Youth Violence:
A Comparison of Singapore and South Korea

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Abstract

This study examines the various types of youth violence that can be observed in Singapore and South Korea, two Asian countries similar in several aspects. Specifically, distinctions are made between traditional bullying that takes place in schools, cyberbullying as a relatively new phenomenon, and youth crime and violence occurring outside of the classroom, in organized groups, which are referred to in this study as 'youth gangs.' In addition, the acts of bullying and violence are further analyzed and dissected through the application of various well-respected sociological and criminological theories, such as Lawrence E. Cohen and Marcus Felson's routine activity theory and Robert Agnew's general strain theory. The qualitative analysis of youth violence and its motivations are followed by an investigation into its damaging consequences on adolescents. Building upon this concept, the paper proposes potential solutions targeting the very root causes of the existing problems, in order to ameliorate the negative effects of youth violence on society.

Introduction

Out of the many different categories of crime and social problems that exist in the world today, youth violence is arguably one of the most pressing matters that requires attention. In cases of youth violence, the seed of problems are sown early; malleable minds are targeted, can lead to far greater and more detrimental consequences. When the youth are targeted at such a critical period of their lives, in which many of their values are formed and individuals begin to gauge their personal positions within society, this has the potential to do a great of damage, such as causing a serious lack of self-esteem (Esbenson and Carson 2009, 221-225). While there is no universal definition of 'youth', according to the World Health Organization's online factsheet that informs of the obstacles regarding youth violence, the term is generally understood to consist of individuals who find themselves within the age range of 10 to 29 years of age. The definition of 'youth violence' is also a very broad one, referring to a wide variety of different criminal acts that involve members of the youth, including but not limited to causing physical pain, bullying, ostracization, and even sexual assault and homicide (World Health Organization 2020). The breadth of violence that the term deals with, in addition to complications regarding its punishment from a legal perspective, renders the matter of resolving this social problem to be a rather difficult one. This paper will specifically examine the situation of youth violence in two countries, Singapore and the Republic of Korea, in order to gain a deeper understanding of its phenomena, motivations, and possible future solutions.

Background

Located in Southeast Asia, the Republic of Singapore is a highly urbanized country comprised of the main Singapore Island and a plethora of smaller surrounding islets. It is a

nation that is diverse in terms of race and culture, with Chinese making up the greater part of its population but also having a significant percentage of Malays, Indians and others. The multicultural and multiracial nature of Singapore also means that four languages are recognized as official languages: English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil (Ho, Kennard, Leinbach and Winstedt 2020).

The Republic of Korea, unlike Singapore, is a largely homogenous country, with almost 98 percent of the population being ethnically Korean and only a small minority of foreigners, usually from Japan and China. Similarly to Singapore, South Korea is also heavily urbanized, and the population is heavily concentrated in the urban areas of the country, at the cost of leaving its rural areas empty and depopulated (Hahn, Im, Lee, Lew and Yu 2020).

Both of these countries, which are often recognized and referred to as two of the most advanced and rapidly developing countries in Asia, share a common problem that is of importance: Youth. Due to the high density of population within these two geographically small countries, and the high concentration of these people within urban areas, there can be seen an almost frantic scramble for opportunities and success. This means that education is highly prized in both Singapore and South Korea, and competition is fierce. A meritocratic attitude can be observed in both countries, and in Singapore “the prospects of students for ‘educational survival’ would depend largely on their performance in competitive examinations”, encouraging “heavy workloads and intense drilling in preparation for tests and examinations” (Christensen 2015, 558). Likewise, in South Korea, almost the entire population progresses to high school and a staggering percentage of almost 80 percent go on to university and higher education (Hahn et al. 2020). Professor of history Michael J. Seth described this particular phenomenon in South Korea as the “product of the diffusion of traditional Confucian attitudes toward learning and status, new egalitarian ideas introduced

from the West, and the complex, often contradictory ways in which new and old ideas and formulations interacted"(Seth 2002, 6). These two countries' attitudes to education and academic competition directly impacts their youths, and as this paper will discuss in greater depth below, may have great influence on the occurrence of youth violence in society.

Bullying in School

There are limitations that one becomes faced with when attempting to research the extent to which violence in schools is a prevalent problem. Despite bullying and violence in schools not being a very new issue, the literature regarding the matter presents a wide variety of data, with a vast spectrum of definitions. That is to say, there is a "lack of consensus regarding what is considered a school-based offence," as each defines the concept of school crime differently, depending on the location, offender, and victim of the offense (Kremser 2014, 2). Also, a significant portion of the research in this particular area relies heavily on the use of anonymous questionnaires answered by sample groups of students, which is reasonable as they are the population that directly experiences and is impacted by violence in schools. However, these questionnaires may not give an entirely accurate account of the actual reality; for instance, one might encounter the "inability of pupils to understand the questions properly, faulty recall of incidents and time periods, fear of reporting, embarrassment, or the victim's own participation in the illegal activities" (Kremser 2014, 2). The above must be taken into account as one proceeds with research and consider how these limitations may be addressed.

According to a study conducted by Björkqvist and his colleagues in 1992, school bullying takes on many different forms. They can be distinguished as direct physical aggression, direct verbal aggression, and indirect aggression. Here, direct physical aggression refers to acts causing actually physical pain, such as hitting or kicking. Direct verbal

aggression would indicate forms of violence where the offender would call the victim names or threaten them in some manner, while indirect aggression would normally take the form of isolating the victim from the majority, for instance by making them feel unwelcome by encouraging others to refrain from interacting with them (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz and Kaukiainen 1992). As members of the youth, especially in Singapore and South Korea where there exists a fervent enthusiasm for education, what goes on within the school and classroom is an essential component that must be investigated in youth violence. In addition to being a place where education in various academic areas takes place, the classroom also functions as a zone for young individuals to learn how to live as a part of the greater world, developing social skills and figuring out how to find their place within society. Having had critical disruption to this vital procedure, victimized children and youths who become targets of bullying at school are more vulnerable to developing long-term harmful effects later in life, and this is one of the most important reasons why the problem of youth violence in schools needs to be resolved as soon as possible.

Singapore

First, a rudimentary understanding of how the education system functions in Singapore: the education system in Singapore consists of six compulsory years of primary school, four to five years at secondary school, and various paths to follow post-secondary (Ministry of Education, n.d.). The country is also home to some of the most prestigious university in the world, such as the National University of Singapore and the Nanyang Technological University. The nation of Singapore boasts a high quality of education, and according to Søren Christensen, a researcher in the Department of Education at Aarhus University, this status quo in related to the circumstances under which Singapore achieved independence. After being made to leave the Malaysian federation, Singapore had to stand for itself, leading to the "development of a national ideology of 'surviving against the odds'."

The meritocratic society that emerged from this background gave the education sector in Singapore the highly competitive streak that it has today (Christensen 2015, 555-556).

According to a study published by the Singapore Children's Society, the issue of bullying in Singaporean schools is a genuine problem, one that is "not restricted to any gender, educational level or ethnic group" (Koh, Tan, Tan and Appadoo Nehru 2008, 14). The percentage of individuals that have suffered from school violence was significant, with almost a quarter of the student population in primary and secondary schools reporting that they had been a victim of bullying during their time in school (Koh et al. 2008, 12). Bearing in mind the aforementioned limitations regarding the use of surveys to determine the seriousness of violence in schools, it could also be assumed that the actual number is in fact higher. The study showed that verbal aggression was the most common type of bullying that was reported in this particular survey, with over half of the victims claiming to have been on the receiving end of hurtful comments during their time in school. In comparison, the levels of direct physical aggression and relational bullying (indirect aggression) were intermediate, and it was found that the gender of students appeared to be relevant in regard to these particular two subcategories of bullying. The collected data suggested that female students tended to experience relational bullying a great deal more than their male counterparts, with 44 percent of primary school girls experiencing rumor spreading while only 17 percent was reported for primary school boys. In addition, at secondary school, the percentage of female students who reported loss of friendships and exclusion was approximately double that of their male schoolmates. On the other hand, when it came to physical violence, while the data for male students showed that 24 percent had experienced physical aggression, only 5 percent of females reported likewise (Koh et al.2008, 19-20).

Koh and colleagues also presented a detailed summary and analysis of the personal aftereffects of bullying that they were able to glean from their research, the results ranging in

a variety of emotional, psychological, and behavioral consequences for the victimized individuals. The most frequently reported consequence of facing bullying in school was the emotional effect of feeling anger, followed by feeling sadness. Other prominent reactions to school violence included the desire to be alone, retaliating back at the offender, and issues with motivation to attend school and concentrate during lessons (Koh et al. 2008, 26-28).

Additionally, victims of bullying showed a tendency to develop suicide ideation or play truant, as "school absence enables youths to escape the bullying experience" (Holt, Chee, Ng and Bossler 2013, 35). In summary, peer victimization and bullying in Singaporean schools clearly discourage students from taking away with them a positive experience of their school years, the ramifications of which could potentially extend long into their adult lives.

South Korea

The education sector in South Korea is also one that is booming, with parents desperate for their children to gain entrance into the most prestigious universities and high quality educators and university admissions experts in high demand. Students in South Korea are required by law to attend six years of elementary school and three years of middle school, after which they may go on to three years of high school and post-secondary education following that (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Despite high school not being a legal requirement, the graduation rate is a staggeringly high 95 percent (OECD 2020), and the country is also home to the world-class Seoul National University. In Korea there is especially a fervent ambition for students to become accomplished in English, and in his paper regarding this 'English fever' in South Korea, Professor Jin-Kyu Park draws an analogy between the stereotypical American 'soccer mom' and the education-obsessed Korean parent. Much like the above-mentioned Singaporean national ideology of 'surviving against the odds', Park also states that "there is a belief that any Korean can advance himself

through his own efforts," and that education is the greatest tool in achieving "upward social mobility and economic prosperity" (Park 2009, 50). In this regard, the societies of Singapore and South Korea appear to share many similarities.

In one study on the prevalence of school bullying in South Korea, it was found that there was a 40 percent prevalence, determining that "school violence is the most common form of youth violence." Out of this 40 percent, the research shows that "17% [act] as perpetrators, 14% as victims, and 9% as victim-perpetrators" (Kim, Koh and Leventhal 2004, 740). On the other hand, a more recent study conducted in 2008 reported significantly different statistics, claiming that around 5.8 percent of South Korean students admitted to experiencing bullying in the span of one school term (Koo, Kwak and Smith 2008, 131). This demonstrates the previously discussed difficulty of measuring and examining the situation of school violence, due to differences in definition of relevant terms and choice of sample student groups. Aware of the differences between their own data and previous research, Koh and colleagues explicitly specify the reasons for their use of the Korean word wang-ta, believing it to be closest to the nuance of the English word 'bullying', defining it as "including physical and verbal forms of bullying as well as social exclusion; in addition, it does not cover fights between equals" (Koo et al. 2008, 123).

The research of Koo and colleagues leads to a most interesting aspect of bullying in South Korean schools: the number of perpetrators is significantly larger than that of the victims. Why would there be more perpetrators than the victims? According to the research bullying in South Korea often takes the form of "a group of 3 up to 10 bullies, many of them girls, and in the same class as the victim, who is threatened and socially isolated" (Koo et al. 2008, 134). The study postulates that this phenomenon of a group of bullies forming to inflict violence upon an individual may be due to individualism-collectivism, which refers to the "relative importance people accord to personal interests and to shared pursuits." In other

words, Eastern countries such as Korea and Japan are often considered to be more collectivist compared to nations of Europe and the Western world, placing greater value on the relationships between people and relatively less on the satisfaction of the individual. Building upon this notion, Koo and colleagues hypothesize that in collectivist cultures such as that of South Korea, even the "decision to bully someone is taken more collectively."

Perhaps due to the greater stakes of becoming isolated in such a collectivist society, youth violence in Korea has led to some drastically serious and tragic consequences. Not only can there be observed the usual reaction of feeling anger or sadness in response to becoming a victim of school bullying, but the youths of Korea are also becoming suicidal as a result of victimization. Korea is currently the OECD country with the highest suicide rate, at 24.6 per 100,000 persons each year. (OECD, n.d.) The sense of isolation that is characteristic of bullying in Korea, or "wang-ta", is a major factor in causing youths to feel suicidal, "directly [influencing] suicidal ideation among males whereas it indirectly influenced suicidal ideation through depressive symptoms among females" (Lee, Hong and Espelage 2010, 535). In this way, peer victimization and the deterioration of peer relationships poses a high risk of youth suicide, and according to the reports of Korean youths that being "socially excluded by their peers, being victims of violence and feeling betrayed by their friends" were the most significant reasons for feeling suicidal (Lee et al. 2010, 536).

The conclusion can be drawn that Korean adolescents within their society of herd mentality are particularly vulnerable to bullying that occurs at school.

Comparison

There are clearly some intriguing points of comparison to be discussed between the situations in these two countries, Singapore and South Korea. Firstly, it appears that in comparison to Singapore, the consequences of school bullying in South Korea are far more

diverse. According to data from 2016, Korea holds the greatest suicide rate of countries in the OECD with 24.6 per 100,000 people per year. On the other hand, in 2016 Singapore's suicide mortality rate was 9.9 per 100,000 people, which is less than half of that of Korea (World Bank, n.d.).

Moreover, as mentioned in passing above, the two countries share some similarities in terms of their history, more specifically regarding the situations in which they achieved independence. Both societies appear to show meritocratic aspects, which is evident in the way that education plays such a pivotal role in the lives of most youths. In the case of Singapore, the nation faced a struggle to be recognized as a viable country following its sudden expulsion from Malaysia in 1965 due to ongoing political and economic tensions, and in the process of doing so, "education was developed into the main vehicle for this elitist system of meritocratic selection" (Christensen 2015, 557). Korea also underwent of period of Japanese colonization which came to its demise in 1945, and the history of struggle for independence, as well as the situation in which highly educated were sought out in order to rebuild the country, instilled in the national mindset an attitude towards education similar to that of Singapore's. This analysis of historical backgrounds and the analogy that may be made to assume that school bullying in Singapore may also show a tendency for groups of perpetrators to offend against a smaller number of victims. Yet, this may be due to the fact that while Korea is almost entirely homogeneous and consisting of people of Korean ethnicity, Singapore is a more diverse country, with a larger variety of ethnicities and languages spoken.

This claim is further supported by the distinct nature of wang-ta in Korea. Prior research shows that the most common victims of such bullying in contemporary schools are linked to "children and adolescents with chronic mental and physical conditions…for example, anxiety, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and tic disorders" (Yoo

2014). In other cases, economically marginalized students tended to be more prone to wang-ta where the perpetrators of the bullying tended to be of a higher economic status than the victims. In essence, such observations show that in virtually racially homogeneous societies, physical differences alongside gaps in socioeconomic status tended to be the overarching causes of bullying rather than race.

Hence, the tentative conclusion may be drawn that the characteristics of wang-ta are due to the lack of diversity among students, which is why a greater number of similarities may be drawn between bullying in Korea and bullying in Japan, or "ijime", where the predominant population is also those of Japanese origin.

Cyberbullying

Violence shows itself in the world in many different forms and defining the term merely as the causing of physical pain and damage is not sufficient to give a sense of what it entails. Especially, with the rapid advancement of modern technology, a problem that is quickly rising in prominence is the issue of cyberbullying, or the act of inflicting violence via the Internet, for example through social networking sites such as Instagram or Facebook. This is a relatively recent addition to the categories of violence, but one that is fast becoming relevant, especially for the youth, as they are the sector of society that find themselves most closely interacting with electronic devices and the Internet. As the study by the Singapore Children's Society also describes, cyberbullying is a form of violence that occurs online, "using technology as the weapon" (Koh et al. 2008). It is somewhat similar to direct verbal aggression in traditional school bullying in that it involves the conveying of words and hurtful comments in order to inflict violence. However, the critical difference is that via the Internet, there can be no limit placed on the location or time at which this violence takes place. In discussing the consequences of bullying above, it was mentioned that school

violence has led to students' truancy from school, as the fact that the victim is not in the same location as the perpetrator logically means that the victim is able to avert facing violence that day. In the case of cyberbullying, however, as long as both the victim and offender have access to an electronic device and Internet connection, youth violence can take place anywhere, at any time. This means that cyberbullying can be viewed as a method for instigators of school bullying to extend their field of influence further, into the private lives of their victims. Simply put, there is no escape for the victimized youth.

In Singapore, a research was conducted regarding the risk of cyber and mobile phone bullying victimization, and researchers pointed out the clear correlation between the use of the Internet and the likelihood of being bullied online, indicating to the significant relationship between the use of online chat rooms and victimization: "Individual time spent in chat rooms and blogging increased the odds of both cyber and mobile phone bullying victimization" (Holt, Fitzgerald, Bossler, Chee and Ng 2014, 9). Additionally, in an exploration into the consequences that follow cyberbullying, it was found that there was also an "influence of technology on both truancy and suicidal ideation," and that youths "who more frequently engage in MMS texting were more likely to skip school" (Holt et al. 2013, 35). The youths of today are connected to the world through their fingertips. It appears evident that although this has brought positive impacts of improved communication, it has also brought with it the curse of allowing youth violence perpetrators to become more deeply involved in the lives of their victims, giving them the ability to attack even when they are not in the same space together.

Meanwhile, in South Korea, a country renowned for its great prowess in terms of technology and IT, cyberbullying is also a very serious issue. According to a research paper about the impact of youths' lifestyles on their involvement with youth crime, the "relatively unstructured and unsupervised nature" of online environments would encourage perpetrators

to victimize their peers through these platforms, and this meant that "greater participation in cyberclub activities coincided with higher odds of bullying" (Cho, Wooldredge and Park 2015, 18). A study into online harassment among juveniles in Korea utilized the social learning theory and self-control theory in order to give an account of the reasons behind why adolescents in Korea become involved in youth violence over the Internet. Social learning theory refers to the theory that claims that "social behavior is a cognitive process in which personality and environment form a continuous process of reciprocal interaction" (Choi, Lee and Lee 2017, 113). In other words, juveniles who are still in the process of developing their manners of social behavior will learn how to behave through observing those around them. Additionally, the self-control theory indicates to the theory that those who lack in self-control "tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical, risk-taking, short-sighted, and non-verbal" (Choi et al. 2017, 114). As youths and juveniles are still in the process of developing their frontal cortex and growing into full-fledged adulthood, the claim may be made that their lack of self-control allows them to take advantage of easy access to the Internet through their mobile devices and become involved in cyberbullying and cybercrime, and this phenomenon may be broadly explained through the application of these two sociological theories above.

Routine Activity Theory (Criminological Analysis)

In terms of criminology, a theory known as the routine activity theory may be applied to further examine the inner workings of cyberbullying and the causes behind why and how it happens. The routine activity theory was first presented by sociologists Lawrence E. Cohen and Marcus Felson in 1979. In essence, the theory makes the claim that crime becomes likely through the combination of three components: a likely offender, a suitable target, and absence of capable guardians to prevent the crime from occurring (Cohen and Felson 1979). Essentially, the two factors to be aware of in application of the routine activity theory are the

following: exposure and supervision. Firstly, in the case of exposure, the theory quite logically postulates that increased exposure to other individuals subsequently increases the likelihood of crime taking place. This is because in comparison to Person A who stays at home and refrains from interaction with others, Person B who leaves the house to mingle with other people is more much likely to encourage likely offenders and turn themselves into a suitable target. Also, the role of the presence or absence of supervision in the likelihood of crime of quite self-explanatory, as the lack of a force to police activities would naturally lead to an increase in the possibility of criminal activities by allowing their execution to become much easier.

Wolfe and colleagues conducted research into the application of the routine activity theory to youths' exposure to sexting, another risk-fraught activity to be engaged in online, (Wolfe, Marcum, Higgins and Ricketts 2016) which "generally refers to sending sexual images and sometimes sexual texts via cell phone and other electronic devices" (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones and Wolak 2012, 14). The sexting of adolescents' pictures and videos is also deemed illegal in many jurisdictions, and therefore can be classified as an act of cybercrimes that youths ought to be wary of. According to the study by Wolfe and colleagues, the increased accessibility to electronic devices, smartphones and the Internet subsequently means increased exposure to the outside world. Through the possession of a mobile device, and as "routine activity research has demonstrated for some time now that relative exposure to potential motivated offenders produces situations conducive to victimization and deviance." (Wolfe et al. 2016, 635), the claim can be made that the Internet-using adolescent resembles Person B in the above example, who jeopardizes their safety by fraternizing with other people. Without even needing to step outside of the house, one is able to actively interact with others, heightening the possibility of encouraging likely offenders and rendering themself a suitable target online, hence heightening the possibility of cybercrime happening.

The research's explanation of sexting through its application of the routine activity theory both broadens the relevance of the theory to the realm of the Internet and confirms the high risk of youths engaging in risky activities online. Thus, the very presence of youths on the Internet magnifies their vulnerability, and increases the possibility of their becoming perpetrators or victims of cybercrime, by encouraging "likely offenders" and revealing themselves to be "suitable targets." But what of the final component that is required of routine activity theory, "absence of capable guardians?" An important characteristic of cyberbullying and cybercrime must be acknowledged here, and this is the fact that often on the Internet, perpetrators of violence are able to remain anonymous, which means that although the act of cyberbullying is very much similar to traditional bullying in most aspects, such as the component of inflicting and receiving psychological violence, the offender is often able to avoid being "personally confronted with the way their victims react and the consequences of their harassments" (Dehue, Bolman and Völlink 2008, 217). The data collected by Dehue and colleagues supports this statement, as out of the students that reported that they had previously been bullied online, 34.8 percent were unaware of who had been their bully. Moreover, the data showed that parents were significantly involved in their children's usage of electronic devices and the Internet, with 60 percent of students reporting that there were rules set in place regarding "the frequency with which they were allowed to use the Internet", and 80 percent saying that there were rules "about what they were and were not allowed to do on the Internet." Despite the apparent heavy involvement of parental oversight, however, the percentage of parents being aware of their children being victimized online was considerably lower than what was reported by the students themselves (Dehue et al. 2008, 218-220).

It appears to be the case, therefore, that the youths' increased usage of the Internet and cyber spaces also has an absence of supervision that prevents crime from happening, as

according to the routine activity theory. In fact, there are two levels to this absence: the cyberbully is able to escape the burden of responsibility due to the lack of barriers preventing violence; and second, even though parents may try to provide guidance and oversight, they are ultimately unable to be privy to the mysterious conversations and exchanges that take place online. The latter is most likely due to the fact that the world of likes, follows, and comments is a realm created by today's generation of youths, and few adults feel wholly at ease as foreigners in their domain.

In this way, youth violence on the Internet is made possible due to the promotion of likely offenders and suitable targets caused by widespread easy access to cyber spaces and the lack of cyber crime-deterring guardianship caused by online anonymity and oblivion of parents. Henceforth, it appears that the routine activity theory can successfully be applied to the issue of cyberbullying and violence, in order to comprehend why the problem transpires in the lives of today's youths.

Youth Gangs

Although the main focus of youth violence may be centered around bullying within the classroom, the fact remains that there is also youth violence that occurs outside of educational environments. Arguably more causing more danger than that of school playground bullies, the problem of youth gangs and juvenile delinquency serves to be a great problem for society and the physical and mental well-beings of its youths. The term 'youth gang' here refers to a group of adolescents who come together to collectively behave in a deviant manner, "driven by socio-political and structural contexts" (Chu, Daffern, Thomas, Ang, Long and O'Brien 2015, 20).

While gangs and organized crime do exist in Korea, they are kept quiet, simmering below the surface. This is largely due to the history of presidents who paid particular

attention to the problems of organized crime in Korean society. For example, President Young-sam Kim "struck hard against organized crime before the end of his term in office in 1998, and President Moo- hyun Noh's administration encouraged the Korean National Police Agency to pay "special attention to serious crimes, including organized crime" (Lee 2006, 69-70). Also, it is difficult for criminal organizations in South Korea to grow and thrive due to Article 114 of the Korean Penal Code. This legislation means that "arrested members of crime groups could be punished not only for any crime they committed, but also for forming or joining criminal organizations." (Lee 2006, 67) This is to say that even if an individual does not actually participate in a crime group's activities, they would still be committing a punishable crime simply by joining their ranks. Perhaps due to these stern measures put in place by the government, gang membership is not something that can be commonly observed among Korean youths, and most of the youth violence takes place within the boundaries of school. However, as discussed above in the section regarding bullying in school, the culture of South Korea is a collectivist one, and systems resembling youth gangs can sometimes be seen among students in school. These youth gangs are commonly referred to as "iljin", which is not to be confused with the traditional definition of bullies. The literal meaning is of the term is "first class", and hence often comprises multiple students that are talented in certain areas ranging from fighting to studying, as it lets them avoid persecution from teachers (DongaIlbo). Oftentimes, these student groups are not openly visible, as they are usually unofficial organizations in which "use of violence becomes more symbolic that overt" (Kwon, Kristjánsson and Walker 2016, 211). Despite the fact that such organizations are not formally established or founded, there is a hierarchy of sorts, which would distinguish the actions of the iljin from other, isolated acts of school bullying. The remnants of Confucian culture that still remains in South Korean society, which means that the simple fact of one being older than another commands some degree of respect. This social hierarchy of age

permeates the school system in Korea also, and this is the reason why the “culture of iljin is formed via close relations with seniors and juniors with senior iljin taking care of juniors and juniors showing excessive loyalty in return by giving money or expensive goods” (Kwon et al. 2017, 211). Hence, it appears that while the problem of youth gangs is not overtly serious in Korea, there do exist forms of organized violence within the boundaries of school.

The situation in Singapore is a little different. The Singapore law enforcement does actively try to suppress the activities of youth gangs, such as through the Criminal Law [Temporary Provisions] Act, 2004, (Chu et al. 2015, 21-22) but the tradition regarding the reason for their existence means that they are still active. While the argument may be made that the iljin of South Korea arose at least partially due to problematic or flawed interpretations of Confucianist ideas, Singaporean youth gangs began to form in the early nineteenth century, and it was their objective to be the protectors of early Chinese immigrants. Over time, these gangs have become a great deal looser in terms of structure, becoming less strict in regards to ceremonial activities such as initiations and so on. These youths that partake in gang activities are problematic to society in many ways, as in comparison to their non-gang-affiliated counterparts, they have a tendency to show more violent behavior. According to previous research, they are “more likely to have a history of violent offending behaviors, substance use, and weapons use”, making them a great deal more dangerous than the typical adolescent (Chu, Daffern, Thomas, Ang and Long 2014, 287).

This research also stated the apparent points of distinction between youths that were affiliated with gangs and those who were not, discovering that gang-affiliated youth perpetrators “appear to be more entitled, have more pro-violence attitudes, and were more partial toward antisocial associates than the nongang affiliated youth offenders.”

Additionally, it was found that youth offenders with involvement in gangs were also more comfortable with the use of weapons (Chu et al. 2014, 295). Following the understanding of the dangers of youths becoming a part of such organizations, it becomes pertinent to ask the question; what factors invite the youths of Singapore to become members of gangs? Upon examination of the responses to their questionnaires, Chu and colleagues discovered that "gang-affiliated youth tended to think that gangs could provide them with protection", and that they were "more likely than their nongang counterparts to have friends and family members who were in a gang" (Chu et al. 2014, 295). It appears to be the case that youngsters who feel compelled to join gangs are influenced by the people closest to them, and that they are enticed by the idea of feeling a sense of inclusion, belonging, or even security.

In fact, a study by Chu and colleagues in 2015 collected data to confirm this point, with its discovery of the "social and intimacy needs" that encourage the youth to affiliate themselves to gangs. Out of the many reasons that were given for joining youth gangs, the most common was the "desire to develop, strengthen or maintain friendships" (Chu et al. 2015, 27-28). Therefore, it seems to be the case that the youth are generally tempted to involve themselves in gang activities in an attempt to "fit in."

General Strain Theory (Criminological Analysis)

In order to make a satisfactory effort to research and implement innovative and effective solutions to the problems of youth violence that have been outlined in detail above, it is critical to first conduct a thorough investigation into the motivations behind the instigators. This section of the paper will refer to the highly respected criminological theory that was laid down by Robert Agnew, known as the general strain theory with a few factors that motivate violence in the youth (Agnew 1992). The general strain theory is a most

influential theory of criminology that also manages to supply a convincing explanation behind many other phenomena, even outside of criminal behaviour.

The classical strain theories, which Agnew built upon in order to present his own thesis, were developed by the criminologist Robert King Merton. In essence, Merton's strain theories claim that the reason for delinquent behaviour is due to the pressure that is placed on the offending individuals, which is the result of "blocked opportunities to attain successful goals," put in place by their negative relationships with other individuals (Froggio 2007, 383). However, the problem with this classical theory is that Merton and other thinkers largely focused on the futile attempts of the lower class to achieve the goals of monetary success and the social status of the middle class. This not only fails to account for the crimes committed by members of the middle class, but it also disregards the fact that humans have a diverse range of aspirations, not only monetary (Agnew 1992, 50-51).

Expanding upon this idea, Agnew presents a broader understanding of what Merton meant by the "pressure" that weighs down on individuals of society. According to Agnew's general strain theory, there are three major sources of stress, or pressure, that provide motivation to commit criminal acts, and their categorizations and explanations are as follows: Firstly, "Strain as the failure to achieve positively valued goals." As opposed to Merton who focused primarily on the goal of monetary gain, Agnew's research explains that these positive aspirations can come in the form of many different things, such as expected, deserved, or just and fair outcomes. These goals all fall under the category of "positively valued goals," and according the general strain theory, failure to achieve them can factor into motivating an individual into behaving in a delinquent manner. Specifically, in the case of the youth, Agnew briefly mentions the youth subculture of seeking "immediate goals," which refers to factors such as "intelligence, physical attractiveness, personality, and athletic ability."

Secondly, “Strain as the removal of positively valued stimuli from the individual.” Under the logic that the failure to achieve goals would be a weak motivation for aggressive behavior, especially “when the goal has never been achieved before,” Agnew also considers the loss of treasured things or people to be a powerful motivator for violence. He gives adolescent-specific examples: for instance, one may grieve their loss of a friend or the loss of familiar surroundings caused by moving schools, in which case they may turn to delinquent behavior in an attempt to replenish the sudden deficiency of these positive stimuli.

Thirdly, “Strain as the presentation of negative stimuli.” The examples of negative stimuli that Agnew suggests are situations such as child abuse, neglect, physical punishment, and more. He postulates that adolescents could potentially resort to delinquency due to the “inability of adolescents to escape legally from noxious stimuli.” Their status as minors give youths somewhat less control over their own lives, in some cases forcing them to resort to violence in order to handle the strain of negative stimuli.

The case can be made that the above strains appear to be a significant factor that motivates youth violence in Singapore and in South Korea. It has already been established above that the two countries’ standards of education are maintained at a constantly advanced level. Clearly, education is highly valued and sought after, and while this national mindset has apparently been beneficial to the elevation of their standards of education, it has also led to unhealthy levels of obsession and competitiveness among their students and youths. The highly stressful environment that students are exposed to and the fear of failure to meet their goals that is constantly drummed into their heads would no doubt place a great deal of strain on the minds of young students.

Agnew’s paper on general strain theory draws links between the above “strains” that individuals are burdened with and the heightened possibility of delinquent behavior. The

theory claims that these strains "[increase] the likelihood that individuals will experience one or more of a range of negative emotions", which would include "disappointment, depression and fear." However, the most critical of these emotions, as Agnew points out specifically, is anger. The reason why he sets anger apart from other negative emotions is because anger "increases the individual's level of felt injury, creates a desire for retaliation/revenge, energizes the individual for action, and lowers inhibitions, in part because individuals believe that others will feel their aggression is justified" (Agnew 1992, 59-60). In short, anger propels the individual to take more drastic action in response to taking on strain, which heightens the likelihood of their turning to delinquency.

Given the highly academic and competitive environment of both Singapore and South Korea's education system, the most obvious strain that the youth of these two countries would feel is the pressure to produce outstanding results in their academic pursuits. While many different factors would weave complex webs of strain and pressure on each individual, it would seem that the most glaringly noticeable would be "strain as the failure to achieve positively valued goals," the valued goals in question being things such as aspirations for high grades, aspirations for acceptance into prestigious universities, and so on. Additionally, as a prominent reason for the Singapore youths' involvement in gang activity appear to be their desire to fulfil their social and intimacy needs, it may also be theorized that they feel "strain as the removal of positively valued stimuli." Here, the positively valued stimuli could refer to healthy relationships with friends and family, or perhaps even the motivation to stay in school. In South Korea, the formation of iljin groups may stem from an exposure to outdated ideas of hierarchy and the remnant of harmful traditions, in which case the strain that Korean youths feel would be classified as "strain as the presentation of negative stimuli."

Potential Solutions

Violence that is experienced at a younger age is arguably more damaging than it is for fully grown adults, for the reason that the victims are much more impressionable and less experienced in the matters of life. In fact, youth violence causes many detrimental effects on children and adolescents, both on a personal and societal level, and according to the World Health Organization, it "increases the costs of health, welfare and criminal justice services; reduces productivity; [and] decreases the value of property" (World Health Organization 2020).

The current status quo of youth violence being unfortunately prevalent in Singapore and South Korea is not to say that their respective governments have been entirely complacent regarding the matter. There are already methods and legislations that have been put in place, with which governments are attempting utilize in order to prevent and bring under control the issues around youth violence. The prominence of youth violence despite the existence of these measures is highly suggestive of the fact that there are many improvements to be made to the current situation.

First of all, an important distinction must be recognized between the justice systems for adults and the youth, or juveniles. While adults who have committed crimes are punished for their actions, there is an additional level to the judgement of crimes committed by the youth. Their justice system comprises of "rehabilitation, which focuses on the offender, and punishment, which centers attention on the offense" (Sheffer 1995, 481). In other words, the primary focus when adults commit an offense is the delivery of justice, but for adolescents the main intent is to educate minds that are still young and malleable, to set them on the right path to become fully functioning members of society.

As is the case with many countries around the world, Singapore does not have laws specifically set in place to combat the issues of violence in schools. Instead, problems of

bullying fall under the Protection from Harassment Act, which condemns anti-social behavior in general, focusing especially on aspects of cyberbullying. In terms of combating youth gangs, Singapore has rather strict laws in place to punish those who partake in illegal gang activity. For example, members of unlawful societies, if apprehended, could face "[i]mprisonment for a term not exceeding 3 years," a "fine not exceeding $5,000," or both. Rioting, a common crime committed by youth gangs in Singapore, could be punished not only by imprisonment for up to 10 year, but also caning, a somewhat unusual method of discipline (National Crime Prevention Council, n.d.).

South Korea, on the other hand, has a separate set of laws to combat school violence specifically, in addition to its laws for juvenile justice. Adolescents up to the age of 19 are considered juveniles, but according to the Korea Ministry of Government Legislation, youths aged 10 to 14 cannot be given criminal punishment for their wrongdoings, but can be given "protective disposition," which is a situation in the child is placed under a watchful eye in a place that best suits their situation, whether it be with their parent or guardian, in a hospital or in some other facility. Being given protective disposition means that there will not be anything left on the child's permanent record, and in comparison, to the juvenile justice system in Singapore, which sets it age range from 7 to 16, (Ozawa 2009, 67) it seems apparent that South Korea's system is far more lenient. Judging by Singapore's reputation for its low crime rate, the claim could be made that Korea would benefit by following suit, and bringing down the minimum age at which individuals begin to take full responsibility for their actions.

The evidence and legislation suggest that governments are already doing significant work to attempt to abolish violence among youths. However, the fact that youth violence is a social problem still is an indicator to the fact that their endeavors are not doing enough, and that perhaps implementing legislature is insufficient to bring about actually meaningful, long-

standing change. What additional measures, then, could be put into action to accomplish this? Some potential solutions to the problems in Singapore and South Korea today can be postulated using this paper's application of criminological theories to the phenomena of youth violence.

Building upon the application of Robert Agnew's general strain theory of criminology, the most fundamental thing that requires reform in both Singapore and South Korea is the education system. The burden of having to produce excellent academic results is coercing the youth into finding delinquent methods of alleviating their stress, of which the target can become both themselves (suicide ideation) or their peers (bullying). Parents and teachers need to refrain from having their excessive obsession and desperation to produce high achieving children negatively affect them, and instead endeavor to decrease the strain that is placed upon their shoulders. A possible solution could be to diversify the career paths that students have access to follow, which would allow them to understand that book learning and attending prestigious universities is not the only way in which an individual's life ought to unfold. Agnew's theory shows that it is the existence of strain that encourages individuals, especially adolescents, to turn to delinquency in an attempt to correct the stress that they feel; if education reform could alleviate the struggle in their stead, it then logically follows that not as many youths would feel the necessity to resort to violence.

Generating actual change in the mindset and mentality of people will be a long and arduous task, even more so than altering the laws to intensify the degree of punishment for offending individuals. However, uprooting the fundamental causes, once they have been located, will be the most sure-fire method of resolving the issues of youth violence, and that is an undertaking that is worth effort.

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