

Commentary

The Right to Health of Victims, Citizens, and Parents: A Study of Families Bereaved by the *Sewol* Ferry Disaster, by Lee Hyeon Jung

Laura C. Nelson*

When the *Sewol* ferry sank in April 2014, more than 300 passengers died, including more than 250 high school students who had embarked the night before on a school field trip. Investigations into the causes of the disaster have documented multiple and cascading faults and errors, including failures of regulation and management, alongside incompetence, cowardice, and the evils of capitalist avarice; the scale and extent of such faults were part of what motivated the candlelight demonstrations that brought down the Park Geun-hye government in 2017. In this article, Lee Hyeon Jung examines how the South Korean government's family-reparative response to the *Sewol* ferry tragedy failed to provide families of the dead with the support and treatment they needed to rebuild their lives in the wake of the loss of their children. Lee's analysis is based on sustained, extensive, and deep engagement with survivors, who were the intended beneficiaries of government programs addressing the needs of the *Sewol* bereaved. Most of the research Lee conducted was with the parents of students who died aboard the ferry. Although the government arranged for emergency mental health counseling through the establishment of the Ansan Whole Heart

* Associate Professor of Gender and Women's Studies, University of California, Berkeley.

Korean Anthropology Review vol. 7 (February 2023): 31–34.

<http://doi.org/10.58366/KAR.2023.7.02.31>

© 2023 Department of Anthropology, Seoul National University

Center, and provided up to six months of financial support if survivors were unable to work, on the basis of her research Lee concludes that these remedies fell short for several reasons: mental health was considered separate from physical health, and so the physical health impacts of psychological suffering went untreated; staff turnover at the Center resulted in the traumatizing repetition of intake inquiries (and concern for suicidal urges further traumatized survivors); and the therapeutic practices simply did not make sense to some of the bereaved family members. While Lee acknowledges the efforts and occasional successes of the Ansan Whole Heart Center, her overall assessment is that the government failed to implement the programs they promised, and that the policies that were implemented failed to address survivors' need for trauma-focused mental, physical, and spiritual health support.

The material Lee presents suggests some further lines of inquiry that might bring anthropological insights to reveal other reasons the programs did not help the parents to heal. The surviving parents testified to the ways the trauma left them feeling that life was empty of meaning, and made continued work and continued engagement with the communities where they had been living feel harmful; their unanticipated bereavement was a rupture that seemed to trigger a wish for agency even in their own annihilation. Several parents expressed a desire to quit work, move to a new location, and even to end their own lives. And while parents themselves felt guilt for surviving and for being the subject of healing efforts, some community members criticized them for receiving benefits, for complaining and for being fixated rather than moving on, and even simply for outliving their children. In "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage" (1989), Renato Rosaldo wrote movingly about death and loss: "*The emotional force* of a death ... derives less from an abstract brute fact than from a particular intimate relation's permanent rupture." Rosaldo urges us to consider the intensity of emotion, specifically grief, as a culturally consequential force. While trauma and mourning are at once familiarly *human*, their specific forms are culturally inflected.

So how might we understand the specific forms of grief, rage, and response to the *Sewol* disaster as locally meaningful and culturally consequential? In the case of the bereaved parents, they articulated their grief as alienation, fantasies of suicide, and rage, but they rejected the professional efforts to help them recover through psychotherapy. Their statements indicate a dismissal of the idea of recuperation; they seem to be saying

that this depth of grief could not and should not be eased, and that what they needed was help in the tasks of living with it, getting on with their lives while continuing to carry the burden of sorrow: Yejin's Dad, for example, went to the Ansan Whole Heart Center looking for concrete guidance on how to speak and operate again in the world, but instead he was encouraged to put his mind at ease and express his feelings. Similarly, Lee observes that the somaticized trauma symptoms survivors complained of—back and dental pain—were those that they wanted to have treated, more than their feelings of grief. There was an apparent mismatch between the cosmopolitan approach to trauma healing through attention to emotional health, and local expectations and patterns of coping with grief. Even the lack of sympathy expressed by community members, brutal comments that the parents should get on with their lives rather than focusing on self-care (including the criticism that survivors were wallowing in grief or benefitting from public programs) indicate that the internalized cultural model of disaster and trauma response is to mourn and then to pick up again the tasks of life. (An implicit suggestion the bereaved parents heard was that, if they could not get on with life, they could commit suicide; this of course should be considered in the context of the phenomenon of the extremely high suicide rate in the Republic of Korea.) In contrast to the failures of the psychotherapy offerings, we might consider the surviving parents who banded together in self-help activity groups (woodworking, for example) or who pushed for investigation into the disaster; they found satisfaction in the active performance of ordinary pursuits, structured by association with others engaged in the same activities. The professional expertise of the mental health practitioners, drawing on internationalized models of psychological well-being and trauma treatment, seem not to have engaged the survivors' experiences and expectations, the culturally shaped patterns of grieving and adjustment to calamity.

In the rich material that Lee presents there are suggestions of other cultural lessons we can draw from *Sewol* survivorship. For example, parenting in South Korea has been constructed as mother's work, so the depth of emotional loss expressed by the *fathers* Lee interviewed brings to light the under-researched topic of fatherhood there. Relatedly, the judgment that life is futile when confronted with the loss of a child speaks to the continued investment in child-centered futurity in South Korea, an orientation with decades of history that mutes political critique of one's own (adult) life and deflects focus from the present to an imagined better

future. Parenting, like grief, is at once a widely-shared human experience *and* one where the cultural inflections might be revealed in extraordinary circumstances such as the *Sewol* tragedy.

Finally, from the perspective of anthropology as a discipline, this material opens the possibility of examining the influences of universalist approaches to how a “right” to the best health possible on the design and delivery of public programs yields efforts that may not be conducive to actual healing. As Lee notes, ideals of optimal health as a human right have been embraced and expanded through international institutions and professional organizations for over seven decades. Lee opens this article with a consideration of the “right to health” as articulated in the founding documents of the World Health Organization (1946), which defined health as “complete physical, mental, and social well-being,” and various later statements from the United Nations, as well as the South Korean constitutional right to “a life worthy of human beings.” These lofty, aspirational statements have had various effects, including generating positions of shame and of authority among governments that have been less or more able to produce something approaching optimal health, and inspiring people to demand access to medical care and to healthier environments of all kinds. Lee’s conclusion returns to measure the results of the *Sewol* programs against these aspirational and universal ideas, but it is also possible to think about how the abstract (and ableist and liberal-individual) ideal of perfect health as a right to be provided by institutions of governance paradoxically may not lead to effective policies and programs, particularly when the concepts of mental, physical, and spiritual health are shaped by cosmopolitan health professionals without consideration for local expectations and structures of meaning. Not only did the bereaved parents of the *Sewol* ferry disaster not receive the programs they had been promised, the programs were not made for them, but rather for model victims of trauma.

In sum, Lee offers an excellent examination of how the policies and programs failed to restore the health and well-being of the bereaved parents of the children who drowned in the *Sewol* ferry disaster, and the material itself suggests further lines of anthropological consideration.

References

- Rosaldo, Renato. 1989. “Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage.” In *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, 1–21. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.