Case Study Analysis:

Brief: “A Historical-Institutionalist Analysis of the MV Sewol and MS Estonia Tragedies: Policy Lessons from Sweden for South Korea”

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On April 16, 2014, the South Korean ship the Sewol sank off the southern tip of South Korea bringing down with it 304 people--most of whom were high-schoolers. Armed with data and a side-by-side comparison with Sweden, the case-study itself attempts to name the tragedy an eventual inevitability based on inherently Korean cultural aspects. It makes direct comparisons to what happened in a similar case involving a Scandinavian ship, the MS Estonia in the 90s

- Role of Cultural Analysis and Critique
- Sewol Tragedy: causes
- MS Estonia Tragedy: causes

The following case study analysis will examine whether or not and/or to what extent culture played a role in the events leading up to the disaster by examining the following:

- Cultural Structures and Responses
- Similar Past Cases

The author then suggests that Korea (and countries with similar cultures) will continue to have such problems until both culturally held beliefs and emergency-systems’ reform change simultaneously. [He] offers that Korea, while having had an extraordinary period of economic growth known as “the Miracle of the Han”, the country has yet to readily adapt to the change in cultural perspective that is said could have prevented this tragedy. Some suggestions as to what to do in the future are given by the author of the case, and are as follows:

- Designating a third-party unbiased investigative unit prior to tragedies happening
- Establishing a public archive to store and collect any and all information about the tragedy.
- Reform the safety regulations: focusing on first-responders

This analysis does its best in researching both sides of the issue of “culture”. There are some particularly strong opinions on both sides that have merit and deserve to be heard as well. As such, the analysis strives for comprehensiveness yet should always be read--as with anything else--with an open mind towards differing cultural perspectives.

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A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS:

Coincidence or Culture?

Introduction

It's always easy to point fingers. In fact, it's human nature. Blame is hard to look at objectively. Each of us, whether we like it or not, has a lens with which we view the world: either in the daily roles we play (father, student, cousin etc), in our career path, or even playing the role of an audience member in a movie theater. While not at all that simple, it would be wise to acknowledge the cultural lenses we bring to each interaction without even realizing it. *Every* decision we make is made through a subconscious lens of one culture or another. Discounting the existence of such an idea would be a disservice.

It is very easy to make sweeping generalizations based on cultural stereotypes: effectively labeling systems, occurrences, and even people as either *this* or *that*. Some find value in the simplicity of categorizing human behavior through comparing one's own culture. The danger is when those preconceived notions of how one should act based on his/her culture are seen as hasty, inaccurate, and even outright offensive, especially in emotionally-charged situations.

The case study from which this work is drawn compares responses to a crisis involving Sweden, Estonia, and Finland with one in Korea. Through each country's respective cultural lens, the author provides historical background and makes a case for how the two social structures affect crisis management. The study best attempts a non-bias viewpoint by including authors from both primary cultures (Swedish and Korean), but the tone leans heavily for the former. Regardless, it is still worth further examination.

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The Sewol Ferry

A ship that had been operating in Japan for 18 years, the boat to become the infamous *Sewol* was bought by a Korean shipping firm named Cheoungheajin and was then relocated to Incheon, Korea, where it was refurbished. On the night of April 15th, after being delayed nearly two-and-a-half hours because of fog, the ship set sail for Jeju island--on a popular route and tourist destination 400 km to the south. The ship itself was said to have been speeding in order to make up for lost time (). The ship capsized at 8:48 AM the next morning after the third-mate attempted a sharp turn in notoriously strong currents.

Reportedly in his cabin at the time, the captain following then tried and failed to right the listing vessel, ordered the passengers to stay in their cabins. When the initial call for help--sent to the Jeju KST--wasn't accepted and was later rerouted to Incheon-KST, a *patrol vessel* was dispatched. During this time, actual recorded audio of an automated announcement asking passengers to remain in their cabins was made and sent via phone by a now deceased student who was onboard . It wasn't until 9:00 AM that yet another rescue post was contacted: this time in Jindo, closeby. Why wasn't it protocol to contact the nearest station first? It's not clear whether there was any protocol to follow as it took another almost fifteen crucial minutes for the crew to confirm that the ferry was capsizing.

8:52 AM April 16, 2014: "Please help, the boat is sinking" --Choi, Duk-Ha, Danwon HS

At 9:30 AM--approximately 85 minutes after the first mistake at the helm--the captain decided to abandon ship with most of the crew via helicopter. Life-boats dropped and almost 150 people made it to safety. The majority--304 to be exact--would forever remain there. Rescue divers, confused at first as to which reports to follow, would arrive only minutes before the whole boat went under. The boat was carrying almost 2.5x over its regulation capacity, and most of that weight had shifted to the port side making escape impossible.

The Estonian Incident

By comparison, in what was considered more so a “freak” accident-rather than human error, the sinking of a *Finnish* ship…. crewed by an *Estonian-speaking* crew... while on a voyage from *Sweden* in 1994 lends itself to the idea that language barriers and cultural miscommunication caused 852 people to lose their lives that night. But in fact, the language of the crew was decidedly Estonian *[2]* and it was later determined that the tragedy was caused by something as simple as a crucially faulty bow visor made hurriedly by a Finnish contractor. Intercultural misexchange played no part in this tragedy--even having occurred in the pitch black of 1AM! By the time rescue parties had arrived it was already too late. While not a direct comparison, it does offer some points up for discussion.

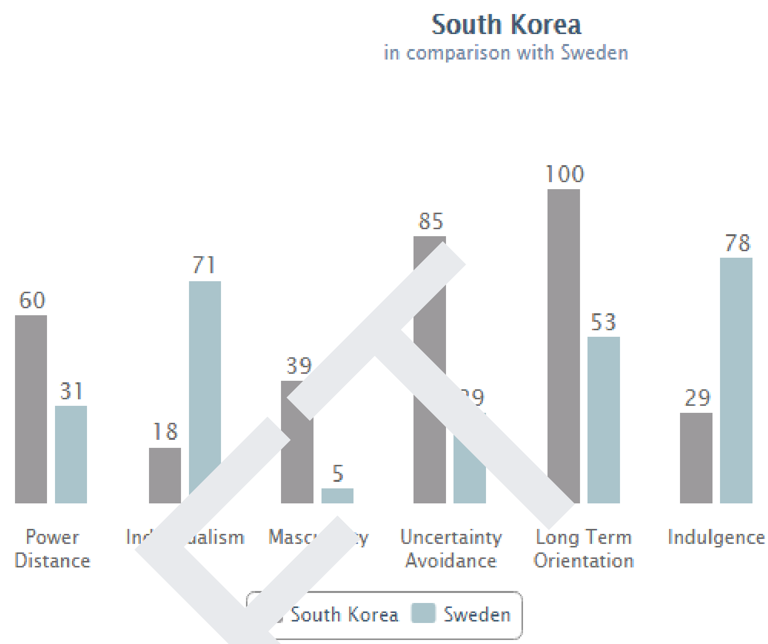
As the case study looks deeper into the Korean cultural structure compared to that of the Swedes, the author(s) states his case for why cultural context played a big part in the overall ineffectiveness of the Sewol Ferry disaster response. Essentially the author asks, “why then, was it so difficult to manage a crisis involving a relatively *slow-sinking* vessel of people who shared the same language in *broad daylight*?”

Cultural Structures and Responses

In the case of Sewol, not only did it take the authorities at the top entirely too long to grasp the enormity of the issue, but it isn’t clear whether there was a specific crisis management plan in place to begin with [5]. Is its absence a matter of culture? The response of the Korean government to the disaster can be broken down into culturally predictable variables as follows:

- **“Group Think”**
- **Collectivism**
- **Uncertainty Avoidance**
- **Hierarchical Power-Distance**
- **Diffusion of responsibility**

"Group Think": "[T]he practice of thinking or making decisions as a group in a way that discourages creativity or individual responsibility." and "the lack of individual creativity, or of a sense of personal responsibility,that is sometimes characteristic of group interaction." [1]



The Sewol crew is unfortunately a fine example of how strong and therefore detrimental "GroupThink" can be.Throughout the timeline of the disaster there were opportunities to speak up and change the trajectory of the tragedy: Why was the 3rd-mate at the wheel in known-rough cu[illegible]nts? T[illegible]time. Why wasn't an evacuation protocol initiated? Who was in[illegible]?! The ar[illegible]ent that Confucian "blind obedience" to authority somehow led t[illegible]e deaths [illegible]hundreds [illegible]his case is widely disputed yet is still worth noting in the case study a[illegible]sis [illegible] *Photo Credit https://www.g[illegible]de.co[illegible]*

Hierarc[illegible]l Power-Distan[illegible]: the stark disparity between the two cultures' power-distance scores sugge[illegible]hat the w[illegible]n which information is disseminated is crucially unique. Especially in crisis situations, [illegible]ctively managing the added complexity built into the high-context Korean power structure--specifically the time and channels it takes for messages to reach their intended target--has potentially fatal results.The information control structure was not arranged properly. Initially more than 10 separate branches become involved in the rescue but as the

[1] <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/groupthink>

Ministry of Security and Public Administration did not designate a clear line of command, there remained no centralized method for receiving crucial information during the rescue. [3, 9]

Diffusion of Responsibility: The first distress message was sent from inside of the hull Sewol to three separate coastal offices before reaching its intended and closest target. *Why is that?* It doesn't take a whole academic analysis to come to the conclusion that this is in fact a case of "that's not my problem." The hierarchical structure of Korean culture makes it easy for *responsibility* and what later becomes *blame* to disappear into bureaucracy in search of accountability. From a management perspective this is maddening!

> "Due to the institutional complexity of and lack of accountability within the South Korean government, the public has failed to single out a clear target to blame, and most media outlets have focused on the de facto owner of Chonghaejin Shipping, Yoo Byung-Un [the CEO], members of his family.... In fact, most of the South Korean media avoided discussing institutional failures and instead presented the Sewol tragedy as due to the unethical behavior of the company owners. Thus, risk management was treated as an individual failure rather than as a systemic problem affecting social institutions."[2]

Collectivism: In the days following the Sewol incident...

- the Korean prime minister (not to be confused with the president) soon resigned
- The principal of Danwon HS committed suicide
- The CEO of Chonghaejin went to the hospital out of shock
- The President announced the creation of a new national security administration.

Collectivism in society "fosters strong relationships where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group."[2] Although the case study's author(s) contend that Sweden is a collectivist society in that they are not only willing to pay higher taxes for more welfare but also because there is little to no private spending on education. He argues that the people trust the government to provide an overall good education. The author says Swedes subscribe to "collective risk management."[2]

[2] https://www.geert-hofstede.com/south-korea.html

In contrast, the case study concludes, Koreans spend substantially more on private education out of a lack of trust for the government [2]. Also, a sense of “individual risk management” is a bi-product of the volatile political and economic climate directly following the Korean War. The author contends further by implying that disasters like the Sewol will continue until Korea acknowledges its need for it’s own social reforms to catch up to the economic “Miracle of the Han” that was. “Collectivism” or “group decision making dynamic” is a case factor in this case that cannot be ignored

Uncertainty Avoidance: “...South Korea is one of the most uncertainty avoiding countries in the world...In these cultures there is an emotional need for rules…”[2]
Again, the differences between Sweden and Korea are readily apparent. Crises present uncertainty. Uncertainty searches for structure. I would be presumptuous and far-reaching to claim that it was *uncertainty avoidance* that kept the students stay put below deck. I personally would like to think to give them more credit than that.

Repeat of the Past

Saying the Sewol was an isolated incident might stand if only Korea didn’t have a grim history of similar incidents in its past. While the initial case study includes a select list of Korean man-made disaster events, for the purposes of this analysis, I would like to focus on one infamous event in particular. Korean Air Flight 801.

Author Malcolm Gladwell writes of the flight crash on August 5, 1997. This too, he points out, was caused by cultural idiosyncrasies: language and power-distance. For a young Korean Air co-pilot “saving face” in front of the captain even if you know they are wrong---really wrong--is key. According to Gladwell, the airline company recovered from a string of accidents after crewmembers began using English-only in the cockpits; thus removing the perceived

distance between Korean speakers of different ages and ranks. Communication improved and so did safety/ [3]

Findings & Conclusions

Some blame the government structure and not culture for what caused the Sewol disaster. One author even calls it "a lazy journalistic shortcut" to simply blame the culture [4]. The fact that nearly 400 students drowned given the amount of time they had to escape is both baffling and personally infuriating. Despite the author of this case study's ragin[illegible] apparent "Sweden-righteous" bias, he does offer some clearly defined strategies that were successful in response:

- Designating a third-party unbiased investigative unit *beforehand*
- Creating and maintaining a *public* archive to store and control any and all information
- Developing a protocol for *first responders* to prevent communication breakdown.

The author of the case study also talks about the ***importance of trust*** in managing relationships. Both the Estonians and the Koreans erected a memorial to those lost, although Korea did so markedly later signifying acknowledgement and symbolically asking the public for forgiveness of any wrongdoing.

Maintain transparency: the combined Swedish, Finnish, and Estonian governments appointed a committee of people named the *Analysgruppen* to serve as a mediator between the bereaved families and relevant state agencies. Yet those in South Korea were frequently ignored by the legislators and cut off from public and media discourse--why? The lowest point came when families of the Sewol victims began a hunger strike to demand an investigation, and, in a display of sheer malice, members of Korea's largest conservative website organized a

"gorging strike;" mocking the families by essentially engaging in an eating contest of pizza and fried chicken!

Most importantly in management is the **development of situation specific protocol** in order to prevent communication breakdown. Ignoring international dynamics in staff management would be like covering one eye to better see something that's behind you--you're bound to miss what you don't acknowledge. Sadly, sometimes tragedy teaches hard lessons.

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