensions at once” (p. 881), and argued that “each group must be given some approximate position on both dimensions if a determinate prediction [of their suicide rate] is to be generated” (p. 882). While this may be true, Johnson’s argument was based on categorising society by religious affiliation (Catholic versus Protestant), an index used by Durkheim to analyse integration only. By assuming that religious affiliation determines both the integrative and regulative properties of society, Johnson failed to consider the effects of, say, economic crisis (the principal source of acute anomie) on the regulatory framework, which is independent of a society’s integrative properties.

2.2.5 The macro-micro link

While his focus was firmly on the macro-level explanation of suicide, Durkheim recognised the need to link his macro typology to the individual level. After all, if individual suicides are to contribute to the suicide rate, the “suicidogenic currents” running through society must converge on the individual. The various currents, Durkheim argued, should therefore be followed “from their social origins to their individual manifestations” (1952, p. 277). It is here that Durkheim acknowledged the role of individual psychopathology, noting that there is “nothing which cannot serve as an occasion for suicide. It all depends on the intensity with which suicidogenic causes have affected the individual” (1952, p. 300). The difference between the suicidal and non-suicidal individual exposed to the same current must be due to their personal characteristics. Each victim of suicide gives the act a “personal stamp” which expresses their temperament and particular circumstances. It is the role of the psychologist and psychiatrist to explain the particular motives and circumstances which drive certain individuals to commit suicide when exposed to the suicidogenic currents (Giddens, 1971b).
2.2.6 Theoretical developments

Not surprisingly, Durkheim’s theory has been the subject of lively and ongoing debate. Various ambiguities and inconsistencies have hindered its interpretation, and several generations of sociologists have sought to test or reformulate the theory. American sociologist Jack Gibbs has been perhaps the most outspoken empiricist critic since first writing on the subject in 1957. Like others, Gibbs (1994) was critical of Durkheim’s failure to formulate an explicit definition of his key explanatory variables and claimed that their meanings are indistinguishable. Moreover, Gibbs argued that due to the absence of a measurement procedure, any statement referring to the quantity of the variables (such as “excessive” and “insufficient”) is conjecture. Gibbs maintained that the theory, as it stands, cannot be defensibly tested and was critical of sociologists who reported research findings as tests of the theory. To overcome the theory’s inadequacies, Gibbs proposed his own Durkheim-inspired theory of status integration (Gibbs & Martin, 1958, 1964). Status integration is an index constructed of age, gender, occupation, and marital status variables. The theory postulates that irresolvable conflict between social roles related to these variables is the key determining factor in suicide. Despite its empirical elegance, however, the model failed to gain widespread support.

Douglas (1967) took the criticism of Durkheim’s work one step further and questioned the very validity and reliability of the official statistics upon which Durkheim had based his analysis. In a major departure from the Durkheimian tradition, Douglas argued for a new sociological approach based on the subjective meanings of suicide to the social actors involved. Acknowledging variation in definitions of suicide among those responsible for determining its occurrence (e.g., coroners, medical examiners), Douglas argued that official suicide statistics are the product of complex social processes which render them “invalid” and “incomparable”. While Douglas’ work has been widely acknowledged as a significant contribution to the literature on the sociology of suicide, his ideas have not been developed to any significant extent.

In the early 1970s, David Phillips revisited Gabriel Tarde’s pre-Durkheim notion that suicide may be affected by imitation or social contagion. Durkheim had dismissed the effects of contagion in his discussion of “extra-social” factors, and prior to Phillips’ research, the topic was largely ignored. Phillips dubbed the phenomenon the ‘Werther effect,’ after the main character in a Goethe novel that had inspired numerous copycat suicides in late eighteenth-
century Europe. In his seminal study, Phillips (1974) detected a rise in the national suicide rate following the reporting of high-profile suicides on the front page of major US and UK newspapers. Further, he found the greater the publicity given, the greater the subsequent increase in suicides. In the past decade, Korea has witnessed an unprecedented number of suicide deaths by high-profile members of the community, including several well-known entertainment celebrities. With the ever increasing popularity of portable information and communication technologies – particularly in heavily ‘wired’ nations like Korea – the influence of contagion (mass media and otherwise) on suicide in contemporary society is likely to be markedly greater than in Durkheim’s day. Several recent studies in Korea suggest that there is a strong association between media reporting of high-profile suicides and subsequent rises in the suicide rate (Fu & Chan, 2013; Ji, Lee, Noh, & Yip, 2014; Kim et al., 2013), as well as exposure to suicide within close social networks and the suicidality of exposed females (Lee, Kim, & Shim, 2013). Stack (1994) points out that there is an abundance of evidence relating contagion to suicide and suggests that Durkheim’s dismissal of such a relationship likely represents his theory’s “weakest proposition” (p. 245). Stack contends that contagion must be incorporated into any reformulation of Durkheim’s theory. Although contagion has been shown to have a short-term effect on suicide rates, Durkheim regarded it as a “purely psychological phenomenon” (1952, p. 123). Given his insistence that psychological explanations of suicide are ‘reductionist’ and that his concern was with the social structural determinants, it seems appropriate that contagion does not belong in his theory.

In a more recent attempt to advance the sociological study of suicide, Pescosolido (1994) proposed the application of a social network theory framework. Honouring Durkheim’s legacy, she argued that such an approach “is consistent both with the central thrust of Durkheim’s work and its application to ‘postmodern’ society” (p. 266), thus “bringing Durkheim into the twenty-first century”. Pescosolido views the network approach as:

A set of basic concepts and ideas about how the centrality of social ties or interconnections among individuals both creates social structures and provides an understanding of the mechanisms through which these structures influence attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. (p. 266)
According to Pescosolido, the social network perspective addresses the failure of Durkheim’s theory to articulate the mechanism underlying the workings of social structural influence and therefore links micro-processes and macro-structures. She notes:

Proposing the social mechanism behind Durkheim’s general concepts of integration and regulation provides a more concrete hold on how to tailor old hypotheses to new sociocultural locations and to derive new propositions and hypotheses from Durkheim’s general theory … A network perspective offers a way to understand this general framework, providing most importantly, greater clarity and specificity to the meaning of integration and regulation and the viability of [states such as egoism and anomie]. (p. 267)

Despite the criticisms of Durkheim’s work and attempts to move beyond it, the majority of contemporary sociological research on suicide has broadly continued in the Durkheimian tradition. Danigelis and Pope (1979) point to a lack of cumulative theoretical development, backed up by Fincham et al. (2011), who note that “suicide studies have remained largely impervious to the ‘new’ approaches advocated by [authors such as Gibbs, Douglas, and Pescosolido,] and their programmes of research have remained largely undeveloped” (pp. 27-28). Pescosolido (1994) aptly sums up the situation:

Scores of studies, sociological and otherwise, have sought to theoretically refine or question [Durkheim’s theory’s] basic insights, but nothing has surfaced to replace or fundamentally discredit the broad scheme of the dual dimensions of integration and regulation in shedding light on the societal quota of suicides. (p. 265)

The most influential sociological perspective on suicide remains that developed by Durkheim. Given the parallels between the socio-historical context of Durkheim’s work and contemporary Korean society in terms of the modernisation process, it is appropriate that Durkheim’s theoretical framework should form the basis of a sociological examination of the present suicide epidemic in Korea.

2.2.7 Operationalization

The problem of operationalizing Durkheim’s theory has plagued the sociological study of suicide. There is no universally agreed-upon method of measuring the causal variables,
making consistent testing of the theory impossible. Researchers have tended to focus on whether or not the empirical bases of Durkheim’s analysis continue to hold. While acknowledging the usefulness of such empirical findings in drawing some durable conclusions, Pescosolido (1994) points out that studies of this nature represent select variables which operationalize only parts of Durkheim’s dual dimensions of social integration and social regulation. Perhaps reflecting Durkheim’s own depth of treatment, the theory of egoistic suicide (and therefore social integration) has received the most attention in contemporary literature (Breault, 1994). In fact, social integration has been perceived by many researchers as the key variable in explaining variations in suicide rates (Taylor, 1982).

Due to the absence of a precise operational definition, social integration has traditionally been operationalized by researchers using family-related demographic indicators such as marriage, divorce, and fertility rates. Divorce rates, in particular, have constituted the main operationalization of research on the family and suicide and have provided the strongest evidence to support Durkheim’s social integration theory (Breault, 1994; Stack, 1994). In a review of empirical sociological studies of suicide between 1980 and 1995, Stack (2000) found that over three quarters of the studies demonstrated a positive correlation between divorce and suicide. The finding was replicated by Park and Lester (2008) in their study of the Korean context for the period 1983 to 2003. In another study, Yip et al. (2012) compared suicide rates in five Pacific Rim populations, including Korea, in 2005-2006 and found that rates were consistently higher among the divorced. In addition, they found that divorced men in Japan and Korea were at significantly greater risk than divorced women, suggesting weaker coping mechanisms in the male populations of these countries. However, Besnard (2000a) argues that researchers have “almost uniformly misunderstood” Durkheim’s notion of the effect of divorce on suicide (p. 133). Besnard claims that rather than attempting to establish any direct relation between divorce and suicide, Durkheim was interested in the effect of divorce on the relationship between marriage and suicide.

While statistical correlation studies have yielded some support for aspects of Durkheim’s theory in contemporary Korean society, they do little to improve our understanding of the underlying causation of the increase in suicides in this sociocultural context. To achieve this, we must have an understanding of the unique social characteristics pertaining to Korea.
2.3 Impact of social change in Korea

2.3.1 Confucian legacy

The ancient Chinese ideology of Confucianism is the philosophical foundation of Korean culture, and it is impossible to understand contemporary Korean society without some knowledge of Confucianism and its role in the nation’s heritage. For centuries, Confucianism has exerted both a profound and pervasive influence on Korean society. While its origins in Korea date back nearly two thousand years, Confucianism (more precisely, neo-Confucianism) was adopted as the official state orthodoxy of the Joseon (Yi) dynasty (1392-1910). Hitherto, Buddhism had been recognised as the state religion; however, its practices had become corrupt during the late Goryeo dynasty (918-1392), and the religion had lost its philosophical appeal (Park & Cho, 1995). Chang (2010) points out that Joseon scholars “excelled even Chinese scholars in revitalizing and refining old Confucian philosophy into a comprehensive set of norms, laws, and customs for prescribing political rule and social relations” (p. 54). The Joseon dynasty is widely acknowledged as the most Confucianized of any dynasty, Chinese and foreign (Tu, 1998). Tu (1998) notes, “since the fifteenth century when the aristocracy (yangban) defined itself as the carrier of Confucian values, the penetration of Confucian persuasion in court politics and in elite culture has been unprecedented” (p. 30). To this day, Korea is recognised as the most heavily Confucian-influenced society in East Asia (Koh, 1996).

Confucianism has been conceived as both a religion and an ideology (Park & Cho, 1995). While the religious element of Confucianism is no longer widely observed, the ideological element is still clearly visible in Korean culture (Lew, Choi, & Wang, 2011). As a value system, the primary purpose of Confucianism was to establish and maintain social harmony through human relations. The Confucian code of ethics for human behaviour and interaction is based on five primary relationships – ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, and friend-friend – which distinguish individual roles and behavioural expectations in society. With the exception of the equal relationship between friends, the principles governing these relationships are hierarchical in nature (Lett, 1998). According to Confucianism, individuals are not created equal and are defined in terms of vertical relationships to others based on age, gender, and status differences (Shim, Kim, & Martin, 2008). The Confucian approach to relationships is based on interdependence rather than independence, and is thus the foundation of the collectivist nature of Korean society. The
degree to which the notion of hierarchy is ingrained in Korean culture may be evidenced in the national language. Through the use of an intricate system of honorific linguistic markers, social hierarchy is reinforced in every speech act. It is not possible to make a single utterance in Korean without taking into account the vertical relationship(s) that exist between speaker, interlocutor(s), and referent(s), and even the relationship between subject and object referents (Yoon, 2004).

Confucianism posits the family as the fundamental unit of society. In a Confucian patriarchal family, the family as an entity takes precedence over its individual members. The central familial relationship is not that between husband and wife, but rather that between parent and child, particularly between father and son. Relationships between family members are hierarchical and characterised by benevolence, authority, and obedience (Park & Cho, 1995). A critical component of the parent-child relationship is the notion of filial piety, which stresses the debt of gratitude owed by offspring to their parents. Filial piety consists of demonstrating respect and affection for one’s parents, making sacrifices and fulfilling filial responsibilities, reciprocating support received from parents, and harmonising family relations centred around parents (Sung, 1998). So central to Confucianism is filial piety, that it is widely regarded as the cardinal virtue and the guiding principle of human living.

The legacy of Confucian culture on Korean society has been viewed in both positive and negative terms (Kihl, 2004). On the one hand, the phenomenal economic growth of Korea during the period of modernisation has often been credited to such Confucian values as the importance of social harmony, deference to societal or group interests, respect for authority, and emphasis on self-cultivation and education. On the other hand, Confucianism has been blamed for the loss of Korea’s independence and sovereignty to the Japanese, and for the failure of the country to modernise at the turn of the twentieth century (Kihl, 2004). More recently, the economic crisis of 1997 has highlighted the downside of time-honoured Confucian values. For example, emphasis on group interests was blamed for suppressing individual creativity, while respect for authority resulted in the inability to question superiors as well as blind reverence for and pursuit of esteemed titles. Emphasis on family led to nepotism or factionalism, while the importance of personal relationships bred cronyism and unhealthy school and regional ties (Kim, 2004).
2.3.2 Modernisation

At the conclusion of the Korean War in 1953, Korea was a divided, war-ravaged, and poverty-stricken nation with minimal infrastructure and few natural resources. The country was faced with the harsh reality of a complete political and economic, not to mention physical and emotional, rebuild. What transpired over the next three to four decades has been described as a developmental miracle – the so-called ‘miracle on the Han River.’ In the course of less than forty years, Korea achieved modernity – a process which had taken upwards of two centuries in the West. Under a state-directed, export-driven development strategy, the country transformed from poor agrarian to advanced industrial society at a rate arguably unequalled in human history. One of the standout features of Korea’s modernisation was the egalitarian nature of growth. Sustained economic growth was accompanied by a relatively low level of income inequality compared to other developing and emerging economies (OECD, 2013d). This shared growth was due, at least in part, to an emphasis on providing universal access to primary and secondary education. A critical element of Korea’s developmental miracle was the populace’s zeal for education and desire for upward social mobility, legacies of its Confucian heritage (Seth, 2002).

Industrialisation and urban migration of this scope and pace entail enormous social change, however, and the nation’s remarkable economic growth was achieved at a social cost. Under the strategy of “growth first, distribution later,” and by exploiting traditional Confucian norms of familial support, the state was able to place the burden of social welfare almost entirely on the family. Chang (2010) argues that it has been the family, above all, that has maintained social continuity and provided support and protection to the individual. He notes the critical role of the family in twentieth-century Korea:

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\text{During the tumultuous processes of colonization, war, military rule and industrialization, [Koreans] could not turn to the state or local communities for material, physical, or psychological protection. Instead, they have coped with various crises, explored new opportunities, and maintained social identities only through familial support and protection. (p. 130)}
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Despite the turmoil of rapid modernisation and the burden of almost exclusive welfare provision, the Korean family remained remarkably robust. Although there were structural changes resulting from a drastic decline in fertility and an increasing tendency towards nucleation, traditional neo-Confucian norms and values were largely upheld (Chang, 1997).
The modernisation process in Europe, though far more prolonged, had been associated with a rise in suicide rates (Durkheim, 1952), whereas the rate in Korea remained relatively stable at low levels during the most turbulent years of transition. It seems likely that this can be attributed to the strength of Confucian-influenced familial bonds acting as a protective factor against suicidal impulses.

2.3.3 Globalisation and the 1997 Asian financial crisis

The resilience of Koreans against macro-political, economic, and social change has its limits, however, and the social side effects of the nation’s developmental miracle have become increasingly apparent in more recent years. The 1997 Asian financial crisis was a watershed and the catalyst for the most disturbing demographic changes in the nation’s history. Decades of phenomenal economic growth came to an abrupt halt, and the country witnessed bankruptcy and unemployment on an unprecedented scale. So desperate was Korea’s financial situation, that a humiliating bailout by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was required to avoid a national economic collapse. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the crisis, Chang (1999) pointed out the severe costs and risks associated with the nation’s rapid ascent from agrarian backwater to economic powerhouse, noting “what [Koreans] have built up in such a hurry turns out to be a highly collapse-prone economic, political and social system” (p. 31). Due to the developmental state’s heavy reliance on the family for the provision of social welfare, the country lacked even a basic social safety net at the time of the economic crisis. Chang criticized the haphazard, economy-centred approach to development at the expense of basic social citizenship rights and posed the question of whether Koreans can continue to be resilient under such adverse social conditions after the burst of the economic bubble. He noted, “the social torments of the recent economic crisis are particularly grave because the state is totally unprepared for massive unemployment and poverty” (p. 46).

Under the conditions of the IMF bailout, major neoliberal structural reforms were initiated by the new Kim Dae-Jung administration. Perhaps the most serious and immediate consequence for the average citizen was a restructure of the labour market in favour of greater flexibility. This was accompanied by a marked deterioration in employment conditions, including a substantial rise in the number of so-called ‘non-regular’ workers, who suffer from extreme discrimination in terms of employment security, remuneration, and benefits, compared to ‘regular’ workers (Kim, 2004; Shin, 2013). This polarisation of the workforce has resulted in
rising income inequality and relative poverty in post-crisis Korea. Chang (2012) points to an increasing tendency of “social and personal withdrawal” as a result of widespread disenfranchisement in the wake of the post-crisis neoliberal reforms (p. 40). He argues that a deep sense of political, economic, and social hopelessness has forced Koreans to pursue various exit strategies, including exit from the country (e.g., out-migration, transnational gireogi families), exit from the family (e.g., delayed marriage, divorce, reduced fertility), and the most extreme example, exit from existence (i.e., suicide). Referring to the phenomenon of family exit as defamiliation, Chang lays the blame on a “functional overload” of the Korean family, brought on by various onerous roles and responsibilities arising from a complex interplay of conflicting family ideologies (Confucian, instrumental, affectionate, and individualistic) prevailing in contemporary Korean society. While compressed modernity is largely responsible for the simultaneous exposure of the family to these diverse ideologies, the overload has been strongly aggravated by the neoliberal reforms following the economic crisis. Noting that “stress and fatigue are endemic in the family life of almost every South Korean” (2010, p. 133), Chang claims that psychological burden has forced many Koreans to seek means of reducing their family commitments and obligations. As evidence of this, Chang points to disturbing post-crisis demographic trends, including significant increases in delayed marriage and divorce, and a further decline in fertility. As with the modernity process itself, the familial crisis has unfolded at an alarming rate, and the cumulative effects of the various tendencies of defamiliation are contributing to a serious demographic crisis.

The functional overload of the family has had a particularly detrimental impact on women. Chang and Song (2010) note that the competing ideologies inherent in virtually every Korean family have “a common attribute of emphasizing women’s functionally dominant but socially subordinate role in family life” (p. 545). They claim that it is the resultant pressure placed on women as the traditional cornerstone of Korean family life which has fuelled the tendency of defamiliation, noting:

[The] increasingly prevalent phenomena of marriage deferral and avoidance combined with extremely low fertility rates and increasing childlessness as well as high divorce rates are much more critically propelled by women than their male counterparts. (p. 546)

Yet, despite this apparent display of individualisation, Chang and Song claim that women do so reluctantly. They point out that “in most cases, South Korean women try to reduce,
postpone or remold the effective scope of family life because they intend to cling to it rather than desert it” (p. 546).

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the literature relating to Durkheim’s theory of suicide and the impact of social change in Korea arising from the processes of modernisation and globalisation. Given the paradigmatic influence of Durkheim’s theory in the sociology of suicide and the parallels between the socio-historical context of twentieth-century Korea and that of Durkheim’s work (nineteenth-century Europe) in terms of social change, this chapter has argued that Durkheim’s theory is an appropriate conceptual tool for analysing the increase in Korea’s suicide rate.
3 SOCIAL INTEGRATION

3.1 Introduction

Durkheim devoted a considerable proportion of his study to the types of suicide arising from insufficient (egoistic) and excessive (altruistic) social integration. Of his two explanatory variables, social integration has been widely interpreted as the predominant (Besnard, 2000b). Noting that altruistic suicide is rare in modern industrial society, Durkheim was primarily concerned with egoistic suicide, or suicide arising from “excessive individualism”. Breault (1994) observes that:

Durkheim makes the fewest errors, is the least ambiguous and develops the most original and extensive theory when he discusses egoistic suicide. Note that egoistic suicide is the first theory discussed in Le Suicide, and it takes up more space than the other three theories combined. (p. 13)

Durkheim believed that industrialisation and urbanisation were responsible for an increase in egoistic currents in society. He used the term egoism to embody the weakening of the social bonds which attach individuals to collective life. Religious, familial, and political groups counteract egoism as they are well integrated and constitute strong links to society. As such, Durkheim based his statistical analysis of social integration on these three key social institutions. In the discussion of social integration in the Korean context, there are convincing reasons to suggest that the family should be our unit of analysis. Firstly, of the three social institutions analysed by Durkheim, the family featured most prominently, and several scholars have suggested that marital-familial status is the central variable in Durkheim’s work (Besnard, 2000a; Danigelis & Pope, 1979). Secondly, family data has provided the most consistent and durable empirical support for his theory of social integration (Danigelis & Pope, 1979; Stack, 2000). Finally, courtesy of a strong Confucian heritage, the family is the most basic unit of Korean society. An understanding of the relationship between the family and social structural conditions is fundamental to the explanation of social trends in Korea (Chang, 1997).

The family is unquestionably Korea’s most sacred institution. As a society deeply rooted in Confucian ideology, Koreans have long held the view that family cohesion and continuity are the foundations for sustaining the community and state (Park & Cho, 1995). The family has traditionally played a central role in social control and social support. Universal norms
regarding marriage, procreation, and filial piety have been at the core of Korean family values. While many traditional values remained largely intact throughout the period of compressed modernity, the sheer pace of social change was responsible for laying the foundations for an assault on the family that would follow in the era of globalisation. The 1997 economic crisis and subsequent neoliberal reforms acted as a catalyst for what some scholars are referring to as a “family crisis” (Chang, 2010). What was previously the principal source of identity and strength has become a source of burden and stress, and Koreans are avoiding family obligations in increasing numbers. The place of time-honoured Confucian values is being seriously challenged, and the family’s role in the maintenance of social integration is becoming increasingly obscure. This chapter examines the effects of post-crisis neoliberalism on the Korean family and the implications for suicide risk in terms of Durkheim’s notion of weakening social integration.

3.2 Impact of the 1997 Asian financial crisis on the family

3.2.1 Neoliberal reforms and the flexible labour market

The economic crisis of late 1997 was a watershed in modern Korean history. While the crisis itself was relatively short-lived, its legacy has extended well beyond the economic sphere, permeating every corner of Korean society (Kim, 2004). Under the conditions of the IMF bailout, the new Kim Dae-Jung administration (elected in December 1997) began implementing major structural reforms involving the labour market, financial market, public sector, and corporate governance (Shin, 2013). Although neoliberalism was adopted as the basic ideology of the previous Kim Young-Sam administration (1993-1997), it reached new heights in the wake of the crisis. The most notable ramification for the working- and middle-class population was the restructuring of the labour market in favour of flexibility.

Prior to the crisis, the Korean employment system was characterised by long-term, stable employment and recognition of seniority (Yang, 2009). According to Koo (2007), “individuals who were hired by a large company at a young age were expected to stay with the company until they reached retirement age … and could expect their wages to increase steadily based on seniority rather than on a merit-based, invidious evaluation system” (p. 6). However, in the aftermath of the crisis, employment conditions suffered a serious deterioration as employers sought greater flexibility in adjusting the size and composition of
their workforce as a means of reducing costs to remain competitive in the increasingly globalised market. The shift towards greater flexibility has seen a proliferation of precarious or ‘non-regular’ employment, including contractual, part-time, and casual work. Companies have replaced regular workers with non-regular and hired primarily non-regular workers to new positions (Shin, 2013). In 2012, Korea’s unemployment rate of 3.3 percent was the equal lowest in the OECD (OECD, 2013b), but the figure deceptively masks the rapid growth in non-regular employment.

A lack of consensus on the precise definition of the term ‘non-regular worker’ has made it difficult to obtain consistent figures on the true size of the non-regular workforce, and statistics vary considerably according to the definition used. Government agencies report relatively low rates, whereas labour institutes report much higher figures. Following a revised definition of the term adopted in 2002, the Korea Labor Institute reported a steep increase in the proportion of precarious workers from 27.4 percent in 2002 to 37 percent in 2004, with the figure stabilising at approximately 35 percent by the late 2000s (Shin, 2013). This may be a conservative estimate, however, as other organisations suggest much higher proportions, even to the extent that non-regular workers account for a slight majority of the workforce (Chang, 2012). Chang (2012) notes that for those newly recruited since the economic crisis, immediate, regular employment is a rarity.

In addition to the unstable nature of their employment, non-regular workers suffer considerable discrimination in terms of remuneration and benefits in comparison to their regularly employed counterparts. In many cases, non-regular workers perform the same tasks and work the same number of hours as regular workers, yet their salaries are substantially lower, and the disparity between wages of non-regular and regular workers has been increasing. In 2002, the average monthly wage of non-regular workers relative to that of regular workers was 67.1 percent, but by 2011 the figure had dropped to 56.4 percent (Shin, 2013). Thus, there has been a continual deterioration in the economic status of non-regular workers. Exacerbating the situation further is the fact that the majority of non-regular and self-employed workers are excluded from various public programs of social protection such as pensions and unemployment insurance (Shin, 2013). Consequently, non-regular workers are extremely vulnerable to economic uncertainty. Moreover, a lack of mobility between non-regular and regular employment means that many non-regular workers become trapped in a cycle of instability and vulnerability (OECD, 2012). In sum, non-regular workers and their
dependents suffer from severe material hardship, which has translated into increasing income inequality and relative poverty in post-crisis Korea.

3.2.2 State (over)reliance on the family and the plight of the elderly

One of the most critical elements of Korea’s remarkable transition to advanced industrial society has been the ability of the state to rely on the family for the provision of social welfare. Although the practice is common, to a certain extent, in all societies, successive administrations in Korea have managed to keep public expenditure on social welfare to an absolute minimum and far behind the country’s rate of modernisation. Despite marked progress since democratisation in the late 1980s, the Korean welfare state remains underdeveloped and dualistic in coverage (Yang, 2013). In 2012, gross public social expenditure accounted for only 9.3 percent of GDP, the second lowest rate in the OECD and less than half the OECD average of 21.9 percent (OECD, 2014a). Expenditure is concentrated in traditional social insurance programs such as pensions and healthcare, reflecting underdevelopment of programs that support families and employment (Yang, 2013). Furthermore, almost 60 percent of social spending is delivered in the form of services rather than cash transfers (OECD, 2013d).

The origins of the small welfare state in Korea are largely rooted in traditional Confucian notions of familial support. In line with the central role of family in social life and the Confucian virtue of filial piety, there has been a strong social and moral obligation for families to provide care and support from within. As Korea began to rapidly industrialise and urbanise, the state was able to exploit this age-old custom under its “growth first, distribution later” strategy (Chang, 1997). There was little public opposition to the approach as families were well accustomed to self-support, the state being expected to concentrate its resources on economic growth strategies for the benefit of the entire population (Chang, 2010). Consequently, the family remained responsible for the overwhelming majority of welfare provision. Noting that families in Western European countries once played a significant role in the provision of welfare, Yang (2013) argues that the influence of Confucianism on the small welfare state should not be overstated, however. Yang claims that it is more likely that “the relatively high level of welfare services provided by families may be an outcome, rather than a cause, of underdeveloped public welfare” (p. 460). In any case, Korea’s remarkably
rapid economic growth came at the critical cost of overburdening the family with almost exclusive welfare responsibility (Chang, 2010).

As political pressure mounted for progressive social and economic policies in the decade following democratisation, politicised conservative debate took place on family change, i.e., the transition from traditional extended family to nuclear family (Chang, 2010). It was argued that “the nuclear family failed to maintain such Confucian virtues as familial solidarity, filial piety, and self-sacrifice and thereby disrupted the harmonious and stable support relations among family members” (Chang, 2010, p. 52). Chang insists, however, that the nuclear family was a convenient scapegoat to deflect political pressure for a transition from conservative developmentalism to progressive welfarism. At the time of the economic crisis in late 1997 (ten years after democratisation), Korea still had only a very basic social security system in place and was completely unprepared for widespread unemployment and poverty (Chang, 1999). The detrimental impact of the crisis on household income made it increasingly difficult for families to provide the required level of support from within. The relative poverty rate³, based on market income, doubled between 1996 and 2008 (OECD, 2012). At 14.9 percent, Korea’s relative poverty rate is currently the eighth highest among OECD member nations (OECD, 2014a), but the problem is most apparent among the elderly. The relative poverty rate of the over-65 population is approximately three times higher than that of the population as a whole and is the highest in the OECD (OECD, 2013c). Moreover, the rate has been increasing. In 2010, an alarming 47.2 percent of over-65s lived below the poverty threshold – over three and a half times the OECD average and a 5.8 percent increase on the figure three years earlier. Two major reasons have been put forward for the extremely high rate of elderly poverty in Korea. The first is the late implementation (in 1988) of a public, earnings-related pension scheme. As a result, current retirees have little or no entitlements, and over half of their income is sourced from paid employment – one of the highest proportions in the OECD. The second reason is the strict eligibility requirements for public assistance.

In 2000, the government implemented a new public assistance program, known as the National Basic Livelihood Security Program (NBLSP), to address the rapid increase in poverty in the wake of the financial crisis, particularly in the over-65 age group. The NBLSP is intended to provide a subsistence level of benefit to those without income or with

³ Percentage of individuals living on less than 50 percent of the median equivalised disposable household income of the population
inadequate access to pension payments, but it has failed to make any significant impact on poverty reduction. Despite considerable social and economic change in the years since the program’s inception, the number of recipients has remained constant (Phillips & Jung, 2013). Only 3 percent of the population are in receipt of benefits – half of those below the absolute poverty line and well below the 14.9 percent living in relative poverty (OECD, 2012). One of the principal reasons for the limited coverage is that the NBLSP is premised on outdated notions of Confucian familial support. There remains an underlying assumption in Korean social policy that family should be the primary support mechanism for the elderly and disadvantaged. As Sung (2001) notes, “public policies for the aged have been oriented toward ‘support by the family first and social security by the state afterward’” (p. 74). Consequently, NBLSP entitlements are available only to those who can demonstrate that they have no means of support from within the family. Elderly people with a directly linked adult-age family member (spouse, child, son/daughter-in-law, etc.) are automatically ineligible for assistance, regardless of whether they receive financial support from that family member. A significant number of low-income households are excluded from entitlement to public assistance, yet increasing numbers of families have been unable or unwilling to provide the level of support required by the elderly and disadvantaged, particularly in the wake of the economic crisis (Chang, 2010). Despite expanded coverage and the introduction of new programs in recent decades, the Korean welfare state has failed to keep pace with social and economic change, and there is a widening discrepancy between the level of support provided by family and the availability of public assistance. Ironically, society has seemingly turned its back on the very generation responsible for its remarkable industrial transition. It can be no coincidence that the elderly have experienced the greatest increase and highest rates of suicide in recent years.

3.3 Value change

According to Lee (2004), traditional Korean philosophy has experienced three periods of discontinuity in its long history – all within the span of a single century. The first discontinuity was a result of the cultural annihilation policy of Japanese colonial rule in the early twentieth century. The second occurred during the process of modernisation as the nation attempted to shed its past, while the third discontinuity has come about due to the

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4 Percentage of individuals below the minimum cost of living
neoliberal restructuring by civilian governments in the post-democratisation era. With the demise of the Joseon dynasty at the hands of Japanese imperialists in 1910, Confucianism as the official state ideology was dismantled; however, Confucianism as an internalised cultural ethos remained. Despite the social upheaval of colonisation, war, military rule, and modernisation, many traditional Confucian values and practices – particularly family-related – survived throughout the twentieth century. Late twentieth-century Korea may be described as a society where modern institutions and traditional values coexisted in relative harmony, producing a unique, albeit somewhat contradictory, cultural setting. However, the 1997 economic crisis and subsequent neoliberal economic reforms have taken a devastating toll on this harmonious coexistence. Prior to the crisis, Confucian values had largely adjusted to the rapidly changing social landscape, but a fundamental incompatibility exists between Confucian values and neoliberalism. As Yang (2009) observes:

The [reforms following the economic crisis have] driven the whole country into an American-style neoliberal capitalist system that emphasizes the market instead of community, competitiveness instead of cooperation, efficiency instead of harmony, and individualism instead of collectivism. (p. 193)

The reforms have precipitated profound changes in social organisations and values. While neoliberal ideology has permeated every corner of Korean society, the consequences are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the realm of the family. Fundamental changes have occurred in family roles, attitudes towards family, and relationships among family members – all within an astonishingly short period of time. Koh (1996) notes of contemporary Korea:

Confucian values and practices are transmitted not through schools, worship services, or the mass media, but only through spontaneous family indoctrination. As the family becomes nuclearized and family unity wanes, the transmission of Confucian values also wanes. (p. 192)

Thus the erosion of Confucian norms and values may be viewed as both a result and cause of family change.
3.4 Reduction in family life

The recent change in values has exposed the vulnerability and volatility of the Korean family under globalisation. Chang (2010) coined the term defamiliation to describe various tendencies to delay or avoid family obligations in post-crisis Korea. He defines defamiliation as “the reduction in the moral significance and/or social space of the family in individual life” (2012, p. 42), and argues that the phenomenon is one of a number of methods of personal and social ‘withdrawal’ as a result of widespread disenfranchisement from the social, political, and economic environment in post-crisis Korea.

3.4.1 Indications of defamiliation

Post-crisis statistics on such demographic indicators as marriage, divorce, and fertility rates highlight a decisive shift away from traditional Confucian family norms in a remarkably condensed period. This has been accompanied by a decline in the most revered of all Confucian virtues – filial piety.

3.4.1.1 Delay and avoidance of marriage

In line with Confucian ideals, Korea has maintained a strong norm in favour of marriage. The age at which Korean couples first enter into marriage has been gradually rising since the mid-twentieth century (Kwon, 2003); however, the rate of increase since the 1997 economic crisis has been particularly significant. Over the twenty-five year period between 1970 and 1995, the mean age at first marriage for males rose by just 1.3 years, whereas during the fifteen-year period (1997-2012) following the economic crisis, it increased by 3.5 years. The figures for females are 2.3 and 3.7, respectively. In 2012, the mean age at first marriage was 32.1 for males and 29.4 for females (Statistics Korea, 2013d). Similarly, the crude marriage rate\(^5\) (CMR) remained relatively stable over the twenty-five year period from 1970 to 1995, but plummeted from 8.4 in 1997 to 6.3 in 2002 – a drop of 2.1 in just five years (see Figure 3.1). The CMR recovered slightly in subsequent years, but stood at 6.5 in 2012 – well below pre-crisis levels. The figures are indicative of a major shift in attitudes towards marriage in the

\(^5\) Number of marriages per 1,000 population
wake of the economic crisis. Previously an unquestioned social expectation, marriage is increasingly being viewed as a flexible commodity by many young Koreans.

### 3.4.1.2 Divorce

As the Confucian patriarchal family is child-centred rather than couple-centred, marital stability has traditionally been emphasized over marital quality. Divorce was rare in Korea prior to the 1990s and carried a strong social stigma. However, the economic crisis had a dramatic impact on Korean attitudes towards divorce, and the stigma attached proved to be less of a deterrent. Between 1970 and 1995, the crude divorce rate\(^6\) (CDR) rose from 0.4 to 1.5 – an increase of just 1.1 over twenty-five years. But in 2003, the CDR peaked at 3.4 – an increase of 1.4 in the mere six years following the economic crisis (see Figure 3.1) (Statistics Korea, 2013d). The rapid surge placed Korea second only to the United States in the frequency with which couples dissolve their union (Park & Raymo, 2013). Unlike the CMR which has remained well below pre-crisis levels, the CDR has since declined considerably and had stabilised at pre-crisis levels by 2012. The decline is at least partly attributable to the introduction of a mandatory cooling-off period between the filing and processing of an application for divorce. In March 2005, the largest divorce court in Korea adopted a compulsory waiting period, initially of one week, but later extended to three weeks. In June 2008, a three-month cooling-off period became national law (Lee, 2013). Lee (2013) found that the introduction of the cooling-off period had a significant effect on reducing the divorce rate, whereas no significant decrease in the rate of filing for divorce was detected. Lee’s findings suggest that the cooling-off period is having a positive impact on the decision of whether to proceed with divorce; however, the lack of change in the rate of divorce applications appears to confirm the fundamental shift in attitudes towards divorce since the economic crisis. Divorce has become an increasingly socially acceptable solution to marital discord. Some have argued that the increase in divorce represents a shift in the central axis of the family from the relationship between parent and child to that between husband and wife (Cho, 2005) – a further indication of the declining influence of Confucian norms.

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\(^6\) Number of divorces per 1,000 population
According to Confucian ideals, married couples are expected to procreate in order to maintain the family bloodline. The relationship between parent and child is considered the most fundamental of the five primary relationships guiding human interaction. Nevertheless, the events of the latter half of the twentieth century had a profound influence on attitudes towards reproduction. Korea experienced one of the most dramatic fertility declines in history during the period of compressed modernity. In 1960, the country’s total fertility rate (TFR) stood at 6.0, but by 1990 it had plummeted to 1.57. The plunge is largely credited to the state’s aggressive family planning program initiated in 1962, combined with the nation’s rapid economic development (Kye, 2012). The effects of the 1997 economic crisis, however, were responsible for a further decline in fertility. The TFR continued its downward spiral at the turn of the twenty-first century, hitting a record low of 1.08 – nearly half the replacement level of 2.1 – in 2005 (see Figure 3.2). By 2011, it had recovered slightly to 1.24, but remained the lowest among OECD member nations (OECD, 2014a). Preliminary figures for 2013 indicate a further decline in the TFR to 1.19, accompanied by the second lowest number of live births since record-keeping began in 1970 (Statistics Korea, 2014a).

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3.4.1.3 Fertility

Figure 3.1 Crude divorce rate (CDR) and crude marriage rate (CMR), Korea, 1992-2012. Source: Statistics Korea (2013d).

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7 Total number of children that would be born to each woman if she were to live to the end of her childbearing years and give birth to children in agreement with the prevailing age-specific fertility rates (OECD, 2013b)
The country’s ultra-low fertility rate has been attributed to various factors, including financial difficulties, employment insecurity, and general uncertainty (Cho, 2005). It is likely that increased levels of education, particularly among women, also contribute to the decline in fertility (Kim, 2013). Clearly, the tendencies of delay, avoidance, and dissolution of marriage are directly related to the post-crisis decline in the TFR. In a study of Korean university student attitudes to childlessness, Yang and Rosenblatt (2008) found that Confucian-inspired pro-natal values were clearly evident and suggested that increasing childlessness is a reluctant response to the economic and social climate. Thus, rather than being driven by a major shift in values related to family size, the post-crisis fertility decline is more likely to be a response to an unfavourable childrearing climate.

![Figure 3.2](image) Total fertility rate, Korea, 1992-2012. Source: Statistics Korea (2013c).

3.4.1.4 Care of the elderly

The elderly represent the most disadvantaged and vulnerable group in contemporary Korean society. As discussed earlier, they suffer from not only the highest rate of poverty in the population, but also in the industrialised world (OECD, 2013c). The social welfare system, rooted in outdated Confucian notions of familial support, has failed to adequately address the problem. A key factor in the plight of the elderly is the gradual decline of the Confucian virtue of filial piety. One of the most visible signs of filial piety has been the practice of family-centred care and support for elderly parents, an age-old customary and normative duty.
and obligation in Korea (Sung, 2001). Indicative of the prominent role of the family as a provider of social welfare, such Western institutions as retirement villages and nursing homes were virtually unheard of in Korea as adult children – particularly sons (and their spouses) – bore primary responsibility for the emotional, instrumental, and financial support of elderly parents. In recent decades, however, this practice has weakened. Among the many reasons behind the trend are: reduction in family size (and therefore number of available carers), increased labour market participation by women, significant urban migration of young people (leaving elderly parents behind), and increased life expectancy (Sung, 2001). The traditional expectation that elderly parents (or parents-in-law) will cohabitate with their adult children has become either impractical or unacceptable to most married couples, and the practice is an increasingly rare social phenomenon (Chang, 2010). Consequently, growing numbers of elderly citizens are living alone, attempting to support themselves. Along with the fertility decline, the trend against cohabitation is representative of the transition from large, extended family to small, nuclear family.

3.4.2 Driving force behind defamilization

Given the long history of family-centeredness, it is somewhat perplexing that Korean attitudes towards family could change so profoundly in such a short space of time. How could the family remain so robust during the turbulent years of colonisation, war, and modernisation, yet succumb so quickly under globalisation? What forces could drive such a fundamental shift in attitudes towards family? Clearly, increased financial pressure on the family in the post-crisis period is a core element. While still burdened with a vast majority of welfare provision for elderly and disadvantaged members, the family was confronted with decreased income levels and greater insecurity from the neoliberalised labour market. But past hardships had not resulted in an abandonment of family values. If anything, hardship had strengthened the bond between individual and family, so why was this situation any different?

Chang (2010) suggests that it is the very family-centred nature of Korean society that is responsible for driving the phenomenon of defamilization. He notes, “as a result of explosively rapid social and economic transformations and overwhelming Western influences, the values and norms of South Koreans regarding family life and relations have become more diverse and complex than those of most other nations” (p. 131). According to Chang, Korea’s compressed modernity has simultaneously exposed the family to four mutually distinctive
family ideologies, which he categorises as Confucian, instrumental, affectionate, and individualistic. Prior to modernisation, Korea can be considered to have maintained a homogenous family ideology, namely Confucian.

Confucian familism, despite serious erosion, remains the dominant ideology. While its influence on family relationships is still significant, the Confucian gender and age hierarchy has caused alienation and discrimination against women and young people. Chang defines instrumental familism as a type of “life philosophy” that evolved from the reliance on family for basic survival during the turbulent decades of the twentieth century. It encompasses the strategic role of the family as an instrument for its members’ personal protection and social advancement. A side-effect of instrumental familism is the inevitable sacrifice of the quality of domestic life for the sake of members’ advancement in society. Moreover, the nepotistic mobilisation of family resources and kin networks has impacted negatively on the social, economic, and political order by nurturing such social ills as corruption and collusion. Affectionate familism is the ideology of the middle-class proletariat and relates to the family as an emotional support mechanism and buffer against external hostilities. Affectionate familism emphasises the emotional quality of the conjugal relationship. Originating in the West, individualistic familism has spread rapidly in Korea under the processes of compressed modernity and globalisation. It is representative of two social trends: the increased equality of women and youth, and the commercialisation of domestic life under consumer capitalism.

Chang argues that contemporary Korean family culture is characterised by the coexistence of these four diverse ideologies. The ideologies have been adopted to differing degrees by members of the same family, primarily according to generation, but also gender, class, region, education, etc. As a result of the country’s highly condensed experience of modernisation, Koreans have been exposed and become accustomed to vastly different social, cultural, and economic circumstances depending on their generation and age. It is inevitable that family relations and domestic life should be profoundly affected by such rapid change. As a consequence, substantial generation gaps have appeared in Korean families. Yang (2009) agrees that the sheer pace of social change in Korea is responsible, noting:

If a society is stable and changes very slowly, a new generation will undergo similar socialization to the older generation and inherit similar cultural values from the latter without much change. In this situation, there is no appreciable generation gap in terms of shared values and norms. However, in a rapidly changing society it is likely that
different generations will have different values and value dispositions. Since Korea has recently been changing very rapidly, we may expect significant generation gaps in terms of values. (p. 201)

Chang (2010) suggests that the contradictions between the competing family ideologies are a source of psychological tension and conflict within families. For example, “when parents imbued with instrumental familism attempt to control their children’s marriages as a means of elevating social and/or economic status, it may baffle many children, who idealise the affectionate familism of the Western nuclear family” (p. 24). The functional burdens from the diverse roles and responsibilities prescribed by the multiple ideologies have resulted in what Chang refers to as a “functional overload” of the family. The more Koreans pursue family-centred life, the more they are confronted with the burdens arising from the friction between ideologies. It is for this reason that Koreans, particularly the younger generations, have sought to delay or avoid family-related responsibilities.

While the various tendencies of defamilization represent individual responses to a complex set of social conditions, Chang and Song (2010) suggest that women are the driving force behind the trend. Noting that marriage deferral and avoidance, low fertility and increasing childlessness are more critically propelled by women than men, Chang and Song argue that women are utilising their personal inclinations to effectively “sabotage” social reproduction. Yet, they insist that women’s actions are not motivated purely by selfish interests, but are rather a self-protection mechanism against the increasingly demanding and stressful nature of Korean family life. Chang and Song point out that “Defamiliation … denotes a decrease in family life and relations rather than a complete abandonment or abolition of them. Defamiliation can be conceived as a type of refamiliation, denoting various patterns of demographic, social, and psychological restructuring of families” (p. 542). In other words, defamiliation is not so much an active rejection of the family, but rather a passive response to the social environment.

3.5 Implications for suicide risk

At the heart of Durkheim’s analysis of the family is the institution of marriage. From his statistical analysis, Durkheim observed that the suicide rate was considerably higher in the unmarried than the married of the same age. This led him to ponder the social factors that
may account for such a discrepancy. Durkheim divided the family into two distinct groups: the ‘conjugal group’ (husband and wife), and the larger ‘family group,’ consisting of the conjugal group and offspring. Each group constitutes different types of social bonds which contribute to integration in distinctly different ways. In the case of the conjugal group, alliances are intra-generational and bonds formed on the basis of “a contract and elective affinity” (Durkheim, 1952, p. 185). In the family group, the bonds stem from blood ties and serve to link one generation to the next. Family life serves to counteract egoism by ensuring that greater concentrations of commitment are focused within the family rather than on the individual, thus suppressing the tendency to withdraw into the self. By creating duties and obligations outside the self, family attaches the individual to the broader society. To compare the strength of the conjugal and family groups, Durkheim examined the suicide rates of families with and without children. Finding that the immunity of married men to suicide doubles in the presence of children, Durkheim concluded that the integration of the family group is greater than that of the conjugal group. He argued further that the larger the family group, the greater the cohesion, and the greater the protection it offers against suicide. For Durkheim then, family size, or density, was the key to the protection enjoyed by the married.

While Durkheim held the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation responsible for the increase in suicide rates in nineteenth-century Europe, Korea’s arguably more turbulent transition to the modern era was accompanied by low levels of suicide. Despite the scope and pace of social transition faced by Koreans during the latter half of the twentieth century, their will to survive remained strong. Koreans’ familism was a “crucial mechanism” for managing the rapid social changes as family was “the only reliable and stable source of support and protection” (Chang, 2010, pp. 4, 15). The heavy reliance on family for resources, protection, and support during periods of social upheaval seems to have provided the necessary buffer to minimise the suicidal impulse. Notwithstanding the substantial decline in fertility during this period, traditional Confucian-influenced marriage and procreation norms persisted, and divorce was rare. In family terms, Korean society remained well integrated in the face of a turbulent political, economic, and social environment.

The various tendencies of defamilization in post-crisis Korea, however, have substantially weakened the strength of the Confucian-influenced bond between individual and family. In Durkheimian terms, this is symptomatic of an increase in egoistic currents (and therefore a decrease in social integration). The deterioration of the matrimonial bond (through avoidance, delay, and dissolution) and the related reduction in family size (through reduced fertility and
the demise of the extended family) translate into an overall weakening of the family’s capacity to function as a protective buffer, thus making the individual more vulnerable to external hostilities such as those experienced under globalisation. With the weakening of the family’s ability and willingness to provide support and protection from within, the state has attempted to strengthen its level of support through the social security system. Substantial progress has been made on improving the coverage of the welfare system, but the Korean welfare state remains underdeveloped by international standards, and a sizeable proportion of the population is still unprotected. The discrepancy between family and state support has seen an increasing number of Koreans fall through the cracks.

According to Durkheim’s theory, weakening social integration is associated with an increase in the suicide rate. Declining social integration is likely to have the greatest impact on older members of the population, particularly those over 65, who are traditionally most reliant on family for support and protection. The social conditions in Korea are so concerning that the OECD released a comprehensive report in early 2013 detailing the urgent need for policies that promote greater social cohesion in the country. Given Durkheim’s insistence on ‘family density,’ or the presence of children, as the critical element in the protection enjoyed by the married, Korea’s extremely low fertility rate may have the greatest future ramifications for the suicide rate. Social integration alone does not wholly explain the increase in Korea’s suicide rate, however. Before we are in a position to completely understand the post-crisis surge in suicide, it is necessary to consider the contribution of Durkheim’s second causal variable, social regulation.

3.6 Conclusion

The events of the latter half of the twentieth century brought rapid and radical changes to Korean society, and in turn to the structure and values of the Korean family. Korea’s highly condensed transformation from agrarian to industrial society created significant generation gaps in terms of sociocultural values. The simultaneous exposure of the contemporary Korean family to Chang’s (2010) four types of familism has created intergenerational tension and conflict arising from contradictions between the competing ideologies. The situation has been greatly exacerbated under globalisation, in particular the legacies of the 1997 economic crisis. The neoliberal structural reforms that followed the crisis have polarised the workforce and contributed to rising income inequality and relative poverty. Although the state’s
commitment to social welfare has increased substantially since democratisation, the Korean welfare state remains underdeveloped and is among the weakest in the OECD. The present social security system is failing to meet the needs of many of society’s most disadvantaged citizens, particularly the over-65 population, who exhibit the highest poverty rate in the OECD. The resulting financial burden has placed added pressure on the family and expedited the demise of time-honoured Confucian norms and values. Family life has become a source of burden and stress, and Koreans have sought various means of minimising its impact on their daily lives, including delay and avoidance of marriage, divorce, reduced fertility and childlessness, and reluctance to accept eldercare responsibilities. The various tendencies of defamiliation have been propelled predominantly by women. In Durkheimian terms, the reduction of the place of the family in individual life is symptomatic of declining social integration (or increasing egoism), which is indicative of an increase in the suicide rate. The next step towards understanding the present suicide epidemic in Korea is to consider the contribution of Durkheim’s second dimension, social regulation.
4 SOCIAL REGULATION

4.1 Introduction

Durkheim’s second explanatory variable – social regulation – has not enjoyed the same pre-eminence as social integration. Mirroring Durkheim’s own depth of treatment, the contribution of social regulation has often been downplayed or completely ignored by researchers. As Pescosolido (1994) points out, researchers have tended to overlook Durkheim’s unified two-dimensional theoretical framework in favour of individual, specific hypotheses. This may be due in part to difficulties in operationalizing social regulation, and in part to the fact that many commentators have failed to recognise the theoretical distinction between Durkheim’s dual dimensions (e.g., Johnson, 1965; Pope, 1975). However, to downplay or ignore social regulation is to deprive the theory of one of its critical explanatory elements.

Durkheim used the term ‘anomie’ in *Le Suicide* to refer to a state of insufficient social regulation and source of suicidal impulse. He related anomie to the passions, or insatiable desires of the physical component of man. Unless an individual’s aspirations are sufficiently regulated by the social component, (s)he becomes lost in an “infinity of desires,” with suicide being a possible outcome of the perpetual disappointment and frustration in failing to satisfy those desires. Durkheim argued that anomie is closely related to the business cycle and that periods of rapid economic fluctuation, both upwards and downwards, are the primary source of *acute* anomie. However, it was *chronic* anomie that was of greater concern to Durkheim. Just as egoism was viewed as an inevitable product of the development of industrial society and the growth of individualism, so too anomie was seen as a permanent disease of modern society’s institutions. The concept of anomie has been extensively developed by later scholars, most notably Merton (1938, 1968), as a central component in theories of deviance and crime. Merton used anomie to explain the structural sources of deviant behaviour, and his elaboration of Durkheim’s concept provides a useful insight into the structural sources of chronic anomie in contemporary Korean society.

At the beginning of his chapter on anomie suicide, Durkheim noted, “it is a well-known fact that economic crises have an aggravating effect on the suicidal tendency” (1952, p. 241). It therefore came as no surprise when Korea’s suicide rate soared in the wake of the 1997 crisis. The sudden and dramatic economic downturn was particularly harsh for a nation that had
become accustomed to uninterrupted growth for over three decades and lacked a basic social safety net. Following an initial decline with the recovery of the economy, however, the suicide rate picked up once again and subsequently soared well beyond the peak recorded in the midst of the crisis. Clearly, the explanation behind Korea’s suicide problem is considerably more complex than economic downturn alone. While acute anomie in the immediate aftermath of the crisis is likely to have been a major contributor to the initial rise in suicides, this chapter explores the presence of a more entrenched type of anomie in Korean social structure that is partially responsible for sustaining the heightened rate. Following Merton’s (1968) elaboration of anomie, it examines the increasing disjunction in Korea between culturally defined goals and the institutionalised means of achieving them. Contrary to the widespread neglect of Durkheim’s second causal variable by researchers, this chapter argues that the social regulation dimension is fundamental to explaining the increase in Korea’s suicide rate, particularly among the younger age groups.

4.2 Success theme in Korean culture

As Merton noted, the heavy emphasis placed by a culture on financial success is not peculiar to the United States. As Korea modernised in the mid to late twentieth century and began to experience the benefits of economic growth, the acquisition of wealth became increasingly valued by society. This is hardly surprising considering that the nation had ranked amongst the poorest in the world at the end of the Korean War in 1953. However, financial success may be viewed as a modern, capitalistic manifestation of a deeply entrenched cultural goal that has characterised Korean society for centuries – the attainment of social status.

4.2.1 Education and the pursuit of social status

Korea is known as being a status-conscious society (Lett, 1998). Social status as a culturally prescribed goal in contemporary Korean society may be traced to the nation’s Confucian heritage. Confucianism places enormous importance on social status, as all human relationships and interactions are defined by relative differences in status. As mentioned previously, it is not possible to make a single utterance in the Korean language without prior knowledge of the relative differences in status between speaker, interlocutor(s), and referent(s) (Yoon, 2004). Aside from the age-based social hierarchy, the Confucian notion of status was
generally based on scholarly pursuits or, put simply, education. In traditional Confucian society, education was highly valued as both a means of self-cultivation and a method of attaining status and power. The educated were considered the elite of society, and their status outranked those in commerce and all other professions (Shim et al., 2008). A civil service examination system was adopted in 958 and acted as the principal selection device for the limited number of government positions. By passing the exams, which were based on the mastery of Chinese (Confucian) classics and literary skill, a candidate not only proved their moral worth to govern others, but acquired the status and privileges associated with office-bearing. In conformity with the Confucian ideal that each individual is capable of benefiting from education and the achievement of moral enlightenment, the exams were theoretically open to all citizens. During the early part of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), a successful performance on the civil service exams represented virtually the only means of social mobility (Lett, 1998). In reality, however, practices arose that restricted access to the aristocratic elite, known as yangban. The years of study required to prepare for the exams meant that wealthy families with the means to support students through this period had a distinct advantage. In effect, the exam system primarily served as a means of allocating power, prestige, and status among members of the yangban class (Seth, 2002).

A hereditary group, the yangban dominated Joseon society through their position as rulers, scholars, and landowners. Although the yangban were effectively a closed caste, their values as scholars and moral leaders gradually permeated society. Seth (2002) notes, “the yangban ideal of a refined, elite individual or family whose virtue, moral excellence, and right to privilege was periodically reaffirmed through educational achievement would remain a model for aspiring middle- and even lower-class Koreans” (p. 12). The power and authority of the yangban diminished during the period of Japanese colonial rule, and the Korean War effectively eradicated any remnants of the Joseon class structure. The three-year conflict resulted in a more egalitarian society, but one of almost universal poverty (Lett, 1998). Few people had any significant social advantage over others, providing a relatively level playing field upon which to rebuild. Driven by strong public demand, a major priority of the state in the post-war years was to expand the educational system from the bottom up, with an emphasis on universal access to primary, and later, secondary education (Seth, 2002). With equality of opportunity and a strong desire to escape poverty, the population overwhelmingly turned to formal education as the primary mechanism by which to rebuild their lives and their nation.
The improved accessibility of education to all citizens, together with the economic reforms of the 1960s, presented Koreans with increased opportunities for social mobility (Lett, 1998). Over the next three decades, a modern capitalist class structure emerged, with a distinct new middle class. In her detailed study of the “new urban middle class,” Lett (1998) referred to its development as the “yangbanization of Korean society in the modern context” (p. 212), arguing that Koreans’ strong desire to acquire social status is “an important element in both the formation and the definition of South Korea’s new urban middle class” (p. 206). Lett argued that the new middle class “displays features more typically associated with an upper class” (p. 224), having acquired the concept of elite status previously held by the yangban (with the exception that ancestry was no longer relevant). Koreans’ belief in education as the vehicle of social mobility has thus not only continued into the modern era, but intensified as education became universal. As Seth (2002) points out, “Koreans have inherited a worldview that is hierarchical and rank-conscious so that education is a means of firmly establishing one’s position in society” (p. 251). The vehement pursuit of education appears unrivalled anywhere else in the world and has become so ingrained in the culture that Koreans use the term gyoyukyeol ‘education fever’ to refer to the phenomenon.

In many ways, there are remarkable similarities between the educational environment of the Joseon period and that of contemporary Korea. As Lett (1998) observes:

> During the [Joseon] dynasty, mastery of Chinese and the Confucian classics and passing the civil service exams and thereby earning a degree conferred high status. Now, it is the mastery of English and passing the university entrance exam in order to acquire a university degree that are marks of culture and high status. (p. 210)

As in the past, educational credentials in modern Korea indicate not only an individual’s level of intellectual training, but – more importantly – their position in the social hierarchy. Rather than being confined to the urban middle- and upper-class, however, the desire for educational attainment, and therefore social mobility, has become a universal feature of contemporary Korean society (Chang, 2010; Seth, 2002). In Merton’s terms, the cultural value placed on educational achievement has been assimilated by all levels of the social strata. This is not surprising when one considers the ethnic homogeneity and shared cultural history of Korean people. While the perception of education as a highly valued commodity is not unique to Korea, Koreans view education as a collective family effort, and parents at all levels of the social strata go to great lengths and make extraordinary sacrifices in order to provide their
children with the best possible educational opportunities. Indeed, assisting their children in this regard is a primary goal of Korean parents (Ahn & Baek, 2013). Chang (2010) notes, “a good [Korean] family is supposed to function as a focal instrument for promoting its members’ success in society. The success of its members in society will, in turn, elevate the social status of the entire family.” (p. 28). Educational attainment in Korea is therefore not simply an individual achievement, but a reflection on the family unit as a whole.

Due largely to the influence of Western individualism and capitalistic values, social status in contemporary Korea is based not on scholarly pursuits alone, but the prestige and wealth to which education allows access. Shim et al. (2008) note that the pursuit of status “remains a major motivation” in contemporary Korea and that this is primarily achieved through financial wealth (p. 64). Moreover, they observe “the almost obsession of contemporary Koreans regarding material possessions and demonstration of wealth” (p. 64). Thus, education, while still revered as it has been throughout Korean history, is now firmly viewed as the vehicle for the acquisition of wealth and status. The nation’s enormous investment in education has therefore been induced by the social struggle to attain and advance class position rather than an orientation to knowledge as a cultural value. The formation of modern social classes is founded on the educational investment and competition by individuals and families (Chang, 2010).

4.2.2 Competition and its discontents

There is no question that Korea’s preoccupation with education is directly linked to the nation’s remarkable industrial transformation. When Japanese colonial rule ended in 1945, the majority of adult Koreans were illiterate, with less than 5 percent having received more than a primary (elementary) school education. There was only one university in the country, and most of its students were Japanese (Seth, 2002). Korea now boasts the highest rates of upper secondary- and tertiary-educated 25-34 year-olds in the OECD (OECD, 2013a), a phenomenal achievement. In 2011, 65 percent of 25-34 year-olds had attained a tertiary education, a figure well above the OECD average of 37.8 percent. The number of high school graduates continuing on to tertiary education was as high as 82.1 percent in 2005 and currently stands at 71.3 percent (Statistics Korea, 2013e). The overwhelming demand for

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8 Defined as International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) (1997) levels 5A, 5B, and 6
tertiary education has inevitably placed the higher education system under enormous pressure, resulting in an intensely competitive admissions process for those intending to engage with it.

While a university degree has become one of the primary markers of status in modern Korea, not all degrees are treated the same. In Korea, it is not an exaggeration to say that the university one attends determines one’s future social status. Indeed, as Cho (1995) notes, “it is a shared belief among most [Korean] parents that the rank of one’s university determines one’s worth as a social being” (p. 148). Reflecting the vertical nature of Korean society itself, the higher education system is characterised by a well-defined hierarchy that has become deeply entrenched in the culture. As Cho observes, “children are indoctrinated in their early days to believe that their ultimate goal in life is to enter [one of the] top-class universities in Seoul” (p. 148). She notes further, “those who fail consider themselves to be second-class citizens,” a view “shared by much of the rest of society” (p. 148). Needless to say, competition for the limited number of places is fierce. Graduation from one of the nation’s elite institutions effectively guarantees future success, not only in employment and promotional prospects, but in social life more generally. For example, an individual’s educational background is an extremely important factor in determining their eligibility as a suitable marriage partner. Although the quality of education provided by the top-ranked institutions may not differ greatly from those further down the ladder, it is the prestige attached to the institution’s name and the accompanying access to valuable social networks that is most highly sought after. Academic credentialism – the emphasis on where a person studied rather than on their abilities, achievements, and potential – is exceptionally strong in Korea (OECD, 2014b).

The intense competitiveness surrounding university admission has had an extremely detrimental ‘washback’ effect on primary and secondary education in Korea. The secondary years, in particular, are largely geared towards preparing students for the all-important university entrance examination in much the same way as preparation for the civil service exams was the primary goal of the Joseon education system (Seth, 2002). In response to the tremendous importance placed on the university entrance exam, Korean adolescents devote an inordinate amount of time to study and preparation. Perhaps the most important and contentious issue concerning the contemporary Korean educational system has been the rampant use of supplementary education to aid university entrance exam preparation. The use of various methods of supplementary education (also known as ‘shadow education’), including private one-on-one tuition and hagwons (private after-school academies), has
skyrocketed in recent decades, as parents scramble to give their children a competitive edge. Koo (2007) notes, “over the years, public schools have become discredited from their role to prepare students adequately, and parents have turned increasingly to the private education market to satisfy their educational demands” (p. 11).

Like other East Asian nations, Korea’s high population density has fuelled the need to distinguish one’s self, and the patronage of supplementary education has become institutionalised. According to Dawson (2010), the private education industry in Korea, relative to the formal education system, is by far the largest in the world. While the national participation rate has been gradually declining in recent years, it still accounted for approximately 70 percent of the school-age population in 2013, with higher rates in certain (typically urban) districts. Participation rates by region fluctuate somewhat from year to year, but small increases were observed in Seoul and surrounding Gyeonggi province in 2013 (Statistics Korea, 2014b). Interestingly, participation rates are highest among primary school students (approximately 82 percent in 2013), reflecting the strong desire of parents to expose their children to educational opportunities as early as possible. From a young age, Korean students spend numerous hours after school and on weekends and holidays engaged in various forms of supplementary education, leaving little time for leisure activities. Aside from the heavy financial burden, supplementary education has been heavily criticised for undermining the formal school system and for contributing to various detrimental effects on student health and wellbeing. In spite of this, supplementary education continues to flourish. In their study of shadow education use among high school students, Lee and Shouse (2011) suggest that participation is strongly fuelled by prestige orientation. They found that student prestige orientation prompted greater shadow education expenditure by parents, regardless of the likelihood of tangible benefits such as admission to prestigious tertiary institutions. Shadow education therefore appears to serve a symbolic purpose as well as a functional one.

The growing importance of English language proficiency in the globalised marketplace has further exacerbated the financial and psychological strain on Korean parents and their children. Most universities require students to achieve minimum scores in standardised English proficiency tests in order to graduate (Choi, 2008). Moreover, many employers use English test scores to assist them in separating the large pool of well-qualified applicants, regardless of whether English proficiency is required for the position (Koo, 2007). Thus, English proficiency (or more precisely, a high English test score) is closely aligned with occupational success and social mobility, which puts it on a par with graduation from a
prestigious university. Despite the level of demand, the state education system is notorious for failing to equip high school graduates with the required levels of competence in English. Consequently, parents and students have overwhelmingly turned to private education alternatives to fill the knowledge gap. The emphasis placed on English proficiency is so great that English accounts for the highest rate of private education expenditure of all subjects. Moreover, the average monthly expenditure per student on private English education increased by 1.3 percent in 2013, in contrast to falls in other subject areas (Statistics Korea, 2014b). For many Korean children, private English education begins prior to entering primary school (at specialised English-only kindergartens) and continues throughout their schooling years. The obsession with English education has strongly fuelled Korea’s already intensely competitive educational environment.

In order to further distinguish themselves, families with the available means have looked beyond Korea to give their children an educational advantage. A significant number of Korean children are sent abroad, principally to English-speaking countries, for at least a portion of their education. Some children are sent at an early age to help them acquire native-like English (Park, 2009), while others are sent with the intention of attending a foreign university. Upon returning to Korea, these children are invariably positioned higher up the social strata than those solely educated locally. Thus, English has become a significant class marker in modern Korean society (Park & Abelmann, 2002). Competency in the language is a powerful commodity and is a symbol of educational opportunity and therefore social status.

One of the most critical issues in the development of the current educational environment has been the failure of the state to adequately coordinate education with economic planning, despite sustained efforts to do so. Whilst Korea is well-known for the success of its state-directed economic development policies, it has experienced greater difficulty in harnessing the populace’s zeal for education towards the vocational and technical needs of an industrialised economy (Seth, 2002). The reason for this is rooted in culturally inherited attitudes towards blue-collar work. The aristocratic yangban elite of the Joseon dynasty had a particular disdain for manual labour, believing that their status would be compromised if they engaged in such activity. As with other attitudes and values from the Joseon period, this disdain has continued into the modern era, and the dichotomy between manual and non-manual labour remains as significant in contemporary Korea as it did during the Joseon dynasty (Lett, 1998). Consequently, attempts by the state to increase participation in vocational education and training have met with limited success. The overwhelming
preference for a traditional academic qualification has had an obvious flow-on effect on the labour market. Because educational achievement has been dictated not by macroeconomic coordination of supply and demand, but by universal aspiration for occupational mobility and status attainment, younger Koreans are overeducated (Chang, 2010). The result is a serious mismatch between the skill requirements of employers and the skill profile of jobseekers. In other words, there are substantially higher numbers of well-qualified jobseekers than there are suitable positions. This mismatch results in heightened competition for the best, most secure jobs, and those who miss out invariably face the prospect of entering the highly disadvantaged non-regular workforce. Thus, there is potential for a sharp decline in the economic returns of Koreans’ sizeable investment in the pursuit of tertiary education (OECD, 2013d).

The result of such an educational environment is a vicious cycle of competition with seemingly no end. Merton (1968) argued that for an effective equilibrium between the cultural and social structures to be maintained, individuals must derive continuing satisfaction from both the product (achieving the culturally prescribed goal) and the process (participation in a competitive order and eclipsing one’s competitors) (p. 188). For a majority of participants in the Korean educational system, however, the pressure from what is often referred to as “inhuman competition” and “examination hell” is clearly anything but satisfying. Numerous studies have documented links between study-related pressure and poor health and wellbeing in Korean youth (e.g., Ahn & Baek, 2013; Lee & Larson, 2000). It is somewhat ironic that education, which is intended to improve the quality of life, is responsible for inflicting various detrimental effects on those engaged in it. The dissatisfaction arising from the ultra-competitive educational environment is aggravated further by the issue of inequality.

4.2.3 Growing inequality

4.2.3.1 Economic inequality

While the nation’s obsession with schooling has resulted in one of the highest rates of literacy and most-educated generations in the world, it has come at a significant cost. As expenditure on supplementary education has risen, an increasing financial burden has been placed on Korean families. Despite the government’s continual increases in fiscal resources per student,
expenditure on private education has been rising faster than income growth (Kim & Lee, 2010). Naturally, the burden is felt most acutely by socioeconomically disadvantaged families, who are compelled to spend a considerable proportion of their household income on private education fees. Not surprisingly, participation and investment in supplementary education are significantly correlated with socioeconomic status. As Chang (2010) aptly points out, “the war for educational certificates is more likely to be won by those families that can afford to spend on expensive strategic studies for college entrance” (p. 41). Students from low-income households are far less likely to participate in supplementary education. In 2013, 31.3 percent of students from families with a monthly income of less than 1 million won participated in supplementary education. While still a substantial number, it is considerably less than the 79.2 percent from families earning 4 to 5 million won (Statistics Korea, 2014b). Similarly, average monthly expenditure per student is four times greater for middle-income households than low-income households. Despite an overall decline in total private education expenditure in recent years, rates are increasing in certain provinces. The end result is that students from low-income households are overrepresented in low-ranked tertiary education institutions (OECD, 2014b), which, in turn, limits their opportunities for social mobility. Furthermore, inequality does not end when a student gains admission to tertiary education. A vast majority of Korean tertiary institutions are privately operated, with tuition fees being their primary source of income. Korean tertiary education fees are the third highest in the OECD, but only a weak support structure is presently in place for students from low-income households (OECD, 2013d).

Inevitably, financial destitution translates into educational disadvantage, thus perpetuating intergenerational transmission of economic inequality. The financial implications arising from educational expenditure in Korea are so significant that they have been linked to the country’s extremely low fertility rate (Cho, 2005), with families opting to concentrate their “investment” in a small number of children. The controversial university admissions process and the prevalent use of supplementary education have been major social policy issues confronting successive administrations for decades. Growing inequality as a result of private education expenditure has prompted numerous policy responses aimed at regulating the burgeoning industry. This included an outright ban on private tuition during the 1980s, and more recently the introduction of a curfew on hagwon operating hours. However, the policy measures have generally addressed the symptoms rather than the underlying causes of the problem, and the shadow education industry continues to thrive (Lee & Shouse, 2011). It has
been acknowledged that as long as competition for university admission remains at present levels, any attempt at reform will be ineffectual (Seth, 2002).

While Koreans enjoyed equal access to educational opportunities in the early stages of modernisation, the present environment is more akin to the civil service examination system of the Joseon dynasty. Without the rigid class structure of the past, education theoretically provides equal opportunity for social mobility for all citizens. In reality, however, those families unable to afford private, overseas, and tertiary education expenses are automatically disadvantaged, unable to compete on the same playing field as those with greater financial means. Yet, social advancement through education remains a culturally prescribed goal – even expectation – in contemporary Korean society. An increasing gap has thus emerged between the universal desire for social mobility and status and the institutional means for attaining it. Although an education-related goal-means discrepancy is not a recent phenomenon in Korea, it is likely to have widened further in post-crisis Korea as income inequality has increased. As Chang (2010) points out:

The disturbingly fast expansion of economic inequalities since the national economic crisis of 1997-98 … implies that poor families in rapidly increasing numbers have been disenfranchised from the educational competition system which is the hallmark of the post-liberation class mobility system. (p. 143)

While Koo (2007) notes, “over the years, social mobility through education has become more restricted, and education is functioning as a mechanism for class reproduction rather than for social mobility” (p. 11).

4.2.3.2 Gender inequality

A darker side of Korea’s Confucian social order has been the ongoing discrimination against women in social, economic, and political spheres. In recent decades, women have enjoyed equal access to educational opportunities, and parents “have invested in daughters’ education as enthusiastically as in sons’ education” (Chang, 2010, p. 34). Indeed, the national participation rate in supplementary education is slightly higher for female students than male (Statistics Korea, 2014b). However, women’s educational investment and attainment has not translated into equal participation and recognition in the labour market. The gender wage gap (for full-time employees) of 37.5 percent in Korea is the highest in the OECD and over twice
the OECD average of 15.2 percent (OECD, 2013d). In addition, women are overrepresented in the nation’s disadvantaged non-regular workforce, with 42 percent of female employees engaged in non-regular employment, compared to 28 percent of males (OECD, 2012). The gap is most pronounced among workers in their early forties, where 67.5 percent of women were non-regular workers in 2010, as opposed to 28.9 percent of men (Shin, 2013). The significant gender gaps reflect the difficulties faced by Korean women wishing to combine family responsibilities with a rewarding career. The barriers preventing women from accessing quality employment have discouraged participation in the labour market, particularly among the most educated. The 2010 employment rate for Korean women who had not completed upper secondary education was 12 percentage points above the OECD average, whereas it was 17 percentage points below the OECD average for women holding a tertiary qualification (OECD, 2013d). Rather than being a pathway to enhanced employment opportunities, tertiary education for women has often been used to gain a competitive advantage in the pursuit of a suitable marriage partner (Seth, 2002). Chang (2010) suggests that women’s success in the marriage market is “fundamentally conditioned upon their education level” (p. 36). Korean society seems to be sending mixed messages to women, i.e., that they are equal to men up until the point of completing their tertiary education, but thereafter are considered inferior in the pursuit of professional opportunities. The issue of ongoing labour market gender inequality in a context of educational gender equality is likely to generate a strong goal-means discrepancy among the young female population.

In addition to education-based competition, women are required to compete with one another on the basis of their physical attributes. The definition of being successful for a woman in Korea is strongly correlated with her appearance. Korea has become well-known internationally for its penchant for cosmetic surgery. Like supplementary education, plastic surgery has become so commonplace, that it is considered completely normal and stigma-free. Conservative estimates indicate that 20 percent of Koreans, including a growing number of men, have had cosmetic surgery of some form (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012). As the industry is poorly regulated, cosmetic surgery statistics are not entirely reliable, and the actual figure is likely to be considerably higher. This is particularly the case for women in their twenties. So common is the practice that even those who do not wish to resort to it feel obliged to do so in order to remain competitive. According to Suissa (2008), there is intense social pressure on women of marriageable age to meet widely accepted standards of beauty. Much like education, cosmetic surgery is viewed as an investment to enhance one’s chance of
finding a wealthy husband and therefore securing one’s social and economic status. In the highly competitive Korean marriage market, there is a strong need to “stand out from the herd of eligible young women as being exceptional” (p. 625). A good educational background and attractive physical appearance is a winning combination in the race for the best jobs and marriage partners.

4.3 Implications for suicide risk

In Merton’s terms, it is clear that contemporary Korean society suffers from a “malintegration” of the cultural and social structures. This malintegration is responsible for producing an environment where an increasing number of individuals are unable to fulfil the cultural expectations placed on them. In a context where educational achievement is heavily dependent on the private investment of families in supplementary education, rising economic inequality (as witnessed in post-crisis Korea) translates directly into educational inequality. An inevitable consequence of the intense and increasingly unfair competition for the best education, and therefore employment and marriage prospects, is that not all competitors will be successful in their pursuits. As competition has increased, so too has the number of individuals who fall short of the lofty expectations of society and, in turn, their family and themselves. According to Merton (1968), tension between the cultural and social structures produces anomie, which exerts pressure on certain individuals to engage in deviant behaviour. The effects of anomie in Korean society are likely to be particularly strong among youth, who experience the greatest exposure to, and therefore consequences of, the ultra-competitive educational environment. The growing inequality of access to educational opportunities resulting from the proliferation of supplementary and overseas education suggests that those lower down the social strata are more likely to experience anomie. However, as Merton stressed, the effects of anomie may be felt at all levels of the social strata. A student from a middle-class background may also have his/her goal of admission to a high-ranking university thwarted by the fiercely competitive struggle for limited places, despite greater access to supplementary education opportunities.

As Durkheim observed, “to pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness” (1952, p. 248). When discussing the individual (psychological) manifestations of his suicide typology, Durkheim argued that anomie “throws open the door to disillusionment and consequently to disappointment” (p. 285), and related it
to “anger and all the emotions customarily associated with disappointment” (p. 284). In the case where these negative emotions are directed inward, self-destructive behaviour is a likely outcome in vulnerable individuals. The relative comparability between genders of adolescent and young adult suicide rates in Korea is unique to this age bracket and suggests universal pressure from the social environment. The considerable discrepancy between women’s level of educational attainment and their opportunities in the labour market may be a contributing factor to the unusually high rate of suicide in the young female population. When rising levels of anomie are juxtaposed against the increase in egoism discussed in the previous chapter, it is clear that the social conditions prevailing in post-crisis Korea were rife for a surge in the suicide rate.

4.4 Conclusion

The culturally prescribed goal of social advancement and its associated status is deeply ingrained in Korean culture and shows no signs of diminishing in importance. Contemporary Korean society places a high premium on social ascent and accompanying affluence for all members, regardless of their position in the social strata and consequent access to opportunities. A legacy of the nation’s longstanding Confucian heritage, the attainment of social status in contemporary Korea is deeply grounded in educational achievement. As Seth (2002) succinctly notes, “the pursuit of education [is] about status and prestigious degrees [are] the primary markers of status” (p. 171). Education is, to a significant extent, the only institutionally legitimate means to achieve upward social mobility. While founded on egalitarian ideals, the modern Korean educational system has developed into the most costly and competitive in the world. Low-income families have been increasingly disadvantaged by the institutionalisation of supplementary education, the proliferation of overseas education, and the high cost of tertiary education. In many respects, the modern education system resembles the elitist civil service exams of the Joseon dynasty. Numerous attempts at state intervention have been largely ineffectual to date, and the vicious cycle of competition continues to escalate. As inequality increases, the gap between the goal of social advancement and the institutionalised means (i.e., education) for achieving it has been widening in recent decades. This suggests that there has been a fundamental breakdown in the capacity of Korean society to regulate the aspirations of its members in accordance with available means. In Durkheimian terms, such a decline in social regulation is representative
of an increase in the degree to which Korean society’s institutions produce anomie. This, in turn, contributes to an increase in the suicide rate.
5 IMPLICATIONS FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION

5.1 Introduction

From our discussion in the preceding chapters, we have seen that there is good evidence in Korea of a marked change in strength in Durkheim’s explanatory variables in recent decades, particularly in the wake of the 1997 economic crisis. The erosion of the bond between individual and family is representative of a decline in social integration (increasing egoism), while the widening discrepancy between cultural goals and institutional means is indicative of weakening social regulation (increasing anomie). In light of the discernible decline, this chapter initially examines the implications for Korea’s suicide rate in terms of Durkheim’s theory. It then argues that, contrary to the prevailing view that suicide is an individual-level issue, the problem in Korea must be framed as a macro-social one if the underlying causes are to be addressed. The key to long-term suicide prevention strategies in Korea, therefore, lies in social policy. The chapter discusses the need for policy responses to the issue of deepening social inequality in Korea.

5.2 Does Durkheim’s theory explain the increase in Korea’s suicide rate?

Durkheim’s theory posits that the degree of social integration and social regulation together determine the suicide rate of a given population at any given point in time. Although social regulation has traditionally been downplayed and even ignored by researchers, I have argued that both dimensions are important in explaining the increase in Korea’s suicide rate. More specifically, declining social integration (increasing egoism) is likely to have the greatest impact on older age groups, while declining social regulation (increasing anomie) is more likely to affect adolescents and young adults. There is good evidence to suggest that both social integration and social regulation, as defined by Durkheim, have weakened significantly in Korea since the economic crisis of 1997. In Durkheim’s terms then, contemporary Korean society may be classified as both egoistic and anomic, relative to the pre-crisis period. According to Durkheim, the suicide rate of a society at any given time can be explained in terms of the balance of the four “suicidogenic currents.” When the currents are in a state of dynamic equilibrium, individuals are relatively protected from suicidal impulses. A change in strength in one or both of the causal variables such that the state of equilibrium is upset results in an increase in the suicide rate. In the case of post-crisis Korea, there has been an
increase in both egoistic and anomic currents, the result of which is a significant disturbance in the equilibrium and therefore a significant increase in the suicide rate.

When discussing the individual manifestations of his suicide typology, Durkheim argued that the different types of suicide are:

not always found in actual experience in a state of purity or isolation. They are very often combined with one another, giving rise to composite varieties; characteristics of several types will be united in a single suicide. The reason for this is that different social causes of suicide themselves may simultaneously affect the same individual and impose their combined effects upon him. (1952, p. 287)

Moreover, he noted the “peculiar affinity” between egoism and anomie, claiming that “it is not surprising that they should be found in the same individual” (p. 288). Thus, the dual increase in intensity in Korea of egoistic and anomic currents is likely to result in a complex interaction in certain vulnerable individuals, giving rise to the mixed variety of ego-anomic suicide. For example, Korean youth exposed to anomie may concurrently suffer from the effects of weakened social integration (egoism). Suicidal impulses may be reduced in the presence of various protective factors. Typically, social support mechanisms such as the family buffer individuals against suicidal impulses; however, the capacity of the Korean family to function as a protective buffer has weakened in recent years, rendering the individual more vulnerable to suicidal tendencies.

Although not empirically validated here, it is reasonable to conclude that Durkheim’s theory of suicide provides a plausible explanation for the unprecedented surge in Korea’s suicide rate observed since the late 1990s. As Durkheim found in nineteenth-century Europe, such a dramatic increase cannot be explained by individual psychopathology or other non-social factors. The aetiology of suicide in Korea is to be found in the social structure. Suicide therefore represents an extreme response by vulnerable individuals to adverse social conditions.
5.3 The need for a macro-social approach to suicide prevention

There is no simple solution to suicide prevention, yet suicide is preventable. Such a complex, multidimensional phenomenon as suicide requires a multilayered approach to its prevention. Suicidologists have identified five major areas of prevention: (i) education and awareness programs for the general public and professionals; (ii) screening methods for high-risk persons; (iii) treatment of psychiatric disorders; (iv) restriction of access to lethal means; and (v) media reporting of suicide (Mann et al., 2005). In their review of studies on suicide prevention strategies, Mann et al. (2005) concluded that physician education in the recognition and treatment of depression and restriction of access to lethal means are the most proven methods of suicide reduction, while more evidence of efficacy is required for the other methods.

Consistent with Mann et al.’s findings regarding the restriction of lethal means, the decline in Korea’s suicide rate in 2012 – the first in six years – has been credited to the ban on the pesticide Gramoxone, a method particularly popular among the rural elderly population (Park, J.-M., 2013). While restricting access to lethal means may be successful in reducing the number of impulsive suicides, there is a limit to its effectiveness, and individuals with sufficient suicidal intent will simply seek an alternate method. When screen doors were installed on subway platforms in Seoul to prevent jumping in the path of trains, the number of suicide attempts from bridges over the city’s Han River increased (Yonhap News Agency, 2011).

Given that diagnosable psychiatric disorders are present in over 90 percent of suicide victims and that more than 80 percent of disorders are untreated at the time of death (Mann et al., 2005), the clinician clearly plays a frontline role in suicide prevention at the individual level. The stigmatisation of mental health issues in Korea represents a major obstacle to the diagnosis and treatment of psychiatric disorders (Cho et al., 2009), and a cultural change is urgently required if mental health service use is to improve. Appropriate treatment of mood and other psychiatric disorders is a central component of any suicide prevention strategy and is likely to be the most effective short-term solution to reducing suicide in Korea. The applicability of Durkheim’s theory to the Korean context, however, suggests that the problem is largely a macro-social one. While clinical approaches are vital to addressing individual suicide risk, they represent a ‘band aid’ solution to the larger problem as they treat the symptoms rather than the underlying causes. As Durkheim noted, “the productive cause of
[suicide] naturally escapes the observer of individuals only; for it lies outside individuals. To discover it, one must raise his point of view above individual suicides and perceive what gives them unity.” (1952, p. 324). Following Durkheim’s anti-reductionist perspective, we need to step back from the individual and look at the underlying macro-social conditions that interact with individual predispositions to stimulate self-destructive behaviour.

Durkheim’s perspective is consistent with a public health approach to prevention. In his seminal article, epidemiologist Geoffrey Rose (1985) argued that individual prevention strategies are “interim expedient[s], needed in order to protect susceptible individuals, but only for so long as the underlying causes of incidence remain unknown or uncontrollable; if causes can be removed, susceptibility ceases to matter” (p. 38). Rose advocated the “population strategy,” arguing that, “the priority of concern should always be the discovery and control of the causes of incidence” (p. 38). Efforts to reduce Korea’s suicide rate over the long term are unlikely to make any significant impact unless there is a strong focus on macro-social strategies aimed at stabilising the imbalance in Durkheim’s explanatory variables. A sixth category should therefore be added to the major areas of suicide prevention identified, one that recognises the social structural determinants of suicidal behaviour (particularly relevant to societies undergoing change), i.e., effective management of social policies. A comprehensive national prevention strategy that integrates both individual-level (mental health) and macro-level (social policy) responses recognises the multifaceted nature of suicide and is likely to be the most effective approach to reducing Korea’s suicide rate in the long term.

5.3.1 Social inequality

When analysing Durkheim’s two explanatory variables in the Korean context, one issue stands out as being common to both – increasing social inequality. In terms of social integration, we have seen how post-economic crisis neoliberal reforms have contributed to labour market duality. Pronounced discrepancies between the employment conditions of regular and non-regular workers have polarised the workforce and strongly fuelled income inequality and poverty. Although successive administrations have substantially increased the state’s commitment to social welfare since democratisation, the Korean welfare state remains underdeveloped and one of the weakest in the OECD. The present social security system is
failing to meet the needs of many of society’s most disadvantaged citizens, particularly the over-65 population, whose poverty rate is the highest in the OECD.

In terms of social regulation, we have seen how Korea’s modern education system – founded on egalitarian ideals – has developed into the most expensive and competitive in the world. Intense, “inhuman” competition for admission to the nation’s elite universities has seen rampant proliferation of various forms of supplementary education among primary and secondary school students. While not a recent phenomenon, the problem has intensified since the late 1990s with the growing importance of English proficiency. The cost of supplementary and overseas education has created a substantial divide between those families able to afford such opportunities and those unable to. Financial disadvantage translates directly into educational disadvantage, contributing to intergenerational inequality. Moreover, women continue to experience labour market gender inequality, despite educational gender equality.

While rising inequality is certainly not unique to Korea (OECD, 2013d), the post-crisis period contrasts starkly with a recent tradition of egalitarianism and homogeneity in Korea. During the period of strong economic growth from the early 1960s until 1997, Koreans enjoyed relatively equal income distribution. Living standards continuously improved, and a new middle class was formed (Lett, 1998). The sustainability of that middle class has been under threat in the post-crisis period (Koo, 2007), and there is an urgent need for policy intervention to tackle the issue of rising inequality in contemporary Korean society. This section discusses the need for policy responses in the three key areas of the labour market, social welfare, and education.

5.3.1.1 Labour market

Labour market duality in post-crisis Korea has been cited as one of the primary causes of the rise in social inequality. As such, labour market reform plays a critical role in the policy response to inequality. At the core of the problem is the polarisation of the workforce into regular and non-regular workers. Despite undertaking similar work and similar hours, non-regular workers suffer from extreme discrimination in terms of remuneration, benefits, and protection. Consequently, non-regular workers have become second-class citizens, not only in the workforce, but in society more generally. Labour market reform is complex and the
details of the policy responses required are beyond the scope of this thesis (see Chapter 3, OECD (2013d) for a detailed analysis). Needless to say, there is an urgent need to improve the employment conditions of non-regular workers and reduce incentives for employers to hire non-regular workers. One of the most pressing issues is the need to expand the coverage of non-regular workers by the social security system to reduce their vulnerability.

5.3.1.2 Social welfare

Substantial progress in the development of a modern welfare state has been made in the decades since Korea’s democratisation. Gross public social expenditure increased from 2.8 percent of GDP in 1990 to 9.3 percent in 2012, representing an annual increase of 12 percent in real terms, the fastest rate of growth in the OECD (OECD, 2013d; OECD, 2014a). In spite of this, Korea’s social spending is the second lowest in the OECD (only Mexico spends less) and less than half the OECD average of 21.9 percent (OECD, 2014a). In contrast, several European countries spend over 30 percent. Korea’s recent increase in spending is only sufficient to offset the country’s rapid population ageing, and has failed to alleviate the deterioration in income distribution in the wake of the 1997 economic crisis. There is general agreement that Korea must increase social spending in line with its level of development and improve coverage to fill ‘blind spots’ in the social safety net. Although currently one of the youngest, Korea’s population is ageing at the fastest rate in the OECD and is projected to be the second oldest by 2050 (OECD, 2013d). Thus, there is a strong sense of urgency to increasing social spending.

Introduced in 2000 to address the post-crisis rise in poverty, the National Basic Livelihood Security Program (NBLSP) is the principal income security program, particularly for elderly people without income or with inadequate access to pension payments. However, the program has proved ineffective in reducing poverty, with nearly half the over-65 population living in relative poverty, the highest level in the OECD. One of the critical weaknesses of the NBLSP is the overly strict eligibility criteria, principally the ‘legal supporter criterion.’ The requirement that recipients do not have a close adult-age family member such as a spouse, child, or son/daughter-in-law precludes a substantial number of needy individuals from receiving benefits. The legal supporter criterion needs to be relaxed or phased out in recognition of the fact that although potential recipients may have an adult-age family member, they do not necessarily receive sufficient (or any) financial support from that
individual. Social policy in Korea cannot continue to be premised on outdated notions of Confucian familial support when the reality indicates otherwise. Coverage of the NBLSP needs to be extended to cater to all those living below the absolute poverty line. Another inherent weakness of the NBLSP is that it is administered by local governments, who are responsible for contributing between 10 and 60 percent of the funding (OECD, 2012). As a result of this financial burden, local governments attempt to limit outlays. Funding for the program therefore needs to be centralised so that recipients are not disadvantaged by the availability of local funding.

Well-targeted social spending is critical to reducing poverty and improving the quality of life for Korea’s most disadvantaged citizens. By relieving some of the financial pressure on overstretched families, targeted social spending has the potential to contribute to a reduction in tendencies of defamiliation, thereby strengthening social integration.

5.3.1.3 Education

The central mechanism driving educational inequality in Korea is the high degree of participation in private supplementary education. There is a clear need to reduce reliance on the private education sector and therefore reduce the heavy financial burden on Korean families. The issue is not a new one. The state has made repeated efforts since the 1960s to control the burgeoning private education industry; however, attempts at regulation have generally targeted the symptoms rather than the causes, and the industry has continued to thrive. At the heart of the problem is the pressure for students to outperform each other on the all-important university entrance examination. The overwhelming demand for tertiary education, aggravated by the well-defined stratification of the higher education system, has resulted in the university entrance exam becoming the single most important pathway to success and social status. Consequently, maximising their test score has become an all-consuming process for secondary school students. A general lack of confidence in the state education system, coupled with the desire to gain a competitive advantage over others, has fuelled the demand for supplementary education.

Reducing the importance placed on the university entrance exam is one possible method of decreasing reliance on the various forms of supplementary education. One option is to lower the weight given to the exam in selecting students for university admission by broadening
selection criteria to allow for a more well-rounded measurement of student achievement levels. This approach requires caution, however, as the inclusion of more subjective selection criteria creates opportunities for favouritism and corruption and may generate more problems than it solves. Another option is to strengthen public alternatives to private supplementary education. Increasing the government’s commitment to publicly funded after-school tuition programs has the potential to reduce reliance on the private sector as well as alleviating the discrimination against low-income households inherent in the current system. As the growth of the private education sector has strongly undermined state education, it is widely acknowledged that the government needs to continue to improve the overall quality of the educational experience in the public school system and restore the public’s faith in it. Given the tremendous importance placed on English proficiency since the late 1990s, there is a particular urgency to improving the quality and effectiveness of English teaching to better meet the demands of the higher education sector and employers. As English accounts for the highest amount of private education expenditure, this option has the potential to significantly alleviate the financial burden on Korean families.

Perhaps what is ultimately required to reduce pressure on Korea’s overheated educational system is cultural change. After all, it is the disjunction between the cultural and social structures that generates anomie (Merton, 1968). If harmony between the two cannot be reasonably achieved through social structural change, then cultural change may be the only alternative. While Koreans’ near-universal desire for tertiary education is a unique and admirable cultural trait, in reality it is impractical. An overeducated ‘top heavy’ society where non-academic qualifications and manual labour are devalued cannot function without creating friction. In addition to increasing competition, the cultural expectation of pursuing tertiary education places undue pressure on a sizeable proportion of the population for whom this expectation is unreasonable. While every member of society should be encouraged to improve themselves through education, not every member is capable of pursuing tertiary education, nor should they be. The current oversupply of university graduates and the diminishing economic returns on their sizeable educational investment are indications that Korea’s ‘educational fever’ may be unsustainable.

There is no question that the nation’s zeal for education was directly related to its remarkable industrial transformation. However, this zeal cannot continue indefinitely at previous levels. Korean society has fundamentally changed since the days of modernisation, and culture needs to adapt accordingly. During the period of compressed modernity, Korean society
underwent an extraordinary process of rebuilding from the ground up. A new capitalist social stratification was being forged, and this was largely built on the populace’s educational investment. There are natural limits to social mobility, however, and society cannot be composed entirely of a middle and upper class. The cultural expectation that the next generation will ‘outdo’ the one before cannot continue indefinitely. Of course, cultural change is ‘easier said than done.’ The belief in education as the pathway to social mobility and status has gradually permeated Korean culture over centuries of Confucian influence and practical experience. Seth (2002) is not optimistic about change, noting, “as long as education remains linked to widely held ideas of social status, … reforms are not likely to succeed. More likely, the mass streaming of Koreans toward the educational ladder of social success will continue.” (p. 256). Such a deeply ingrained cultural value takes time to wind back, but perhaps the hardship that Koreans are currently experiencing is the first step in that process. If the rate at which time-honoured Confucian family norms and values have deteriorated in the post-crisis period is anything to go by, a change in Confucian-inspired educational culture may not be such an unreasonable expectation after all.

5.4 Conclusion

The discernible decline in strength in Durkheim’s causal variables in post-crisis Korea suggests that Durkheim’s theory provides a plausible explanation for the unprecedented increase in the nation’s suicide rate since 1997. The suicide epidemic in Korea can therefore be considered to be largely a macrostructural issue rather than an individual-level one. Prevailing views on suicide prevention strategies, however, strongly favour the individual-level perspective, placing mental health at the centre of such strategies. A modification of this view is required if Korea’s suicide rate is to be reduced in the long-term. A comprehensive national prevention strategy that acknowledges both mental health and social policy perspectives is likely to be the most effective tool in tackling Korea’s suicide rate over the long term. Korea faces the challenge of reducing social inequality arising from income inequality and poverty. Major labour market reforms are required to reduce incentives for employers to hire non-regular workers as well as to improve employment conditions for non-regular workers. The country needs to substantially increase its level of social spending in line with other advanced industrial nations, while improving the coverage of existing social welfare programs. Furthermore, reform must continue in the education system to reduce the
heavy reliance on the private sector, thereby improving social mobility opportunities for the financially disadvantaged. Relieving the considerable financial and psychological burden relating to employment security, familial support, and educational investment will help ease pressure and tension within the family unit and prevent further declines in marriage and fertility. Greater equality of access to educational opportunities will help to reduce the discrepancy between the dominant cultural goal of social mobility and the institutional means of achieving it, thereby lowering the level of anomie. Well-implemented social policy responses therefore have the potential to strengthen both social integration and social regulation, thus lowering suicide risk in the general population.
6 CONCLUSION

6.1 Limitations and suggestions for future research

The principal limitation of this study is that Durkheim’s theory cannot be conclusively shown to apply to the Korean context without supporting empirical evidence. However, given the difficulties in operationalizing Durkheim’s theory identified in this thesis (Chapter 2), it was decided not to undertake an empirical analysis. While this thesis has considered only the presence of egoistic and anomic suicide, it is possible that Durkheim’s other types of suicide, notably altruistic suicide, may also be present in contemporary Korean society. An additional limitation is that there may be unique Korean cultural traits relevant to suicide that are not taken into account by Durkheim’s theory. For example, although there is a social stigma attached to mental health issues in Korea, it is possible that permissive attitudes exist towards suicide as a solution to stressful life events. This may have relevance to the explanation behind Korea’s suicide rate.

Future research of an empirical nature could be undertaken in order to verify the claims made in this thesis. In addition, future studies may be undertaken to determine the effectiveness of social policy responses in Korea as a means of suicide prevention. An additional avenue of future research would be to apply Durkheim’s framework in a similar manner to other societies undergoing substantial social, economic, and political change. The present study suggests that Durkheim’s theory has the power to predict an increase in the suicide rate in the context of declining social integration and/or social regulation. Such predictive power could be used to enable societies to be better prepared for an increased risk of suicide in the population.

6.2 Concluding remarks

Over a century ago, French social theorist Emile Durkheim (1952) challenged the notion that suicide is purely an individual-level issue. Although he was not the first to investigate the social dimension of suicide, Durkheim developed an original, coherent sociological theory that has exerted paradigmatic influence ever since. Noting the considerable variation between the suicide rates of different European countries and the relative stability of national rates, Durkheim rejected various non-social factors, including individual psychopathology, in the explanation of the differing rates. Insisting that the social suicide rate can be explained only
sociologically, Durkheim argued that the aetiology of suicide is to be found in the social structure. He posited that two social conditions – integration and regulation – together determine the suicide rate of a society at a given point in time. Durkheim proposed a fourfold typology of suicide based on the polar extremes of his causal variables, but was most concerned with the types prevalent in modern industrial society, which he named egoistic suicide (insufficient integration) and anomic suicide (insufficient regulation). The suicide rate, Durkheim argued, can be explained in terms of a collective force consisting of “suicidogenic currents,” (egoism, anomie, etc.), which, by converging on vulnerable or predisposed individuals, causes them to commit suicide.

Social integration refers to the bonds attaching individuals to society. Of the three social institutions (religion, family, polity) used by Durkheim to analyse the effects of integration on suicide, the family has provided the strongest and most durable empirical support for Durkheim’s hypothesis. Durkheim argued that the family environment provides protection against suicidal impulses through the presence of strong and numerous social bonds. As the most fundamental unit of Korean society, the family was the only reliable source of support and protection to the individual during the turbulent twentieth century. Yet, in the aftermath of the 1997 economic crisis, there are strong indications that Koreans are defying long-standing Confucian norms and values by delaying or avoiding family responsibilities, creating a demographic crisis. The surprising trend seems to have been generated by a complex interaction of competing family ideologies brought about by the nation’s extremely condensed experience of modernisation (Chang, 2010), exacerbated by the detrimental effects of the 1997 economic crisis and subsequent neoliberal structural reforms on household income and employment security. The effects of declining social integration have been particularly harsh on middle-aged and elderly Koreans.

Durkheim’s second causal variable, social regulation, refers to the moderation of individuals’ aspirations by social norms. Durkheim used the term ‘anomie’ to refer to the condition of insufficient social regulation. While the social regulation dimension of his theory of suicide has been largely neglected by researchers, the concept of anomie, on the other hand, was extensively developed by later scholars to explain the structural sources of deviant and criminal behaviour. In his seminal work, Merton (1938, 1968) argued that a disjunction between cultural goals and the institutional means to achieve them generates anomie, thus exerting pressure on vulnerable individuals to engage in deviant behaviour (of which suicide is an example). In Korea, the attainment of social status is a deeply ingrained cultural goal
that dates back to the nation’s Confucian past. Since dynastic times, status has been acquired through social mobility, which, in turn, is achieved through formal education. Koreans’ vehement belief in education as the vehicle for social mobility and status attainment has seen the nation pursue educational credentials at a rate unrivaled anywhere else in the world. While this ‘education fever’ has created one of the world’s most literate and highly-educated populations, the near-universal drive for tertiary education has generated a fiercely competitive educational system that relies heavily on the private investment of families in various forms of supplementary education. Deepening income inequality in the wake of the 1997 economic crisis has translated into educational inequality, and, consequently, a sizeable handicap for low-income households in the race for the best educational, employment, and marriage prospects. Thus, the gap between the cultural goal of social mobility and the institutional means (education) of achieving it has been widening in recent decades. Anomie generated by this discrepancy has had a particularly detrimental impact on younger Koreans and is conducive to an increase in suicidal tendencies in this segment of the population.

There is good evidence of a discernible decline in Durkheim’s causal variables in Korea, particularly during the post-crisis period. Weakening social integration as evidenced by the erosion of the Confucian-influenced bond between individual and family has had the greatest impact on older age groups, while declining social regulation as evidenced by the imbalance between cultural goals and institutional means is most likely to have affected adolescents and young adults. Durkheim’s theory of suicide provides a plausible explanation for the dramatic increase in Korea’s suicide rate since the late 1990s, suggesting that the problem is largely a macro-social one. Suicide prevention strategies typically focus on addressing individual-level risk factors and neglect social determinants (Mann et al., 2005). However, the applicability of Durkheim’s theory to the Korean context suggests that a long-term reduction in the suicide rate can be achieved only through a comprehensive national prevention strategy that integrates both mental health and social policy responses. Rising social inequality since the 1997 economic crisis presents a major challenge for Korean policy-makers, most notably in the areas of the labour market, social welfare, and education. Labour market duality is largely responsible for the increase in income inequality and poverty, and major reforms are required to improve the employment conditions of disadvantaged non-regular workers. Korea needs to substantially increase its level of social spending to bring it more in line with other advanced industrial nations. This includes improving the coverage of social security programs to reduce poverty, particularly in the over-65 population. Finally, ongoing educational reform is
required to reduce the heavy reliance on private supplementary education, which strongly exacerbates socioeconomic inequality and contributes to intergenerational inequality. Policy measures to promote greater equality have the potential to restore balance in Durkheim’s causal variables. With relief from financial and psychological stress, Koreans may once again realise the important place of the family in individual life.

Despite the passage of time, Durkheim’s theory of suicide remains a powerful conceptual tool in shedding light on the root causes of suicide. This thesis has argued that both dimensions of Durkheim’s theoretical framework are necessary to the explanation of the increase in Korea’s suicide rate. Adopting a sociological perspective to suicide allows us to gain greater insight into the underlying causes, thereby enabling us to develop more effective strategies to tackle the problem at its core. In the formulation of effective prevention strategies, the role of sociology in understanding suicide at the macro level is as important as that of clinical approaches at the micro level. Korea’s high suicide rate, among other disturbing social trends, is symptomatic of a significant decline in the quality of life since the 1997 economic crisis for a sizeable proportion of the population. In the years ahead, Korea faces the considerable challenge of addressing the issue of widening social inequality in the context of rapid population ageing. While clinical approaches will always be at the core of suicide prevention efforts at the individual level, the key to long-term prevention in Korea lies in the state’s ability to reverse the trend of rising inequality. Only then will the quality of life improve for all citizens and the suicidal impulse diminish.
REFERENCES


