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“The influence of culture on Alfred Adler’s life tasks, the definition of ‘criminal’, and intrafamily killings in Korea”

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ABSTRACT

Adler posited that the successful resolution of the three main life tasks in socially useful ways—friendship, love, work—served as a benchmark of social and mental health across the entire life cycle. However, it remains unclear how Adler’s ideas about friendship and marriage may fit into the context of non-nuclear families in other cultural and historical contexts. In this paper, I analyze parricide and filicide cases in Korea to illustrate the assumption of nucleation in Adler’s theoretical framework, along with the unique way that culture shapes the meaning and behavior of homicide offenders. I argue that the successful negotiation of family relations in the context of multigenerational households in a Confucian-influenced family system represents a unique task across the life course that recalibrates the notion of social interest in important ways.

Key words: Alfred Adler, Individual psychology, culture and crime, Korean homicide, parricide, filicide

Introduction

Unlike his contemporaries such as Freud or Jung, Adler unified a theory of personality and crime into one framework. Despite this theoretical integration, there are several reasons to critically reexamine Adler's views about crime and criminals, especially their intersection with the official definition proffered by the state. First, Adler's definition of crime and criminality reproduces a materialistic conception of crime which imputes undue rationality to offenders and the offending process (Shon & Barton-Bellessa, 2015). For Adler, crime is defined as use of force or deception for the purpose of acquiring material gain (Adler, 2004, p. 114). The existing literature on individual psychology continues to assume this neo-Adlerian definition of crime, criminals, and criminality (e.g., Highland & Dabney, 2009; Highland, Kern & Curlette, 2010). For example, while Highland and Dabney (2009, p. 134) stated that their study of drug dealers "may be able to identify people at risk of harming others or the community at large via criminal activity," they overlooked the fact that law enforcement practices during the height of the crack trade in the 1980s and 90s selectively targeted black Americans in inner cities while virtually ignoring the upper-class whites who consumed its powdered form (Alexander, 2008). Highland and Dabney thus unproblematically accept the definition of a "criminal" and the purported goal of material gain without considering the racial bias and selective enforcement efforts that led to the criminal label.

Second, a sample of drug dealers from a prison population is a more accurate reflection of disparity in sentencing decisions of courts than criminal motivation and antisocial tendencies of offenders, for possession of 500 grams of cocaine (purchased and consumed by middle and upper-class whites) yielded the same prison sentence as five grams of crack (purchased and consumed by inner city black Americans) (Reiman, 2008). In addition, being a street-level drug dealer just does not pay enough to make ends meet; drug dealers often supplement their illegal work with service-related jobs, both which pay about minimum wage (Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000, p. 787). Drug dealers who would exemplify the antisocial characteristics noted in Highland and Dabney's (2009) sample would have been "new jacks" who view drug dealing as a durative career or "enforcers" who perform security functions within street gangs (Hagedorn, 1994). Using convicted drug dealers as an example of a "criminal" is thus problematic, for it overlooks the financial reality of their work and the role of the state as complicit agents in the production of crime in its definition—despite the state's pronouncement of their guilt (Chambliss, 1988). It is important to advance Adler's theory of crime and criminals beyond the present state by exploring other cultural and historical settings and their implications for Adler's ideas.

Third, crime and criminals in Adler's works have disproportionately emphasized the acquisitive aim of predatory offenders, reflected in crimes such as robbery, theft, and financially motivated murder (see Adler, 1992, p. 106; Adler, 2004). This narrow account of violent criminals leads to the omission of a large class of offenders who kill for non-material gain, especially those who commit killings within the family. For example, Highland, Kern, and Curlette (2010) found that killers did not spend a lot of time planning their crimes. They explained their ambiguous result in the following way: "We suggest that this finding is more likely a product of a lack of specificity of murderer type rather than invalidation of Adler's theory. For instance, differentiating serial killers from single victim murderers could provide a very different picture" (Highland, Kern, & Curlette, 2010, p. 452). The preceding account is correct and consistent with the voluminous literature on the many varieties of homicides. However, Highland et al. implicitly assume Adler's (Adler, 1992, 2004) definition of a murderer: one who kills a defenseless victim in premeditated ways. Homicides within the family tend to be shaped by inadequate resources or changes in gender roles, not financial gain (Roth, 2001). In addition to specificity of murder types, homicides do not always involve premeditation and defenseless victims, for homicide is a social act that unfolds between at least three participants: a victim, an offender, and an audience. Moreover, the legal identity one assumes is oftentimes contingent on pure chance rather than malicious intent (see Wolfgang, 1958). Homicides are also shaped by macro-level forces such as ideology and culture, which affect not only

quantitative rates of violence, but also the character of violence, such as shifts in offender and victim identities, family composition and the relations amongst them, and the weapons used (Shon & Marques, 2021). The cultural factors at work in homicides are overlooked in Adler's definition of murder which foreground criteria such as premeditation and a defenseless victim (Adler, 1992, 2004). A culturally nuanced approach to understanding intrafamily homicides is necessary in the Adlerian literature.

My contention is that Adler overstated the significance of stranger-on-stranger killings in his work in order to support his theory while overlooking the meaning of homicides within the family. That is, Adler may have assumed cultural sensibilities unique to western Europe. An examination of family killings—parricide (killing of a parent) and filicide (killing of offspring by a parent) in particular—in a Korean context has the potential to advance Adler's notion of social interest as it relates to culture specific family constellations (see Kim & Hogge, 2013). It is this culturally mediated family relations that Highland and associates overlooked in their Adlerian study of murderers. In addition to forming friendships, I argue that the successful negotiation of family relations—genealogical (related by blood) and affinal (related by marriage)—in the context of multigenerational, joint households in a Confucian-influenced social system represents a unique task across the life course that recalibrates the notion of social interest in important ways. The joint family structures found in Far East Asia (e.g., Lee & Park, 2008; Okada & Kurosu, 1998) differ from the primarily nuclear character of family that Adler implicitly assumed. The Confucian-influenced family constellations have the potential to illuminate factors that have been missed by previous Adlerian scholars who have examined homicides. Fully teasing out the meaning of cultural practices and how family members negotiate the complex relations between them in mid-20th century Korea may add an additional level of richness to Adler's views on the three life tasks and the notion of social interest.

This paper examines parricides and filicides in a South Korean (hereafter "Korean") context. The preceding offenses are used to illustrate the assumption of nucleation in Adler's three life tasks, along with the unique way that culture shapes the meaning and behavior of parricide and filicide offenders. Adler emphasized the successful resolution of three main tasks in life—friendship, love, work—as a benchmark of social and mental health across the entire life cycle. I argue, however, that these tasks may need to be refined when viewed in non-Western cultural contexts where alternative family systems and cultural values operate. Consequently, it remains unclear how Adler's ideas about friendship and marriage may fit into the context of non-nuclear families.

Adler also attributed mental illness such as delirium and hallucinations to a lack of social interest (Adler, 1992, p. 214; Adler, 2003, p.185). He also noted the presence of delusions and paranoia in patients who believed that the "world was involved in a conspiracy against them" (Adler, 1992, p. 214). In contemporary psychiatric literature, mental illness is viewed as a causal factor in the killing of one's parent and offspring, which are exacerbated by depression, paranoia, psychosis, schizophrenia, and personality disorders (Friedman & Resnick, 2015; Marleau, Millaud, & Auclair, 2003; Raymond et al., 2021; Tang & Siu, 2018; Valenca et al., 2021). This logically leads to the following question: was mental illness a factor in Korean filicides and parricides, and what was the meaning that was attached to them?

Data, Methods, and Validation

The current comparative study draws on previously published studies of Korean parricides and an on-going study of Korean filicides. Both studies used *Chosun Ilbo*, a major Korean newspaper established in the 1920s, as data. Both types of family killings were searched beginning on January 1, 1948, to December 31, 1962. Case selection began in 1948 as that year marked the beginning of the Republic of Korea. Case selection ended in 1962 as it marked the end of the first full year of military rule.

Newspaper copies were available in digital texts and publicly available. The digitized texts were manually examined, looking for the appearance of terms such as 'homicide' and 'murder' in the

initial stages. A more refined search was carried out if the term 'sarin' (Korean word for murder/homicide) appeared; cases were selected for inclusion if the term 'chasik' (offspring) or 'jon sok' (superordinate elder) appeared next to the term 'murder'. 'Chasik sarin' literally translates to 'offspring murder,' the closest English equivalent of 'filicide'; 'jon sok sarin' translates to 'superordinate murder,' the closest English equivalent of 'parricide'.

Articles that were directly related to the killing of a parent or superordinate family elders were selected which resulted in a total of 102 newspaper articles on 92 completed or attempted parricide incidents (n=92). Newspaper articles directly related to the killing of an offspring or subordinate relative were selected, which resulted in 152 newspaper articles on 136 completed or attempted filicide incidents (n=136). While access to official criminal justice records would have enabled a more robust study, the rules of access at the National Archives of Korea (NAK) prohibited access to official records for 30 years once they enter its custody. Moreover, permission of surviving family members is required in order to access official records. These internal policies at the NAK made it impossible to check the validity of crime-related information contained in the newspapers.

To get around this problem of validation, I compared contemporary criminal justice records (i.e., sentencing verdicts in trial courts of original jurisdiction) to contemporary newspaper articles on parricide cases in Korea. Recent criminal justice records are accessible to the public for a ten-year period at the regional prosecutor's offices. To locate cases, Korean Supreme Court files were searched in order to find the case numbers of specific parricide incidents. Once these case numbers were obtained, document requests were submitted. Using 20 parricide court cases and 20 newspaper articles that occurred between 2002 and 2012, a convergence rate was constructed using three key variables necessary to understand parricides. The weapon used, intent, and the sources of conflict between the victims and offenders converged in 75 percent of the cases (Shon & Lee, 2016b). Newspapers were thus verified to be a valid source of data in the preceding ways to study the past.

For the current study, one key variable was examined. The putative motivation—reasons parents kill their offspring and offspring kill parents—was imputed from the descriptions contained in the newspapers. This one variable serves as the focal point of critical examination of Adler's three life tasks and social interest. The excerpts that are used in the paper all originate from Chosun Ilbo. The first four digits in the case number refer to the date on which the offense was reported in the newspaper. The last four digits refer to the year. For example, Case# 09011957 refers to an incident that was reported on September 1, 1957.

Disentangling the Putative Motivation in Parricide and Filicide

Although homicides are generally classified by the relationship between victims and offenders (homicide type), other criteria can also be applied. For instance, mass murders are defined by the number of victims (3 or more) that an offender kills in a single incident (Bowers, Holmes, & Rohm, 2010). However, in addition to the categories that are imposed by the logic of the relationship between victims and offenders (e.g., parent-offspring) and victim counts, previous criminological literature illuminates a number of motivations that underlie homicides within the family. For example, mass killings of family members are often carried out by male heads-of-household who experience major life transitions such as divorce, termination of employment, major illness, loss of child custody, and massacre their family in response (Liem & Reichelmann, 2014). Husbands primarily kill their wives in intimate partner homicides as a way of asserting their patriarchal authority while women do so in order to defend themselves or their children (Belknap et al., 2012).

Parricide is broadly defined in the West as the killing of a parent. Filicide is generally defined in the West as the killing of one's child who is under the age of 18. An examination of parricides and filicides in a Korean context has the potential to contribute to the body of Adlerian and humanistic psychology literature in a number of ways. First, the Korean definition is not restricted to biological and stepparent victims as in Western definitions; the definition of parricide includes the killing of

superordinate elders such as grandparents, fathers/mothers-in-law, uncles, and aunts (Shon, 2018). The variation in the definition of parricide and filicide illustrates the fundamental cultural differences between the West and East. Second, Korean language and customs do not restrict the definition and meaning of a 'child' to those under the age of 18.

Third, Korea differs from the European-American values and sensibilities that marked the Victorian and interwar period that Adler lived and practiced as a therapist. Korean society is marked by collectivism rather than individualism. It is guided by Confucian principles such as filial piety, family loyalty, and harmony and deference is accorded to status and age rather than liberal values such as equality and right (U Kim & YS Park, 2000). This difference in ideology and culture translates into life tasks that may vary significantly from the ones Adler used as examples. A key cultural difference that arises relates to the definition of the family and the various relations that bind its members.

Adler advocated the view that forming friendships in adolescence, securing meaningful work in adulthood, and establishing one's own family through marriage constituted three key tasks throughout the life course (Adler, 1992). While Adler promoted monogamy and progeny as indicators of successful resolution of this life task, he did not systematically explain how relations between parents and their offspring, and other family members ought to be organized and managed, although he did comment on how the relations between husbands and wives ought to be organized. One reason may be that Adler was a product of his time. Marriage in late 19th and early 20th century Victorian Europe experienced an increase in nuclear families (Fauve-Chamoux, 2002; Kermodé, 1999) as well as the emergence of new gender roles. Men were expected to be wage-earners in the market economy while women were expected to be caretakers in the home (see Rotundo, 1993 for an American embodiment of gender role shifts). In the process, the family became nucleated.

Mid-20th century Korea did not experience such shifts until the latter part of the 20th century. After being liberated from a 35-year colonial rule (1910-45), and a brief reign by U.S. authorities (1945-48), the Korean War ensued (1950-53). During these periods, Korean families practiced marriage customs that had persisted since the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910): patrilocal marriages where a wife joined her husband and his patrilineal kin in his natal home (Kaser, 2002). Consequently, Korean brides entered into new affinal relations—with fathers and mothers-in-law; brothers and sisters-in-law; and affinal uncles, aunts, nephews, and nieces. This type of living arrangement represented a 'joint family', an arrangement that was common in Asia, Africa, and eastern Europe (Gruber & Szoltysek, 2012). The definition, meaning, and reality of "family" in mid-20th century Korea thus differed radically from the nucleated family that Adler described and wrote about in his work.

Adler's work as a clinician coincided with the gradual decline of stem families and the rise in nucleated families due to changes in technology and means of production (Moring, 1993). Adler's repeated use of Konrad Kleinschrot as an example to illustrate the distorted logic of a parricide offender to evade a major task in life (Shon, 2016a) occurred in the midst of this broad historical change in Europe. However, killing a parent in order to secure insurance money represents only one particular motivation for parricide. Offspring also kill their fathers due to bouts of schizophrenia and other delusions of grandeur (Carabellese et al., 2014). Parricides also mirror modal homicides between men in that they represent culminations of ordinary arguments that are extended to their logical conclusion (Shon, 2018). Adler selected one case that was consistent with his theoretical framework.

Kleinschrot epitomized a criminal and was presented as such in Adler's writings because a criminal in Adler's framework is someone who uses force or deception against a defenseless victim for the purpose of acquiring material gain. Kleinschrot met these definitional criteria. This definition of crime and criminal, however, omits important sociological and social processes that are intricately related to criminal behavior (Shon & Barton-Bellessa, 2015). Reasons that precede killings—putative motivation—represent another way to explore the nexus between family relations and conflicts that evolve throughout the life course. Moreover, parricides and filicides also emerge from the failure to

cooperate between husbands and wives in the context of marital relations, which are shaped by cultural factors rather than individual pathologies.

The Constraining and Expansive Effects of Culture on Marital Relations, Parricide, and Filicide

Married couples argue over money, chores, and other unmet needs and expectations, arguments that turn into assaults that usually involve the police. In criminology, marriage is considered a prosocial institution as it reattaches wayward men from a life of drift and delinquency to new roles and obligations of being a husband, a provider, and a father (Laub & Sampson, 2003). In an Adlerian framework, finding love through a monogamous marriage and the rearing of children is indexical of social interest and the fulfillment of a major life task. In both theoretical frameworks, the prosocial effects of marriage are emphasized while the potentially disintegrative effects are absent. However, both frameworks presuppose the prosocial aspects of marriage and its socially bonding functions primarily in the context of nuclear family relations. The notion that a marriage may involve multiple wives (or husbands) in a culturally tolerated and accepted form is not entertained.

Normative cultural practices may exacerbate marital discord and conflict in ways that diverge from marriage practices in the context of nuclear, monogamous marriages. Mid-20th century Korea provides a unique glimpse into alternative family systems that reproduce domestic conflicts which then travel in descending and ascending directions. Polygamy refers to the legal recognition of multiple wives who are entitled to property and inheritance rights (Du, 2017); this practice was not legally recognized during the Chōson Dynasty (1392-1910) or in mid-20th century Korea. However, polygyny was a tolerated cultural practice. Polygyny involved the taking of multiple wives who were legally unrecognized—“unofficial”—but lived in the marital home. The unofficial second wives in polygynous marriages were considered concubines (chōp) in Korea; they received no legal protection and could be abandoned without consequences (SJ Kim, 2019). The existence of this cultural practice shaped conflicts between spouses and between the wives. Polygynous marriages led to domestic arguments between husbands and their first wives since they resented having another woman in the house. Polygyny also fomented jealousy in the first wives and created friction between first wives and concubines (JM Kim, 2017). Polygyny thus facilitated intrafamily conflicts in the home; it embodied a culturally recognized and accepted form of infidelity that led to the practice of concubinage. One consequence of this marriage custom is that the children of first wives and concubines became the logical equivalent of stepchildren, and the children of concubines bore the brunt of filicidal violence.

There were other direct ways that discordant relations between husbands and wives filtered into filicides. Children became objects of revenge from spouses who had been cheated on. Husbands who discovered their wives' infidelity killed their offspring as a way of punishing their spouses (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2022). Newborn infants became the victims of filicide as extended family members attempted to cover up evidence of immoral behaviors and their consequent illegitimate births that might bring shame to the family. For instance, women who had affairs and gave birth while their husbands were incarcerated or conscripted in the military killed their infants and buried them in shallow graves. Grandmothers killed infants born as a result of incestuous relations between family members (e.g., uncle and niece). Members of multigenerational, joint families thus became entangled in the lives of one another that, sometimes, ended in violence.

Discordant relations between husbands and wives also directly shaped parricides. A small portion of parricides were directly attributable to the domestic violence that occurred between parents. Consider the following:

Excerpt 1: case# 09071954

According to police, on the evening of September 2, 1954, Choi, X-X (age 20s) attempted to stop his drunk father (Choi, X-X; age 40s) from verbally arguing with his wife. When the son could not persuade his father to stop arguing, and after his father refused to listen, the son repeatedly punched his father which caused serious injuries. Two days later while in the hospital, the elder Choi passed away.

Defensive parricides began when husbands came home drunk and argued or assaulted their wives out of the blue or when wives refused to serve more alcohol. Arguments between spouses transformed into scenes of parricide when mothers pleaded for assistance and sons came to their defense. Sons also killed their fathers in order to defend themselves when fathers redirected their attack when they attempted to intervene in domestic assaults. While defensive parricides in Korea were rare events, they originated from marital relations that were already strained and fraught with domestic violence.

The dominant theme in the Korean filicides and parricides is the absence of a financial motivation. Both types of homicide emerged from a desire to protect the weak (i.e., mothers who were being assaulted), seek revenge, defend their sense of respectability, or hide evidence of shame. That is, the offenders who killed their offspring and parents did not use force or deception against a defenseless victim in order to further a material advantage; only a small portion of parricides and filicides involved offenders who carried out killings for material benefit. Rather, offenders killed in order to defend and uphold prosocial, communal values (Katz, 1988). These empirical offense characteristics militate against Adler's definition which defines a criminal as one who uses force or deception for the purpose of acquiring material gain. The killers in the current study were arrested and charged with murder for violating the codified laws of the state, not because they illicitly attempted to acquire material wealth.

Filicides that result from spousal infidelity also demonstrate adverse consequences of non-monogamous relations. Adler (1997) was prescient on this point, for he noted that "the unmarried state, polygamy, or polyandrous tendencies and perversions always bear out an avoidance of marriage responsibilities" (p. 170). Sexual behaviors that occurred outside of marital relations, as well as prohibited relations between family members, resulted in the experience of shame—which then functioned as a significant motivation in filicides. These motivations illuminate the manifold reasons why family members kill one another, one that is not shaped by rationality or instrumental gain. Rather, they illustrate the ordinary domestic conflicts that become amplified in multigenerational, joint households. Emotions such as jealousy and shame highlight the private emotions that offenders experienced prior to the killings. Offenders who killed their parents or offspring became criminals because their actions violated the codified laws of a state, not because they selected defenseless victims as targets. Sometimes, parents even initiated the violence first.

That is to say that the mere occurrence of marriage between two partners and the birth of children cannot be operationalized as the fulfillment of life tasks in a Korean historical context. The concept of monogamy loses its meaning in a culture that informally legitimates the acceptance of concubines into a household (polygyny). In these intersecting lines of family relations, women appear as central figures in filicides and parricides. First wives directed their anger at the children of concubines by killing them; the concubines killed the children of first wives when husbands selected concubines as permanent partners and forcibly removed first wives out of the household (Shon & Shon, 2023). In multigenerational households, mothers-in-law verbally abused their daughters-in-law, and the latter reacted to such verbal and emotional abuse by killing them (Shon, 2018). Korean families circa mid-20th century involved a constellation of characters and family relations well beyond the nuclear family, and the domestic conflicts that arose from such family constellations resulted in unpremeditated killings.

The Influence of Culture on Punitive Disciplinary Practice

Adler objected to the use of corporal punishment as a way of disciplining children. He posited that physical punishment only reinforced children's sense of grievance and injustice. Instead, Adler always encouraged parents to nudge children toward the direction of social interest through positive encouragement. Adler's lessons are relevant and applicable in a Korean context, for the misguided beliefs about corporal and verbal punishment in Korea embody the cultural ideologies that shape ascending and descending forms of violence.

Korean society facilitated corporal punishment in the cultural ideologies about the meaning of children in families, and by imbuing fathers absolute right within the family. Korean parents presupposed a proprietary view of their offspring. They believed that a child's body belongs to the parents since they gave them life (Keum, 2000). Korean parents also justified physical punishment and harsh discipline as an expression of love for their children (MS Park, 2001). This cultural attitude was transmitted across generations by fathers who emulated the disciplinary practices of their own fathers, disciplining sons more harshly than daughters (K Jung & A Honig, 2000). Consider the following data:

Excerpt 2: case# 01081958

Park, X-X (age 37) was angry that SJ (daughter, age 5) could not pee properly like others her own age. While Park was chastising her, she repeatedly struck SJ. She died that night. Park hired two men to take the body away from the home and hide and bury it in the woods.

There were several reasons why parents killed their offspring. The largest portion of the Korean filicides involved a lack of resources. Young women who gave birth to infants, without a husband or a job, were particularly affected. However, 11 percent of Korean filicides involved parents and superordinate elders who killed an offspring or a subordinate relative in the process of administering punishment. Excerpt # 2 occurs in a typical way, for a portion of discipline-related filicides occurred because the children had soiled or urinated themselves and died during the administration of punishment. Discipline-related filicides emerged without prior planning from the ordinary methods parents used to punish their children.

If parents berated their children for excessive crying, wetting their pants, or soiling their beds, parents verbally punished their adult offspring for other reasons. Consider the following data:

Excerpt 3: case# 09181961

Kim, X-X (age 26) berated her nephew, Jeon, X-X (age 21) for being unemployed. She chastised him to stop playing around with his life and get a job and contribute to the household. Angered by the chastisement, Jeon struck his aunt on the head with an axe. Jeon then went outside and threw himself in front of an incoming U.S. Army truck.

Children expect love, wisdom, and benevolence from their parents while parents demand love, reverence, and obedience from their children (U Kim & YS Park, 2000). Parent-offspring relations are thus marked by a principle of reciprocity. Some Korean adult offspring had trouble transitioning out of adolescence into adulthood, for they were unable to secure meaningful work. More often than not, adult sons drank, gambled, and led profligate lives. This lifestyle clashed with Korean parents who demanded excellence in school and other areas of life. Adult Korean offspring interpreted verbal chastisement as unbearable assaults on their dignity and autonomy and violently lashed out at the elders by killing them.

A comparative synthesis of filicide and parricide in Korea presents several challenges to Adler's view of progression toward adulthood. The first is that cultural structures play an important role in prolonging adolescence and delaying entry into full-fledged adulthood. Korean parents did not

view their offspring as “adults” despite chronological maturation. Children only became adults after they married and bore their own children. Moreover, sons were expected to bring their wives into his natal household. Patrilocal marriage customs thus prolonged dependence on parents and elders, thus further eroding an offspring’s authority and autonomy. This pattern began to change only after industrialization as young men and women left rural areas and sought work in factories in urban centers.

It is also possible that cultural structures may inadvertently facilitate pampering. Offspring who remained in the home as adults became a source of conflict in the family as they were unable to earn a living and contribute to the household. They were typically adult sons who demanded allowances from their parents for purposes of drinking, gambling, and other profligate activities. Consequently, entitled sons often became the objects of chastisement and verbal berating from parents and other family elders, which then set the stage for verbal arguments and fights that resulted in parricides.

Cultural Variations in the Meaning of Mental Illness

It is not sound to draw clinical inferences from newspaper articles alone. However, the meaning of mental illness in parricides and filicides in mid-20th century Korea was embedded in the stylistic characteristics of newspaper articles. Incidents were coded as being related to mental illness if it was reported as such in the newspapers. Using such a coding procedure yielded the following: mental illness was a factor in 15 percent of parricides; it was a factor in about 7 percent of filicides. The newspaper articles illuminated other notable features.

First, the language used to describe mental illness was terse. Compared to other cases where the putative motivation and sources of conflict were discernible to the reader, mental illness was treated as a *de facto* explanation of the killing. Second, offenders’ mental illness was reported to be already well known in the community. Conversely, newspapers reported the relatively sudden onset of mental illness which were brought about by acute social changes (e.g., illness). Third, when previous history of mental illness or major social changes were not reported as potential factors in the sudden onset of mental illness, the phrase “suspected of being mentally ill” was routinely used to connote the motivation behind the killing. Fourth, unusual methods of killing and post-offense behaviors such as decapitation and mutilation of victims (e.g., sawing off an arm) implicitly hinted at the presence of mental illness. Finally, two phrases were commonly used to describe the presence of mental illness in offenders: (1) “not of sound mind” and (2) “crazy.”

While mental illness in offenders has been an important causal explanation in studies of parricide and filicide (Raymond, Leger, & Lachaux, 2015; Resnick, 2016), the current data illuminate unique aspects of mental illness that diverged from the extant psychiatric literature. Consider the following cases:

Excerpt 4: case# 11251959

The police arrested Hong, D-P (age 71) for murder and held him in jail. Four days ago, Hong witnessed his daughter, Lee, G-H (age 34) “acting crazy” so he fed her poison and killed her.

Excerpt 5: case# 09271956

Kang, W-S (son, age 24) and Kang, J-J (daughter, age 22) were arrested for poisoning their mentally ill father. It was reported that the offspring saw their father suffering from mental illness and obtained poison from a pharmacist. The son and daughter fed the poison to the father and killed him. The pharmacist was also arrested by the police.

The two excerpts are notable for the simple reason that mental illness is not causally implicative in the offenders’ violence; however, it is a factor in the victim selection. The reversal of roles for mentally ill persons, from offenders to victims, in Korean society illustrates several important culturally relevant factors. Confucianism emphasizes filial piety and family unity.

Consequently, families are expected to solve problems privately rather than relying on social safety programs (KS Chang, 1997; JS Kim, 2001). Consequently, other family members are expected to care for the physically sick, the elderly, and mentally ill family members (Sung, 1991). Women usually—daughters and daughters-in-law—performed the task of caregiving to vulnerable family members (MH Lee, 2008), not the state.

While two cases involving mentally ill victims were exceptional cases, they illustrate mental illness of family members as a liability. Social safety net programs in mid-20th century Korea were almost non-existent (KS Eun, 2008). Moreover, that mentally ill persons were killed due to their disability suggest that mental illness in elderly parents and offspring was treated in a similar way to poor physical health, incurring a greater risk of parricide and filicide due to the stress of caregiving and the lack of social resources (see Coorg & Tournay, 2012).

Discussion and Conclusion

Using mid-20th century parricides and filicides in Korea as data, I have attempted to build upon Adler's ideas, especially as they relate to his definition of crime, criminals, and social interest. I have argued that Adler's definition of murderers and criminals is too restrictive and overlooks offenders who kill for moral reasons, and that his ideas about social interest are contingent upon the assumption of Western notions of a nuclear family. Whether offenders kill their parents or their offspring in spontaneous outburst of anger, defense of self or a family member, or in order to acquire insurance money, killing another person represents one of the gravest violations of a state's legal code. A murderer, however, need not exclusively kill a defenseless person in order to be defined as one; a criminal violates the codified laws of the state, and not just implicit norms of a community. Consequently, Adlerian scholars may want to consider using another definition of murder: "unlawful death inflicted upon a person with the intent to cause death or serious injury" (UNODC, 2019, p.9). This definition is preferable to the one Adler employed for the simple reason that it removes premeditation and defenseless victim in its inclusion criteria, and explicitly contains the provision "unlawful." As one of the offenses for which there is cross-cultural consensus, a general definition of murder would be preferable to a psychological one (see Unnithan, 2021).

Yet, there is also danger in excessively relying on the state definition of a crime and a criminal. Consider the inclusion criteria that Highland and Dabney (2009, p. 117) used in their study of drug dealer motivations: "Participants were either on probation or parole, had been convicted of drug trafficking, possession with intent to distribute, or drug possession, and must have admitted to drug dealing during initial screening at the mental health center." While an examination of the motivations of convicted drug dealers is operationally and methodologically sound, caution should be exercised, for no other criminal justice policy has wreaked havoc on communities of color like the punishment meted out for possession and usage of crack cocaine. The enforcement of U.S. drug laws disproportionately targeted open-air drug markets in inner cities (Blumstein, 1993), and the penalties for drug offenses devastated black men in inner cities (Clear, 2002), eroding their employability and the tenability of black families in the process (Braman, 2002). It is the uncritical acceptance of state proffered definition of a criminal—drug dealer—that a minority of influential figures in the field (e.g., Presidents of American Society of Criminology) have inveighed against (Clear, 2010), that those who get defined as criminals are intricately related to politics and racism in America (e.g., Tonry, 2008). While the drug dealers in Highland and Dabney's study have been nominally convicted of violations of criminal statutes, the unjustness of some laws warrants a critical scrutiny of the institutional definitions of crime and criminal (see Chambliss, 1988; Chilton, 2001).

In addition to the paradoxical influence that the state exerts on the definition and meaning of crime and criminals, I have argued that the definition and meaning of what it means to be a murderer ought to be critically examined in relation to macro-level forces such as ideology and culture. To build upon Adler's ideas, I have tried to introduce the importance of cultural structures that constrain and expand individual behavior within the context of family killings in mid-20th century

Korea. The findings reported here support and illustrate the need to refine prior Adlerian tenets as they relate to crime, criminals, and criminality.

First, I have argued that Adler's definition of a criminal restricts offenders to rational and instrumentally motivated actors. Discerning the level of intent that is embedded in the offense characteristics of parricides and filicides illuminates the non-rational factors that operate in the killings. Parricides were unplanned in 46 percent of the cases while filicides were unplanned in 18 percent of the cases. These characteristics suggest an actor who is using violence for the purpose of hurting another person rather than as a conduit to something else (e.g., money, sex) (Salfati, 2003). The finding that almost half of parricides and a fifth of the filicides were not premeditated suggests that Korean cases would not meet an important criterion in Adler's definition of a murderer: lack of premeditation and a defenseless victim. Filicides, however, would be consistent with Adler's definition of a murderer, for the offenders (parents and superordinate elders) selected defenseless victims as targets and planned their crimes in advance. Moreover, filicidal offenders tried to cover up their crimes by burying or hiding the bodies in secluded locations. Filicidal offenders thus appear to be more consistent with Adler's definition of a murderer than parricidal killers. Both filicidal and parricidal offenders, however, would be defined as murderers and criminals because they have inflicted an "unlawful death" on persons and violated a state's criminal code. Their actions would illustrate the detour functions of criminals, for rather than solving a problem of resources and difficulties in social relationships through socially cooperative ways, they adopted a violent shortcut to solve an exigent personal problem. This "shortcut" represents the paradigmatic antithetical logic of a "criminal" and is consistent with Adler's ideas.

Second, although a handful of cases in parricides and filicides were motivated by the desire to acquire the estates of victims, most offenders were not motivated by instrumental concerns. Using the putative motivation behind the killings as data, I have argued that parricides and filicides emerged in the context of ordinary social life, in the midst of domestic disputes, revenge, avoidance of shame, and administration of discipline, against children and grown offspring alike. I have argued that banal domestic conflicts between husbands and wives shaped parricide and filicide in notable ways, poisoning family relations in ways that pull other family members into violence. For example, the presence of concubines created friction between husbands and wives and between the multiple wives who lived in one household. This culturally mediated form of infidelity shaped the emergence of filicides, for the jealousy and conflict created by the presence of concubines in the household led to the lopsided ratios in the killing of their children. Children also became objects of transitive vengeance, a conduit to revenge against a spouse, while sons performed a contradictory set of filial duties: kill fathers in order to rescue mothers from ongoing assaults. The preceding reasons offenders killed are not consistent with an instrumental or rational model of criminal motivation implicit in Adler's definition and highlight the need to refine the definition of a criminal in the tenets of individual psychology. Criminal motivation need not be exclusively tied to pecuniary interests of offenders, especially in homicides.

Third, I have argued that cultural structures play a prominent role in exacerbating strain between husbands and wives, vitiating the value and practice of monogamy. The term infidelity denotes marital partners cheating on their spouses for a variety of personal reasons. However, the findings from the current study show that infidelity can be culturally facilitated through marriage customs that tolerate the practice of taking multiple wives in informal ways (polygyny). My argument is that polygyny can be viewed as a culturally mediated form of infidelity. The concubinage system in Korea enabled men to take on multiple sexual partners without legal or moral consequences (see Du, 2017; Goodman, 2020). Such sexual access and excesses were not available to women in culturally structured ways. Throughout Korean history, wives were expected to be chaste as widows and as daughters-in-law even after their husbands died (JW Kim, 2014). Moreover, patrilocal marriage customs unfairly burdened women, for they assumed the primary domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry, as well as childrearing, thereby perpetuating inequitable division of labor within the home. These expectations were normative in a Confucian influenced social system.

Social interest, defined as actions that benefit the overall community rather than the individual, was thus on par with patriarchal interest in mid-20th century Korea.

Joint households in a Confucian-influenced social system complicates the notion of social interest. In Adler's framework, marriage and the bearing and rearing of children constitute the fulfillment of a major life task. Adler (1997, p. 258) advocated a "comradely division of labor in which neither one nor the other is subjugated" when men and women live as marriage partners. Such a statement sidesteps how cultural structures shape the practice and meaning of marriage and presupposes the primacy of the nuclear family. While marriage has been understood as a monogamous union between two partners, the practice of polygyny in mid-20th century Korea casts a different light on the institution of marriage than the one Adler presupposed. Korean marriages were patrilocal and disproportionately disadvantaged women. Consequently, social cooperation toward a common goal primarily benefitted men in a patriarchal social system that privileged male dominance and sexuality.

Marriage and the rearing of children in Korea occurred in blended households, composed of multiple generations of family members, sometimes including concubines and their children. Marriage and the bearing of children cannot thus be seen as acts of social interest in themselves. Merely completing the act of marriage and the bearing of children is an inadequate metric for the measurement of social interest, for the reality of family life circa mid-20th century Korea diverged from Western notions of the family. Social interest in a Confucian-influenced social system like Korea meant, first and foremost, family interest. This means that social interest has to be operationalized and measured in ways that are culturally sensitive and nuanced, not based on late 19th and early 20th century Victorian standards of the nucleated family. A more equitable concept of social justice requires a critical evaluation of cultural structures that facilitate social interest for all members, not just men. Acting in social interest in mid-20th century Korea would have meant tolerating—accepting—women's oppressed positions in the existing social and moral structures. Men would have gained from such cultural institutions and social practices that enabled their physical excesses to flourish; women would not. One caveat that should be appended to the meaning of social interest ought to be, "for whose benefit does social interest exist?" The term 'community interest' inadequately captures the class and gender interests that marginalize some members in the population. Clarifying who the beneficiaries of 'community interest' are may reveal the limitations of generalized metaphysical constructs such as community/social interest. As argued here, social interest does not benefit all members of a community equally.

Fourth, I have argued that cultural structures play a significant role in exacerbating domestic discord between genealogical and affinal family members. Patrilocal marriage customs in Korea necessitated a new bride to join her husband and his kin in his natal household. No married woman brought a second husband into her natal household in the current data. Patrilocal marriages literally pitted a woman against all of the husband's male agnatic kin and her mother-in-law in one household. Daughters-in-law performed the household chores and became de facto servants in the multigenerational homes. This arrangement often brought mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law into domestic conflicts that resulted in verbal and emotional abuse of daughters-in-law that resulted in parricides. Several generations of family members, genealogical and affinal, living under one roof exacerbated ordinary conflicts across family relations that exploded into fatal violence against parents and superordinate elders. Sons, daughters, sons- and daughters-in-law who killed their parents and parents-in-law in unpremeditated ways were charged with aggravated homicides, charges that are unique to a Confucian-influenced legal system, demonstrating the precedence of legal definitions over psychological definitions. Furthermore, the varieties of homicides that occurred in multigenerational extended families in mid-20th century Korea illustrate the diverse array of family constellations unique to a Confucian-influenced social system that amplified conflicts across relations. While informal social control mechanisms such as the family have been hailed as positive forces that suppress delinquency and crime in the criminological literature (e.g., Glueck & Glueck, 1950; Laub & Sampson, 2003), the current findings indicate that the very extended familial relations

may serve as a wellspring for domestic conflicts that result in violent deaths. These deaths were shaped by the unique marriage customs and living arrangements necessitated by cultural ideologies such as Confucianism. It remains unknown how and whether such cultural ideologies manifest in contemporary Korean homicides.

Finally, while I was able to estimate the prevalence of mental illness in parricides and filicides, this figure should be interpreted with extreme caution, for I only relied on one source that was collected through convenience sampling procedures. The meaning that was attached to mental illness in mid-20th century Korea was limited; the newspapers used a handful of words to describe the conditions related to mental illness. However, the data also revealed the meaning of mental illness in Korean society, for offenders killed victims due to their illness, not because of it. It remains to be seen if mental illness is treated as a liability and a problem that is to be solved privately rather than publicly in contemporary Korea.

While I have described how conflicts in joint families amplified domestic discord that led to parricides and filicides during a brief period in mid-20th century Korea, it remains unknown how urbanization, technological advances, women's participation in the workforce, social safety spending by the state, and changing attitudes toward women may have altered the character of parricide and filicide and the identities of offenders and victims in contemporary Korea. These major social changes may have reconfigured life tasks in modern Korea in ways that parallel Western ones. Or it may well be that women still shoulder the burden of childrearing and domestic work. For future works, then, an examination of offender, victim, and offense characteristics in contemporary Korea may yield additional insights about the shifting notion of social and family interest between the past and the present.

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