

# A Comparative Synthesis of American and Korean Parricidal Mass Murders<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Contemporary studies of mass murder have examined attacks carried out by current or former students in educational settings or disgruntled employees at former places of work. Recently conceptualized as “active shooter events,” this type of public mass killing has eclipsed the most pervasive one throughout the twentieth century: mass killings within the family. The dearth of scholarly work on mass killings in the context of parricides in other national and cultural contexts is notable given the salience of family killings in the homicide literature. Using previously published findings on parricides in nineteenth-century America and twentieth-century Korea, this paper provides a comparative synthesis of parricidal mass murders—mass killings that occur during the course of parricides. Notable points of convergence and divergence are discussed relative to culture and offense characteristics.

**Keywords:** parricide, mass murder, parricidal mass murder, Korean homicide, family killing

## Introduction

Parricide is defined as the killing of parents and stepparents by biological or step-offspring in the United States and elsewhere in the West,<sup>2</sup> while it is defined in South Korea (hereafter “Korea”) as the killing of superordinate relatives such as

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parents, parents-in-law, grandparents, aunts, and uncles by subordinate relatives within the family, such as offspring, nephews, and nieces.<sup>3</sup> Mass murder is defined as the killing of three or more victims in one incident and time period.<sup>4</sup> A combination of the two offenses into a single category constitutes one of the rarest classes of murder to date. There are good reasons to examine this atypical form of homicide in a cross-cultural comparative context.

Mass murder has been discussed primarily as an extension of intimate partner violence in the family, carried out by despondent heads-of-household who kill their family members for putatively altruistic reasons;<sup>5</sup> killings perpetrated by adolescents who have been victims of bullying in schools;<sup>6</sup> or disgruntled employees who carry out revenge attacks against co-workers and supervisors.<sup>7</sup> Although some have noted the occurrence of mass killings that transpire in the course of extended parricides, typically carried out by angry young men who target one or both parents,<sup>8</sup> this explanation only reifies the adolescent pathologies related to parricide and overlooks the adult character and its variegated sources of conflict.<sup>9</sup>

There is a cultural reason why an examination of mass killings that occur in the context of parricide is warranted. Previous works have noted that firearms tend to be commonly used in mass murders. That guns are used in a significant portion of mass killings illustrates the salience of firearms in the US, a tacit acknowledgement of the role of guns in the production of mass casualty incidents in a country where gun ownership is prevalent and encoded in its national laws. It makes intuitive sense to deploy guns against multiple victims in a single incident as the lethality of such attacks is facilitated by rapid gunfire. However, the prevalence of firearms in one cultural context is an accidental character of history and cannot be adduced as a final cause of violence.<sup>10</sup> This blindly accepted assumption about the import of guns cannot be extended to all national and historical contexts. In most countries across the world, access to guns is heavily regulated and restricted. Consequently, ordinary citizens do not have access to lethal weapons that are liable to produce mass casualty incidents. For example, recent work on homicides in Korea suggests that knives, hammers, and rope are used in 75% of killings, not guns.<sup>11</sup> This pattern is applicable to parricides as well, for a study of Korean parricides found that over 75% of parricides was committed with non-guns.<sup>12</sup> How mass killings are organized given the absence of firearms in Korea warrants an examination in its own right.

An examination of parricidal mass murder—mass killings that originate during the course of parricides—in American and Korean contexts is also important as the factors that are deemed to be responsible for the high rates of violence in the US, such as the prevalence of guns, violent culture,<sup>13</sup> and cultural ideologies that celebrate self-interest and individualism, are not applicable to Korea. In fact, the opposite is true. Numerous scholars have noted the protective factors

against violence that belief systems such as Confucianism provide. For instance, Korean society is highly stratified and hierarchical; it is an ideological system that confers status and right to age.<sup>14</sup> This obedience is embodied in cultural practices such as filial piety that necessitate the use of honorifics in linguistic behavior toward elders and in worship of one's deceased ancestors.<sup>15</sup> According to Kim and Park "morality and virtue must be reflected in a person's behavior and actions" in Confucianism.<sup>16</sup> Such moral and social constraints should militate against violence against superordinate elders as parricide is considered one of the most heinous crimes according to Confucian ideology and treated harshly in Korean law.<sup>17</sup> Violence that is directed against multiple elders in one setting ought to be even rarer. Consequently, a comparison of the two national contexts in different temporal periods using an atypical offense category provides an unusually titillating opportunity to compare the social and cultural factors that shape the atypical homicide in both countries.

This paper asks the following research questions: how are parricidal mass murders similar to and different from one another across two national and temporal contexts? Such an examination is important as the offense characteristics of parricidal mass murders in Korea may illuminate previously overlooked variables that are significant in the commission of the offense. Given the absence of guns in Korean society, how might the mass killings that occur during the course of parricides be explained? Moreover, how might such findings be interpreted against the plethora of research on mass murder that has emerged from the US that imputes the victim counts to high-capacity magazines and bullet caliber? An examination of mass murders that occur in the course of parricides provides an opportunity to answer such questions. This paper synthesizes the extant literature on mass murder as a way of answering the preceding questions.

This paper draws on two published studies of parricide—US (1847–99) and Korea (1948–63)—and a methodological study of the validity of archival data. The three previous studies used an identical coding scheme to classify and categorize the offense characteristics in parricides.<sup>18</sup> Although a study of American mass murder was completed for a prior study,<sup>19</sup> a similar analysis has not been conducted using the Korean data. One reason that a separate analysis of Korean data has not been conducted is the sheer rarity of parricidal mass murders in a Korean context. Consequently, this paper analyzes Korean cases of parricidal mass murder by foregrounding the similarities in the offense characteristics related to the analysis of past mass murder incidents, such as weapons used, intent, and the dynamics of the incidents themselves. I argue that parricidal mass murders reflect a unique form of contagious violence within the family that involve different actors and offense characteristics that are socio-culturally shaped.

## Review of the literature

Mass murders have recently been conceptualized as active shooter events that occur within confined spaces,<sup>20</sup> carried out by aggrieved individuals who execute the attack in public spaces or former places of work against those who have wronged them in actual or perceived ways.<sup>21</sup> While previous research has shown that mass killers transform their actual and perceived grievance against the world and against certain institutions into righteous anger in public settings,<sup>22</sup> the modal mass killing in the twentieth century involved fathers who killed their wives and children at home.<sup>23</sup>

Mass murderers were once characterized as people who “go berserk,” “run amok,” or “go postal.”<sup>24</sup> Recent works, however, suggest that mass murderers share parallels to assassins and terrorists in that they plan their actions in advance, leak their intentions to others, and draw their inspiration from previous killers who have achieved notoriety through their publicized killings.<sup>25</sup> While it has been found that terrorists and mass murderers have a record of prior contact with mental health providers and the police, they are not considered people with a history of violence.<sup>26</sup> Instead, they tend to be individuals who, in a “downward spiral” in their lives amidst various precipitating crises, view killing as an adaptive problem-solving strategy.<sup>27</sup> Mass killers tend to be persons who become “unglued” from society and lose their tenuous grip on social life.

One offense characteristic that has been consistently found in previous research is the weapons that are used in the attack, and the cultural factors that facilitate their usage. For example, several researchers have noted that mass killings occur in cultures that celebrate hypermasculinity and warrior ethos.<sup>28</sup> Some have shown that prosocial attitudes toward guns are learned from offenders’ fathers.<sup>29</sup> The offenders also tend to be avid consumers of violent media, immersing themselves in books and films that glamorize killing and the killers;<sup>30</sup> media products such as *Rambo*, *Taxi Driver*, *Basketball Diaries*, and *The Turner Diaries* have been purported to be sources of inspiration for mass killers.<sup>31</sup> Others have noted that mass killers have a near obsessive fascination with guns, encapsulated in one of the central typologies of mass murderers—the pseudo-commando.<sup>32</sup> Guns are significant because they tend to be the principal weapons that are used in mass murders.<sup>33</sup> For example, Petee and Padgett’s (1999) study of 106 mass murder incidents found that 88% of the killings were carried out with firearms.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Lankford’s (2016) study of 308 mass killers found that 76% of the offenders had used guns in their offenses.<sup>35</sup>

While some have advocated a complete ban on assault weapons as a way of reducing gun violence, others have pushed for insurance and taxation as a

violence reduction strategy;<sup>36</sup> these proposed changes have shown modestly positive results.<sup>37</sup> Such bans and zero-tolerance policies have been argued to be ineffective, especially in the US,<sup>38</sup> given that close to 90% of mass killers obtained their guns in legal ways.<sup>39</sup> That the mass killers procure their weapons in lawful ways should not be surprising, for they do not see themselves as criminals. Rather, their actions are the logical extensions of those who see themselves as victims of injustice; if viewed with such assumptions in place, then the actions of mass murderers can be seen as behaviors that are intended to administer justice for wrongs experienced.

### *Limitations in the Previous Literature*

Despite advances made in the study of mass murder, previous works contain several shortcomings. One, the literature continues to frame mass murder as public killings motivated by revenge or altruism in the context of family killings carried out by male heads-of-household. It neglects to include mass killings that originate from the bottom up (i.e., offspring to parent), analyzing them as objects of inquiry in their own right. Two, while violent movies, music, and books have been reported to be sources of inspiration for mass killers, a form of mimesis that leads to imitation, such preceding factors would not have been implicative in nineteenth-century America or mid-twentieth-century Korea. What other factors might be related to mass killings that occur in the context of parricides? Three, although guns have been significant correlates of parricides and mass murder in nineteenth- and twentieth-century US, such findings are not applicable to Korea since access to guns was and is severely limited. How might mass killing of family members in the context of parricides be organized given the absence of guns in Korea? Finally, given that recent mass killings have been attributed to bullied students who kill their peers in educational settings, disgruntled employees who target coworkers, or despondent husbands who kill their families, how might mass killings that occur in the context of ascending violence directed at superordinate elders be explained? These shortcomings warrant a comparative synthesis of parricidal mass murders in America and Korea.

### Sources of archival data and synthesis

The current paper draws upon three prior studies of parricide in two different countries and three different time periods for synthesis. Due to space limitations, additional details about the research site, data collection process, and validation procedures have been omitted as they have been described in an

earlier publication.<sup>40</sup> For both American and Korean studies of parricide, cases were included as mass murder if an offender attempted or successfully killed three or more victims in one time period. Although there is variation in the number of victims that have to be killed in order to be defined as an incidence of mass murder, from two<sup>41</sup> to four,<sup>42</sup> three has been the most widely accepted definition of mass murder that previous researchers have used.<sup>43</sup> In addition to the victim count, intent was compared because the contexts in which parricides arose were tied to the way the crime originated. Hence a parricide was coded as being (1) “premeditated” if the offender planned the crime in advance; (2) “spontaneous” if the parricide was not planned; (3) “accidental” if the killing was an unfortunate accident; (4) “hit” if the offender used a hitman to carry out the attack; and (5) “unknown” if intent could not be discerned. The amount of detailed information collected was explained by the coverage a particular case received. For instance, parricides that contained bizarre details generated tremendous news coverage. Parricides that involved the mentally ill received a paragraph at best.

Nineteenth-century American parricides were similar to homicides and parricides in the twentieth century in that the vast majority of offenders and victims were also men. Out of the 231 incidents of parricide, only ten incidents (4%) met the inclusion criteria. In the Korean parricide study, most of the victims and offenders were also men, and five incidents (5%) met the inclusion criteria out of the 92 parricide incidents. Mass killings which originated out of parricides thus represented a relatively minor portion of all parricides in both national contexts.

American parricidal mass murders had a matricidal bent in that such cases generally originated during the course of matricides, which then turned into mass killings. Korean parricidal mass murders almost exclusively began as patricides, which then morphed into mass killings of family members and others who were present at the scene. In the following sections, a synthesis of the notable offense characteristics related to American and Korean parricidal mass murders are examined in greater narrative detail. Excerpts that best illustrate the analytical category being discussed are proffered as examples.

## The situational emergence of parricidal mass murder

One of the notable characteristics of nineteenth-century American parricidal mass murder is its spontaneous character. This body of work demonstrates that mass killings within the context of family homicides could also be understood as post-offense behaviors that are extensions of the on-going situational violence.<sup>44</sup> Parricidal mass killings began and unfolded during the course of a frenzied attack on the principal disputant, attacks that usually began during social intercourse.

Consider the following account of one of the most atypical scenes of violence in the nineteenth-century America:

Excerpt 1 (July 1899)

The *Chicago Tribune* reported that “hot words were exchanged during the morning between Mrs. Foss and her daughter, and Treider also became involved in the discussion.” Mrs. Treider and her mother, Mrs. Foss, argued over “long-standing family troubles” regularly, and the morning of the murder was no different. According to the *Tribune*, the quarrel began anew after dinner. Mrs. Treider “stepped into the bedroom and appearing immediately with a revolver, opened fire on her mother. The first shot was fatal, and the husband, springing forward to disarm his wife, received three wounds that sent him from the house in retreat. After leaving the house he heard two more shots, the ones that killed his wife.” The husband lived but the two women did not.

There are notable offense-related characteristics in excerpt 1. There is a well-established history of domestic discord between the victim and the offender, discord that is rooted in the past which is resurrected on the day of the killing. Whether the dispute is related to long-rooted tension or anger that emerges endogenously from drunken arguments,<sup>45</sup> it is this long-standing domestic difficulty that rekindles during a household event as one disputant escalates the encounter. Although we do not know who started the argument, we are told that the offender momentarily walks away from the scene to fetch her weapons to deploy it against the principal target; the attack on the principal disputant turns this homicide into a matricide. The attacker then turns the gun on her husband, but only after he injects himself into the fray; this attempted disarmament leads to him being shot. That Mr. Treider (husband) survives is solely a matter of luck, for others who received far less serious wounds succumbed to their deaths.<sup>46</sup> The attacker kills herself after the two targeted shootings, turning the matricide and attempted domestic homicide into a mass killing. That the offender is a woman also made this parricidal mass murder one of the most unusual and rare incidents of parricide in nineteenth-century America.

The situationally emergent nature of parricidal mass killings in Korea is also evident, for the mass killing of family members emerged from the ongoing violence and spread across relations. Consider the following:

Excerpt 2 (June 1957)

Kang Dae-song (33) and Eoh Sang-geum (25) were married, but due to financial difficulties, Kang had to work away from home. Eoh and Kang’s mother, Hwhang Bok-deuk (78) lived together. Kang returned from work and accused his wife of having an affair with another man, and stabbed her to death. He then blamed his mother for not watching over his wife and stabbed her to death. He also stabbed his father-in-law in the head who was sleeping in the next room.

In excerpt 2, there are several offense characteristics that shape the scene of parricidal mass murder in ways that the cultural fingerprints are inscribed onto the incident characteristics. First is the multigenerational character of the household. Several generations are gathered under one roof, even the in-laws. Such living arrangements were common in mid-twentieth-century Korea due to patrilocal marriage customs. That the husband is absent from the household is indicative of the employment patterns brought about by the industrial economy as men found work in urban centers.<sup>47</sup> Second is its similarity to American mass killings in that it begins as an unplanned event. Excerpt 2 begins as a domestic argument between two spouses. As prior scholars have shown, sexual jealousy and proprietariness lead to violence that cuts both ways as men and women kill one another in the context of intimate partner disputes.<sup>48</sup> In excerpt 2, the wife is the principal target. Third is that the violence does not stop with intimate partner violence; it jumps across relations and the offender's own mother becomes the second target, thus turning a domestic homicide into a matricide. The offender's mother and father-in-law become secondary targets after the primary attack on the principal target is successfully completed.

In the two excerpts above, we can see the contagious seeds of situational violence across two distinct time periods and national boundaries. The killing of bystanders, witnesses, and other family members on the scene in the course of a primary attack against a principal disputant illustrates a feature often attributed to modern mass murders: "going berserk" and "running amok." The two excerpts also corroborate the "transactional" character of mass killings that originate from domestic squabbles and incrementally transform into mass casualty incidents, for the offense characteristics are consistent with previous language used to describe offenders who become carried away during the course of their attack, offenders whose uncontrollable violence spills over and results in unplanned violence. It also illustrates the fact that the situational dynamics of parricidal mass murders may be influenced by the seductive and contagious character of violence in general.<sup>49</sup>

That is, assaults and killings carry a momentum of their own, enticing the aggressor into the aural and sensuous dialectics of physical violence that highlights the significance of foreground variables. Although sources of the conflict that ignited the argument differed; although the primary targets that were selected for the initial attack diverged; and although the weapons that were used to execute the killings varied, parricidal mass killings in America and Korea culminated with the deaths of multiple victims in one setting in ways that emanated from the on-going mundane violence in the home. That a higher percentage of in-laws appeared as victims in Korean parricides overall illustrates how patrilocal marriage patterns



amplified an entirely different category of victims in scenes of parricidal mass murders in ways that diverged from the ones noted in the West.

## The banal roots of parricidal mass murder

Familicides—killing of family members—were equally likely to begin spontaneously or as premeditated criminal events in American and Korean contexts. Spontaneous mass killings of family members carried out by sons occurred in the home, and similar to typical homicides, began as an argument with another family member which then escalated into a physical confrontation. The reasons that ignited the arguments, then fights, are best described as sources of conflict. The sources that led to conflicts in parricides were usually related to trivial arguments, finances, or discipline and abuse that morphed into killings.<sup>50</sup> Mass murders that transpired within the family sprung from this source of conflict, in similar ways to prototypical homicide incidents. Consider the following parricide-turned-mass murder in America:

### Excerpt 3 (January, 1893)

On January, 1893 the *New York Times* reported that Thomas Rodgers shot both parents and his sister. The incident began after a meal, when Thomas's father "*reprimanded him for his laziness, declaring he must work. Thomas answered 'you can't put me out' and going up stairs secured his brother-in-law's revolver.*" Thomas's sister and mother witnessed that Thomas had secured a gun and attempted to save the senior Rodgers, but Thomas pushed them aside and pumped two rounds into his father at close range. One struck him in the thigh; the other his heart. Thomas then kicked his fallen father in the face. The mother attempted to flee the scene through the back door only to be shot in the back; the sister made it out to the front door and onto the street, but Thomas stood by the front door and shot his sister in the shoulder as she was running. He then fled the scene, and barricaded himself in the Alderman's office, only to be arrested later.

One of the recurrent offense characteristics that emerged from a prior examination of American parricidal mass murders was that they often originated during the course of arguments, which then turned into fights, fights that ended when a lesser drunk disputant fired the more accurate shot. As criminologists have shown, homicides originate as banal arguments that transform into unpremeditated killings.<sup>51</sup> Excerpt 3 is no exception. Thomas Rodgers kills both parents and shoots his sister as the initial verbal argument escalates into a physical altercation and ends in a fatal assault. In countless cases, those who survived the attack related that the attackers killed in a state of frenzy, even those who just happened to be

on the scene. Consider how typical conflicts that emerged in family life led to spectacular acts of violence in Korea:

Excerpt 4 (June 1963)

Pastor Lee Han-goo (33) and Deacon Lee Bo-bae (43) of Chun Ahn City Methodist Church were visiting the home of Kim Chung (age unknown) for a prayer service. After the prayer meeting was finished, Kim Chung, his concubine, Do Go-soon (38), Pastor Lee and Deacon Lee were sitting and chatting when Kim Jung-soo (28), Kim Chung's son, stabbed the elder Kim multiple times and his concubine six times who subsequently died from her wounds. Kim then stabbed Pastor Lee and Deacon Lee, both of whom received critical wounds and were transported to the hospital. He then followed his eleven-year old stepbrother who was hiding in fear and stabbed him in the abdomen and shoulder. He then stabbed himself in a suicide attempt. According to neighbors, Kim was angry that his father had lived a lavish and extravagant lifestyle while neglecting him.

In America and Korea, offspring killed their parents during trivial arguments as one of the disputants escalated the verbal fight into a physical one. Criminologists have shown that almost anything can be interpreted as an affront—a glance, burnt dinner, or unkempt house—which then becomes detritus for an assault.<sup>52</sup> American and Korean sons and parents also argued with one another over trivial matters; in America and Korea, adult offspring constructed elaborate ploys to defraud their parents of estates and insurance money.<sup>53</sup> One key difference that emerged between American and Korean parricides, however, centered around the notion of abuse.

In an American context, abuse was physical punishment that adolescents interpreted to be excessive and killed their parents in revenge-motivated, premeditated attacks; in a Korean context, however, abuse was embodied in two forms: in the first, it was directed against daughters-in-law who were criticized for being lousy household managers, usually by their mothers-in-law, which erupted into argument-turned-parricides.<sup>54</sup> In the second, sons killed their fathers in scenes of chastisement as fathers denigrated the status of their adult sons, and they killed in response to the ontological debasement that such verbal berating brought about. Adult sons who lived profligate lives exhorted more allowance money from their fathers, to spend on alcohol and gambling; this cultural characteristic was facilitated by the special place sons occupied in Korean households, as the family lineage and estate was traced through male heirs, especially eldest sons. Sons who felt entitled to a lavish lifestyle often demanded continued special treatment, and when they were not accorded such accommodation, they behaved in ways similar to offspring who felt maltreated and neglected by their parents: they forcibly took what they thought was theirs.

Korean sons who remained in the home and received allowances from their parents even as adults bore a striking similarity to life-course persistent offenders who killed their parents at the apex of their offense trajectory.<sup>55</sup> That is because those who are pampered by their parents seek its continuance and demand special treatment while those who perceive themselves to have been neglected and abused demand compensation for their suffering. The psychology of criminality thus converges on offenders who feel entitled to special treatment, from those who are indulged and those who are neglected by their parents. Korean sons who demanded more allowances than they were allotted and killed to procure it for profligate ends mirrored this antisocial personality structure that has been well noted in the criminal psychology literature.<sup>56</sup>

It is this source of conflict in the preceding parricide that has to be taken into account in order to make sense of the parricidal mass killings in America and Korea. Sons who felt left out of their fathers' inheritances and spending money felt aggrieved and felt as if they had been denied what was rightfully theirs. The sequence of attack in excerpt 4 is significant for he targets his father and his concubine first; then he attacks the witnesses and audience at the scene, the pastor and the deacon. In an American context, continuity of violence occurred in numerous ways: as violence that was directed at the principal target in the form of overkill—use of force that is more than necessary to kill a target; as violence that was directed at others on the scene in post-parricidal mass murder; and as violence that was ultimately turned on oneself.<sup>57</sup> Parricides in America and Korea were mundane events that bloomed out of the dross of social life, irrelevant to the intrapsychic battles that Freud hypothesized them to be. If the conflicts that led to parricides and parricides that turned into mass murder were rooted in humdrum quotidian conflicts, one of the key variables that shaped the outcome of parricidal mass murders was the weapons that were deployed in the killings. There, the cultural differences became unmistakable.

## Victim behavior and weapons usage

Guns were the most commonly used weapons in homicides and parricides throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in America.<sup>58</sup> They were used in American homicides and parricides because almost everybody had them; but just as importantly, using guns was a culturally accepted and normative way of resolving disputes in the US across social and gender relations.<sup>59</sup> The surprising point is that guns were used in Korean parricides as well. Consider the following:

Excerpt 5 (January 9, 1960)

Army Captain Lee Dong-duk (30) was home on leave. He had been raised by his uncle, Lee Hee-cheol (56), and his wife, Lee Soon-yi (60), after his parents had passed away. While he was home, he had a “difference of opinion” that led to an argument with his two of his uncles—Lee Hee-cheol and Lee Sun-goo (46)—about a family matter. He went out and came home drunk. He shot both of his uncles with his service pistol; he then shot his aunt in the chest after she had witnessed the shootings. Captain Lee then shot himself in a suicide attempt. The army’s criminal investigation division was contacted to conduct the inquiry.

In nineteenth-century America, guns were used in 42% of 231 parricide cases; in Korea, guns made up only 3% of 92 incidents. The origins of the guns illuminated significant cultural characteristics as well. One Korean offender crafted his own handgun from scratch after deciding to kill his parents. The remaining two cases involved soldiers who were on leave from the army, and brought their guns home with them, which they then deployed against parents and other family members. Thus, aside from the innovative gunsmithing skills of one unique individual, guns were the purview of a particular class of offenders who had access, training, and knowledge of firearm usage. In mid-twentieth-century postwar Korea, that class was made up of military personnel.<sup>60</sup> The use of guns in Korea thus represented a modernized form of killing, carried out by a soldier-bureaucrat who embodied its technological advancements.

The Korean parricidal mass murder in excerpt 5 closely mirrors American scenes of mass murder. The offender comes home drunk and kills other family members as a way of resolving a previous dispute. Excerpt 4 is significant because it represents the incident with the highest victim count in the Korean dataset, and involved the use of a non-gun weapon.

Targeting multiple victims is facilitated by the use of firearms which enables the killing of several people from a distance, reducing the possibility of victim resistance or bystander intervention; it also creates psychological distance which mitigates the aversion to killing as well as the guilt suffered afterwards, unlike hand-to-hand combat, stabbings, or bayonet attacks.<sup>61</sup> The use of guns becomes a liability only during those moments when shooters have to pause and reload their weapons—the most vulnerable and susceptible point of physical interdiction from bystanders.<sup>62</sup> Guns are equalizers in a sense because it allows weaker persons to kill stronger opponents without being overpowered. The use of guns is consistent with the “physical strength hypothesis,” which predicts that weaker persons (i.e., adolescents, women) will use guns to overcome structural discrepancies in strength to execute the killing.<sup>63</sup> Hence, that a woman was able to shoot two people and kill herself in America (excerpt 1) illustrates the equalizing effects of guns on violence.

Despite the presence of a gun used in parricidal mass murder in Korea, it is mass murders committed with knives and other intimate contact methods that have the potential to advance the literature as they may illuminate the dynamics of mass killings that affect the victim count in significant ways. As already noted, guns do not pose analytical challenges toward understanding the lethality of such incidents, but knives represent an analytical dilemma: how to kill multiple people when the mechanics of knife attack make it almost impossible to target several people at once. How are mass killings possible with knives and other intimate contact methods?

In excerpt 4, Kim Jung-soo (28) kills five people with a knife—the incident with the highest victim count in the Korean parricide data. The newspaper sets the context of the incident, but does not offer additional offense details. Moreover, the internal rules of access at the National Archives of Korea made it almost impossible to locate official records to explore the offense characteristics in greater detail. How might the victims have behaved while the offender was slashing, hacking, and slicing victims on the scene? Would the victim count in scenes of Korean parricidal murder be affected by non-gun weapons, and if so, how? For the answer, we may look to contemporary legal records where greater details are provided and access is possible. Consider the following details of a parricide in a recent sentencing verdict:

Excerpt 6 (August, 2012)

Seo (male, age 42) suffered from paranoid schizophrenia with delusions of persecution. He thought that his father Mr. A (age 81) and his brother Mr. A-1 (age 56) were using rifles, machine guns, and pistols to shoot and kill innocent people as well as attempting to kill the defendant. Consequently, Seo went to an office supply store and bought several knives used for crafting. Using the yellow craft knife (blade length 15cm; overall length 18cm), he stabbed his brother in the upper neck area until the blade broke and he fell; Seo then pulled out a red craft knife (blade length 16cm; overall length 18cm) from his pocket and attacked his father who had been attempting to intervene; the blade broke again so he retrieved a pink craft knife (blade length 7cm; overall length 20cm) from a nearby drawer and continued to stab his father, but could not use it due to its short length. As a result, he went to the kitchen and grabbed a kitchen knife (blade length 17cm, overall length 30cm) and continued to attack both victims. The blade broke again, so Seo went to the kitchen and grabbed a paring knife (blade length 12cm, overall length 24cm) and stabbed both victims in the neck until both of them died.

Excerpt 6 contains notable victim behaviors that shape the parricide in significant ways. For one, it illustrates the practical exigencies that an offender faces in a knife attack. Offenders frequently cut themselves from the lack of a hand guard,<sup>64</sup> or

blades break when they come into contact with bones.<sup>65</sup> Those difficulties have to be managed by using multiple knives, as the excerpt shows, or change weapons. However, what is meaningful to the analysis is the victim's behavior. In excerpt 6, the offender is able to kill two family members because one of the victims stays on scene. He attempts to stop the offender; he does not flee. In multiple court records which were accessible, the reports detailed how victims froze on the scene as the attacker stabbed and hacked family members to death; others attempted to dash out the door, only to be stabbed from the back.

We might speculate that the victims in excerpt 4 may have attempted to stop the attacker or intervene somehow; or some of them may have attempted to flee the scene only to be overtaken by the attacker. We know that as Kim Chung's son stabbed the elder Kim and his concubine, Pastor Lee and Deacon Lee did not immediately flee the scene as evidenced by their wounds; moreover, the killer's eleven-year-old stepbrother also did not flee for he was discovered hiding in fear and subsequently attacked. How might such high victim counts be explained in Korean mass killings within the family?

As happened in American incidents of parricidal mass murder, the chaos of the scene—screaming, blood, shock—may have militated against a rational course of action by the victims: fleeing the scene. In a previous study of one-on-one killings, fleeing the scene represented the most common course of action chosen by killers.<sup>66</sup> A prior study of mass murders, however, showed that victims, offenders, and witnesses behave in ways that are not predictable. Some offenders were brought to their senses by the sight of blood of their victims while the sight of blood compelled some to lash out against bystanders who were present. The scenes of death brought some offenders to their senses, and led to the administration of cardio pulmonary resuscitation against a dying parent while others engaged in cannibalism. Available archival records enable us to reconstruct scenes of mass killings using knives, and the details suggest that mass killings are feasible not due to the physical prowess and knife wielding skills of attackers, but due to the behavior of victims on the scene, victims who may be immobilized from the shock and trauma of witnessing a murder or attempting to physically intervene.

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper has analyzed the handful of parricidal mass killings that occurred in Korea, and compared them to previously published works on nineteenth-century America and to the robust literature on contemporary mass murders. Parricidal mass murders represent a small fraction of parricides in the US and Korea, 4% and 5% respectively. A cautious comparative synthesis of the findings from Korean

and American parricidal mass murders suggests notable points of convergence and divergence in ways that contribute to the understanding of the nexus between culture and violence.

Parricidal mass murders in Korea diverge from typical familicides noted in the Western criminological literature. Prior works have noted that familicides are committed by male heads-of-household who kill putatively for altruistic reasons, to save their family from a life of misery, in ways that are highly premeditated. A cautious synthesis of American and Korean data suggest that parricidal mass murders are similar to typical domestic homicides in that they begin like other domestic incidents, over trivial matters before morphing into something else; hence it tends to be spontaneous and not premeditated. This banal character of parricidal mass murder represents a unique contribution to the study of family violence and mass murder, for this offense characteristic cuts across national and temporal boundaries, demonstrating the universality of certain offense characteristics. I have argued that parricidal mass murders are guided by the internal logic of its own dynamics. Across two different time periods and across two vastly different cultural contexts, parricidal mass killings converged on the factors outlined in this paper.

Parricides in America and Korea emerged from the confluence of alcohol and intimate partner violence. As noted elsewhere, intimate partner violence shapes parricides as sons come to the defense of their mothers who are being battered during recurring scenes of domestic violence. As noted here, this scene of domestic violence also morphed into scenes of mass killings directed at witnesses, audiences, and other family members. In this sense, parricidal mass murder in America and Korea share close parallels with one another as intimate partner violence extends its influence into additional categories of violence: defensive parricides and mass killings. No other category of violence in the family affects the ecology of violence in the home more than the violence between intimate partners.

I have argued that parricidal mass murders reflect a unique form of contagious violence within the family that are socio-culturally shaped. Recent works suggest that mass murderers share parallels to assassins and terrorists in that they plan their actions in advance, leak their intentions to others, and draw their inspiration from previous killers who have achieved notoriety through their publicized killings. The prevalence of mass killings in the US has been attributed to cultural factors that celebrate hypermasculinity such as fascination with guns, and the violent media that have served as sources of inspiration for a generation of mass killers from Columbine to the Oklahoma City bombing. This trend in the literature on mass murder has been brought about by the accessibility of guns in America

as well as the proliferation of mass media content that has served as a source of identification and legitimacy for those who want to emulate such violent acts. However, I have argued that preceding factors lose significance when interpreted in the context of Korean parricidal mass killings as neither of the two forces would have been implicative in Korea circa mid-twentieth century. Instead, men and women in nineteenth-century America and twentieth-century Korea simply acted out their violent impulses as they were carried away by the currents of their own violence. Or they could very well have been inspired by a textual source; that remains to be addressed in future works.

The parricidal mass killings discussed in this paper illustrate other factors that are just as implicative in the commission of mass murder. For one, the sheer planning and premeditation that is indexical of contemporary mass murders is not so evident in nineteenth-century America or mid-twentieth-century Korea. The mass murders were spontaneous and expressive in character, meant to hurt other people. Hence, the spontaneous character of mass killings that originate from parricides adds another dimension to mass killings that have been overlooked in the literature. The situationally emergent character of mass killings is common to both national and temporal contexts. This finding suggests that there very well may be cross-cultural and universalizable aspects of killing that extend across national and cultural boundaries.

Although guns have been the primary weapons used in mass killings in the US and other Western nations, and the lethality of mass killings has been explained as a function of police response time, weapon caliber, magazine capacity, shooters' tactical movements and proficiency, the analysis of parricidal mass killings in Korea suggests that victim counts may be influenced by other factors. Using newspapers and court records from Korea, I have argued that victim counts in parricidal mass killings that involve knives are primarily shaped by victims' behavior. For one, guns were used in a minority of parricides and parricidal mass murders in Korea; secondly, knives and other edged instruments made up the modal weapons used in parricides overall. As I have argued, however, using knives in mass killings requires victims' implicit cooperation in order to materialize. Victims must remain on scene or attempt to intervene; victims also died while attempting to flee the scene and offenders caught up to them. Although the concept "physical strength hypothesis" has been used to explain the selection and deployment of guns in homicidal incidents to explain their prevalence,<sup>67</sup> this explanation does not hold up in a Korean context, for it unduly privileges offenders' perspective based on a logic of firearms while overlooking the behaviors of victims. Parricidal mass killings that are carried out with knives ought to compel researchers to rethink the dynamics of mass murder by recalibrating the import of victim behavior in



these incidents. Victim counts may be pushed upward by the inability of potential victims to seek evasive maneuvers or flee the scene; that the lethality of such attacks is shaped by the victims' behavior which configures prominently into the resolution of attacks. Witnesses and bystanders who are attempting to intervene in a dispute that is directed against a principal target or are unable to flee the scene due to the shock of witnessing a killing may be providing attackers with additional time as well as supplementary targets to direct their violent impulses. Korean parricidal mass murders also diverge from American ones in that ordinary citizens were not able to secure access to guns as most Americans are able to do. I have argued that soldiers emerged as an elite class of killers who were able to kill with efficiency that is characteristic of modernity.

I have argued that parricidal mass murders diverge from the findings in contemporary mass murder literature in that the former tends to emerge from the quotidian conflicts of domestic life rather than the premediated and vengeful actions of disgruntled employees or bullied students. The recent shift in discourse, from "mass murder" to "active shooter" by American federal law enforcement organizations<sup>68</sup> does not accurately reflect the offense dynamics and characteristics of mass killings that occur during the course of parricides. Moreover, although motivation such as revenge and the role of mass media have been the analytical focus of contemporary post-rampage accounts, I have argued that parricidal mass murders are most cogently explained by the contagious character of violence rather than the mimetic effects of mass media. Rather than originating from exogenous sources, parricidal mass murders contain their own seeds of imitation as offenders become unglued from larger social structures and are overtaken by the uncontrolled anger and seductive allure of violence that is displaced against innocent bystanders. This contagion model of violence holds true even in a nation that is rooted in Confucian ideology that encodes respect for elders on all levels.

Despite the arguments made in this paper, there are notable shortcomings that exist. The comparative synthesis I have provided is based on a small number of cases. There were only ten incidents in nineteenth-century America and five incidents in Korea. Generalizing offense characteristics from such a small and non-random sample poses questions regarding generalizability. For future works, it may be worthwhile to compare parricidal mass killings to other mass killings in society as a point of comparison. Second, only newspapers were used as primary sources of information. It may be much more interesting to use detailed official records to infer conclusions.

## Notes

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