

Exploring “Despair” in South Korea: A Situational Analysis of Media Reports

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Abstract: This study explores the phenomenon of “despair” in South Korea through a situational analysis of media reports. Despite economic growth, South Korea faces severe social issues including one of the world’s lowest birth rates, highest suicide rates, and significant wealth inequality. Drawing parallels to the “deaths of despair” observed in the United States, this research investigates how socio-cultural factors contribute to widespread despair in South Korea. Using Big Kinds, a Korean news big data system, the study analyzes 1,091 despair-related news articles from 2009 to 2024. Through situational, relational, and positional mapping, the research identifies key themes such as unemployment, non-regular employment, and suicide as major contributors to despair. The findings reveal that despair in South Korea is deeply intertwined with structural issues like meritocracy, inequality, and the lack of social safety nets. The study concludes that addressing despair requires comprehensive policies to foster hope, ensure job stability, and strengthen social support systems, alongside addressing individual psychological factors.

Keywords: despair, deaths of despair, South Korea, situational analysis, socio-cultural factors, meritocracy

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Introduction

South Korea has emerged as one of the world’s economically advanced nations, yet it faces significant social challenges, including one of the lowest birth rates and highest suicide rates globally, coupled with severe wealth inequality. Amid rising public dissatisfaction with these issues, the country is increasingly being described as a “despair society” where a pervasive sense of hopelessness about the future continues to grow. The term “despair” has become a recurring theme in recent South Korean media discourse, with growing concerns that the phenomenon of “deaths of despair” observed in the United States may also take root in Korean society.

Angus Deaton, the 2015 Nobel Laureate in Economics, introduced the concept of “deaths of despair” which he described as a form of “social death” (Case and Deaton 184). In the United States, despite the overall trend of increasing life expectancy, there has been a notable rise in mortality rates among middle-aged white individuals, driven by drug addiction, suicide, and alcohol-related liver disease. This paradoxical phenomenon has contributed to slowing the growth of life expectancy in the country. Deaton argues that deaths of despair are a societal issue arising from socio-economic factors rather than individual ones. These deaths primarily affect groups experiencing “cumulative disadvantage” a result of deteriorating labor market conditions in the era of globalization and deindustrialization, which have pushed them into a state of multidimensional despair.

While the issue of deaths of despair is increasingly gaining attention in South Korea, academic research on the topic remains limited. As public interest in deaths of despair continues to grow, it is essential to recognize it as a significant social problem and address it through rigorous academic inquiry. This study aims to explore the sentiment of despair in Korean society at a macro level by conducting a situational analysis of despair-related incidents reported in Korean media. To achieve this, news articles focusing on the theme of despair will be systematically collected and analyzed to identify trends and related words over time. Utilizing analytical tools such as situational maps, relational maps, and positional maps, the study seeks to uncover the contexts in which individuals in South Korea experience despair, as well as the political, economic, social, and cultural factors contributing to these conditions.

Studies on Despair and Deaths of Despair

Despair refers to an individual’s negative perception of the future and the presence of pessimistic emotions (Beck et al. 861–865). It has been frequently identified as a predictor of suicide. Suicide primarily encompasses suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and actual suicidal behavior (Du and Jiang 1437–1452). Among these, suicidal ideation is a critical factor in actual suicide, with research indicating that the severity of suicidal ideation is a significant indicator for assessing suicide risk (Liu et al. 443–451; Palmer 1092–1094).

Among the numerous factors influencing suicidal ideation, rumination has been extensively validated by numerous studies (O’Connor et al. 429–452; Kleiman et al. 539–546; Krajniak et al. 196–211; Rogers and Joiner 132–142). Rumination is a maladaptive cognitive response style associated with negative emotions. It is characterized by repeatedly focusing on the emotions themselves, their causes, and various potential adverse outcomes when faced with distressing emotions, without adopting proactive problem-solving strategies (Nolen-Hoeksema 569–582). Rumination can lead to increased negative expectations about the future, thereby elevating an individual’s level of despair (Lavender and Watkins 129–142). In summary, when individuals encounter negative life events and persistently ruminate on their causes and consequences, they develop a profound sense of helplessness, which subsequently heightens their feelings of despair. When individuals are in a state of despair, their problem-solving abilities tend to diminish, and their thinking becomes one-sided and negative (Guo and Wu 89–93). Consequently, individuals are highly likely to consider suicide as the sole strategy for problem resolution.

Deaths of despair in the United States are notably prevalent among middle-aged white people with low educational attainment. This demographic has been disproportionately affected by the multifaceted challenges brought about by globalization and the flexibilization of the labor market.

These changes have led to diminished employment opportunities, reduced income, and deteriorating family relationships. As their material and social conditions fall below expected levels and social isolation intensifies, individuals in this group often turn to despair-driven behaviors that severely harm their health, such as excessive drinking, substance abuse, or even suicide. However, it is important to note that the dualization of the labor market and the phenomenon of “cumulative disadvantage” are widespread issues that affect all generations and regions, not just this specific demographic group.

Since the publication of Deaton’s study on deaths of despair, research on this topic has steadily increased, particularly in the United States and other Western countries. Related studies have proposed two primary hypotheses regarding the causes of these deaths. The first is the demand-despair hypothesis, which emphasizes chronic stress, helplessness, and hopelessness resulting from changes in socio-economic structures. This hypothesis focuses on factors such as the decline of manufacturing, unemployment, reductions in wages and benefits, the disintegration of communities and families, and emotional instability and stress. The second is the supply-culture hypothesis, which centers on the supply or accessibility of drugs or alcohol, attributing deaths of despair to the subcultural characteristics of the low-educated working class.

In the Asian region, although related research is limited, the causes of deaths of despair are analyzed as follows: first, prolonged economic stagnation and inadequate national-level responses; second, intensified competition in the low-skilled job market. Additionally, it is argued that neoliberal tendencies have dominated Asia’s political economic systems, leading to social issues like deaths of despair (Du 65–70; Moeini and Pourreza 381–386; Miyamoto and Ryff 90–108).

In South Korea, similar to Western societies, issues such as suicide, alcohol abuse, and drug addiction have emerged as significant social problems. Firstly, South Korea has one of the highest suicide rates in the world. In 2022, South Korea’s suicide rate was 25.2 per 100,000 people, which is 2.3 times the OECD average of 11 per 100,000 people, maintaining the highest rate among OECD member countries (Ministry of Health and Welfare). Analyzing the causes (motivations) behind suicides, psychiatric issues account for the highest proportion at 39.4%, followed by economic difficulties at 22.5%, and physical illness at 17.6%. Additionally, family problems account for 5.4%, and workplace or job-related issues account for 3.4% (Ministry of Health and Welfare). While suicide is often perceived as a personal issue due to the significant role of mental health problems, it is crucial to consider the social dimensions. Economic difficulties rank second, suggesting that financial hardships may exacerbate mental health issues or trigger family problems, and workplace or job-related issues are often linked to economic problems. Therefore, suicide can be understood as being significantly influenced by social factors.

The increase in suicides in South Korea can be attributed to structural problems arising from economic crises. The suicide rate is closely related to economic growth rates and shows a positive correlation with indices of social polarization and unemployment rates (Baek and Kim 326–360; Bark and Lee 1–192). Consequently, suicide can be understood as an act of despair driven by social factors, and it can be viewed as a “social death.”

South Korea is also facing severe social consequences due to alcohol consumption. Alcohol is not only a direct cause of mortality but is also closely linked to suicide. Studies indicate that nearly 50% of individuals who attempt suicide were under the influence of alcohol at the time of their attempt (Kang et al. 108). Additionally, South Korea is experiencing a significant rise in drug addiction, prompting the government to declare a “war on drugs.” Once considered a drug-

free nation, South Korea has seen a dramatic increase in drug-related offenses. In 2023, there were 27,611 reported cases, marking a 72.1% increase from 16,044 cases in 2019 and a 50.1% rise from 18,395 cases in 2022, according to the Supreme Prosecutors’ Office of South Korea (2023). The total amount of drugs seized in 2023 was 998 kg, with psychotropic substances accounting for 82.5% of the total seizures. These issues—drug addiction, suicide, and alcohol-related liver disease—highlight that South Korea is not immune to the problem of deaths of despair.

Method

This study utilized Big Kinds (www.bigkinds.or.kr), a news big data analysis system, to collect and analyze news articles published in South Korea over the past 15 years that focus on the theme of despair. Through situational analysis, this study aims to explore the macro-level situational, ecological, relational, and positional contexts of “despair.”

Situational analysis is a qualitative research method derived from grounded theory. It seeks to understand the conditions and contexts of change by focusing on the generation process of events or actions (Clarke 553–576). This method is based on an interpretive epistemology that forms relational, ecological, and situated meanings in the exploration of social phenomena. In situational analysis, a “situation” is not limited to temporally or spatially confined events but often includes ongoing relationships among various elements across different events. It considers “everything” as situated within the context, embracing the relationality and complexity of all elements within the situation, aiming for “thick analysis” (Washburn et al. 1–14). Each situation possesses a unique ecology, and these ecological relationships are analyzed using various maps. Situational maps are created in the initial stages of analysis, listing all collected data and representing all elements within the situation as a whole. Relational maps analyze the nature of relationships among elements identified in situational maps. Positional maps are developed in the final stage of situational analysis, analyzing stances on contentious issues and debates within the situation. These mapping outcomes provide a “big picture” of the situation concerning the research topic (1–14).

Results

Yearly Trends in Despair News and Related Words

A search for news articles containing the term “despair” yielded 4,265 results, of which this study focuses on analyzing 1,091 articles classified under “crime, accident, disaster, and society.” Examining the annual distribution, fewer than 10 articles were collected each year from 1990 to 2000, and around 20 articles annually from 2001 to 2007. However, the number of articles began to rise in 2008, peaking at 63 in 2012, before declining until 2018. In 2020, the number of articles surged to 78, followed by a decreasing trend thereafter (Figure 1). Key events in South Korea during this period include the 2008 financial crisis, the SsangYong Motor incident in 2009, and the Hanjin Heavy Industries incident from December 2010 to 2012. Furthermore, the Sewol ferry disaster occurred in 2014, and the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, both of which had a significant impact on Korean society.

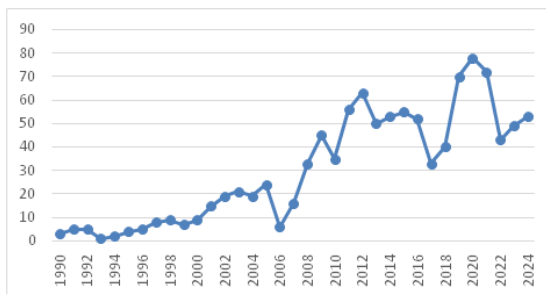


Figure 1. Yearly trends in despair news (Search date: 6 Dec. 2024)

Previous studies have demonstrated that despair, characterized by a profound lack of hope, stems more from structural societal issues than from individual problems and is often associated with suicide. In light of this, this study investigated the term “despair” in conjunction with related concepts such as “hope,” “society,” and “suicide/death.” Through word cloud analysis, this study identified recurring themes that explain despair, including “jobs,” “non regular workers,” “young people,” and “worker” (Figure 2). Additionally, terms like “dirt spoons,” “inequality,” “safety net,” “suicide rate,” “birth rate” (Figure 3), “Sewol ferry,” “SsangYong Motor,” “depression” (Figure 4), and “gambling addiction” (Figure 5) were strongly correlated with despair.



Figure 2. Word cloud map of “despair”



Figure 3. Word cloud map of “despair and society”

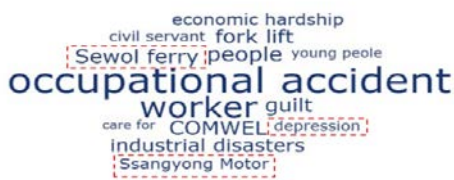


Figure 4. Word cloud map of “despair and suicide/death”



Figure 5. Word cloud map of “despair and hope”

Among the related words, “Federation of Korean Industries (FKI),” “data book,” and “Three Laws” are particularly noteworthy. These words are linked to a 2020 data book published by the Federation of Korean Industries, titled “Three laws leading to youth despair: The future of Korea, Youth jobs are disappearing!” This publication expresses concerns that three laws submitted to the National Assembly could worsen youth unemployment. Consequently, the “Three Laws” symbolize how legislation ostensibly designed to benefit young people may, in reality, contribute to their despair.

Situational Map of Despair

Situational mapping serves as a foundational phase in research, facilitating both data collection and organization. This tool enables researchers to simultaneously maintain a comprehensive view of the overall context while attending to specific details through the compilation and categorization of all essential elements within the research situation. The maps delineate primary components identified in the research context, including but not limited to human actors (individuals and groups), non-human elements (such as technology), temporal and spatial elements, and relevant social issues or discourses. This study developed a situational map by systematically organizing and visualizing key related words extracted from news materials focused on the theme of despair (Figure 6).

INDIVIDUAL HUMAN ELEMENTS/ACTORS Park Won-soon	NONHUMAN ELEMENTS/ACTANTS the fourth industrial revolution; internet
COLLECTIVE HUMAN ELEMENTS/ACTORS young people; teenagers; worker; middle class; self-employed worker; non-regular workers	SOCIOCULTURAL /SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS dirt spoons; N-po generation; hope bus
POLITICAL/ECONOMIC ELEMENTS job insecurity; unemployment; lay off; industrial injury; economic hardship; household debt; inequality	TEMPORAL/SPATIAL ELEMENTS neoliberalism; global recession; COVID-19
KEY EVENTS Hanjin Heavy Industries; Ssangyong Motor; Sewol ferry	RELATED DISCOURSES (HISTORICAL, NARRATIVE AND/OR VISUAL) the burnout society; the hopeless society; overwork death; lonely death
MAJOR ISSUES youth unemployment; school bullying; sexual harassment; gambling addiction; alcoholic liver disease; depression; birth rate; suicide rate	IDEOLOGY meritocracy

Figure 6. Situational map of despair

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, South Korea has been navigating the Fourth Industrial Revolution, marked by significant socio-political and economic challenges. The country has witnessed large-scale layoffs, such as those at SsangYong Motor and Hanjin Heavy Industries, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to employment instability, financial hardship, and debt, which have severely impacted workers' lives. Young people, facing unemployment and precarious jobs, are increasingly opting out of marriage and childbirth. Following the Sewol ferry disaster, South Korea began to be described as a “despair society,” reflecting a growing perception of the inadequacy of social safety nets. In 2015, a series of high school student suicides highlighted the complex interplay of academic pressure, school maladjustment, and family issues, raising questions about the reliability of South Korea's social safety systems (Chungcheong Today).

In analyzing South Korea's “despair society,” the “birth rate” has emerged as a central focus, primarily stemming from the nation's sustained and precipitous decline in birth rates over the past two decades—a trend that has ultimately led to the “demographic cliff” phenomenon. This phenomenon, characterized by a dramatic reduction in the working-age population (15–64 years) relative to the total population, has reached critical proportions. South Korea's total birth rate, which stood at 1.18 in 2002—already signaling entry into ultra-low birth rate society—has continued its downward trajectory, plummeting to a historic low of 0.72 in 2023. This alarming trend has alerted academic researchers, who have pointed out that the nation could face the risk of extinction if the current trend remains unchanged.

At the heart of this demographic challenge lies young people's increasing reluctance to marry

and procreate. While surface-level explanations often point to the escalating costs of marriage and child-rearing, a deeper analysis reveals that South Korea's fertility crisis is fundamentally intertwined with systemic issues spanning gender inequality, inadequate social welfare systems, educational pressures, housing affordability, and wage stagnation. These interconnected factors collectively create structural barriers to family formation, making the birth rate issue not merely a demographic concern but a comprehensive social crisis in South Korea.

South Korea is also characterized by other discourses such as a "burnout society," an "overworked society," and a "risk society." These narratives reflect a life driven by survival competition rooted in meritocracy. Meritocracy is an ideology that prioritizes the combination of talent and effort as the most crucial factors in acquiring social status, with a particular emphasis on the value of effort. In South Korea, there is a strong perception that success is contingent upon individual effort. This belief, coupled with the notion that upward social mobility can be attained through education, places individuals in a highly competitive and merit-based environment from an early age.

Meritocracy in South Korea is deeply rooted in the Confucian culture of filial piety. In Korean culture, filial piety, or "hyo," serves not only as a moral imperative but also as a powerful source of achievement motivation. The essence of "hyo" lies in the remembrance and replication of ancestors, including parents, which is demonstrated through the actions of their descendants. Proper remembrance and replication require that descendants' lives improve upon, or at least maintain, the standards set by their ancestors. Failure to achieve this replication constitutes a failure of "hyo" (Lew et al. 59).

The challenge, however, lies in defining what constitutes an improved life compared to that of one's ancestors. For Koreans, economic success is widely perceived as the primary measure of such improvement, with educational attainment serving as a critical indicator. In South Korea, an individual's educational background significantly influences their career trajectory, social status, personal relationships, and even marital prospects. This intense focus on education has fostered a culture of academic credentialism, where societal assessment and recognition of an individual's talent are largely determined by their educational attainment. Moreover, the symbolic and representative aspects of academic credentials, including the prestige of the school attended, have gained increasing importance. As a result, South Korea's meritocracy is not merely a set of values or attitudes but a deeply ingrained cultural practice. It can be argued that filial piety and academic credentialism together have shaped the unique form of meritocracy seen in South Korea.

However, in South Korea, individual effort and achievement outcomes are shaped not merely by personal determination but are profoundly constrained by family socio-economic status. Over the past decade, children from low-income families consistently face lower admission rates to elite universities and diminished access to high-paying, prestigious careers (Jin). Korean youth are acutely aware of this inequality and express their despair through neologisms such as "dirt spoon," "Hell Joseon," and the "N-po generation."

The ideology of meritocracy is dominant not only in education but also in the labor market. Companies reward individuals based on their achievements with salaries and promotions, while employees lacking in job performance are dismissed. With the ongoing economic recession, South Korean companies increasingly use voluntary retirement as a means of restructuring. Voluntary or honorary retirement is a system where companies, when needing to reduce staff, accept retirement applications from employees and provide severance pay exceeding the legal requirement. Although voluntary retirement appears to be a mutual agreement between the company and the

employee, in reality, it often involves pressuring employees through various means, effectively amounting to dismissal. The “Hope Bus” symbolizes the resistance of workers experiencing despair due to layoffs. The Hope Bus first appeared during a strike by Hanjin Heavy Industries workers in Busan in 2011, demanding the withdrawal of mass layoffs. Initially implemented after the financial crisis, voluntary retirement primarily targeted office workers over 40 years, but it has now spread extensively to include workers in their 20s and 30s, as well as production workers (Park). Not only are non-regular workers constantly at risk of being laid off, but regular employees are also exposed to the everyday anxiety of potential dismissal.

As explored in previous studies, despair can sometimes lead to death. Among the cases that highlight the connection between despair and death, the suicides of laid-off SsangYong Motor workers and self-employed individuals affected by COVID-19 are particularly notable. Workers dismissed during the SsangYong incident reportedly chose suicide due to insurmountable financial difficulties, stemming from the indefinite postponement of their reinstatement and the despair of failing to fulfill their responsibilities as breadwinners. Similarly, the suicides of self-employed individuals facing financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic have become a significant societal issue. While the government’s social distancing policies exacerbated their struggles, the pandemic also accelerated the growth of the contactless economy in South Korea. This shift allowed large corporations to enter the food and retail sectors, traditionally dominated by small businesses, further marginalizing self-employed individuals. Even after the pandemic, the situation for self-employed individuals has not improved significantly. Prolonged economic downturns have led to a rise in business closures. In 2023, the closure rate for self-employed businesses reached 10.8%, with the food and retail sectors experiencing rates exceeding 20% (Song).

The term “deaths of despair” first appeared in Korean news in 2015, coined by the Kookje Daily News’ investigative team. It was used to describe the deaths of individuals in their 20s and 40s who having lost hope due to societal structural issues, made extreme choices. The team analyzed 377 death reports of individuals in these age groups and found that, among 100 cases with clear causes of death, 19 individuals in their 20s committed suicide due to employment and unemployment concerns. Other leading causes included debt (19 cases), depression (24 cases), and relationship issues (16 cases). Among individuals in their 40s, the primary factors were economic recession, unemployment, and the collapse of self-employment. Of the 261 cases analyzed, 46% of suicides were attributed to financial difficulties, including unemployment (16 cases), business failure (28 cases), debt (23 cases), and broader economic problems (36 cases). Family issues accounted for 46 cases. The report also examined the employment status and family structure of individuals in their 40s, revealing that 64% of 258 cases were unemployed, and 60% of 168 cases were from divorced or single households (Kim and Yoo).

South Korea has the highest suicide rate globally, with youth suicide being a particularly severe issue. According to the “2024 Youth Statistics” released by the Korean Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, suicide has been the leading cause of death among Korean youth since 2011. Excessive pressure from societal expectations for success and academic advancement, coupled with rising levels of anxiety and depression, are major contributing factors. Korean youth face multiple crises, including intense competition in entrance exams, school violence, and suicide. Recently, gambling has emerged as a new risk factor.

Post COVID-19, youth gambling addiction has surged significantly. The “2022 Youth Gambling Problem Survey” conducted by the Korea Center on Gambling Problems found that

among 6,968 students who had gambled, 9.1% (635 students) had stolen or taken money or valuables from others. Additionally, among 4,392 middle and high school students, 8.8% (613 students) had contemplated suicide. The average age of youth who gamble decreased from 18.2 years in 2017 to 17.6 years in July 2022, with the average age of first gambling experience being as young as 11.3 years (Kim Hee-yeon).

Relational Map of Despair

A relational map serves as a subsequent phase to the situational map, aiming to visualize the relationships among key elements identified in the situational map. Typically, a single situational map can be divided into multiple relational maps to represent different social groups or organizations. To understand the macro-level situation, this study integrated the interconnected despair situations of three groups—teenagers, young people, and workers—into a unified map (Figure 7).

Examining the interconnections among keywords related to despair reveals that in the lives of South Koreans, fierce survival competition, meritocracy, and inequality are closely linked to social issues such as job insecurity, unemployment, high suicide rates, and the lowest birth rates, creating a cycle of despair. Demographically, teenagers, young people, and workers are particularly affected by despair. Teenagers experience despair due to issues like entrance exam pressure, depression, school violence, and gambling. Young people face high levels of despair related to survival competition, non-regular employment, job scarcity, marriage, and childbirth. Workers, similarly, are burdened by job insecurity, layoffs, and debt. Additionally, women experience significant despair due to sexual violence and harassment. Although South Korea has established systems to prevent sexual violence stemming from power imbalances following the MeToo movement, incidents of sexual harassment involving high-ranking officials, including former Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon, continue to emerge, leading to widespread public distrust in the government.

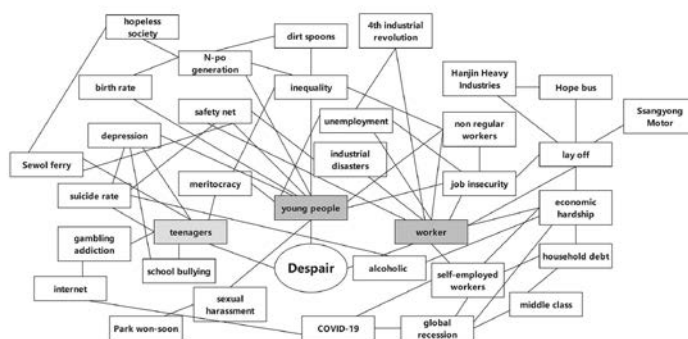


Figure 7. Relational map of despair

Positional Map of Despair

Positional maps represent the final analytical stage in situational analysis, serving as a form of discourse analysis. The primary objective of these maps is to organize positions by situating topics of interest or contentious issues within a specific context. Positional maps focus on issues, stances on these issues, the absence of positions, and differences in discourse. The two axes represent the range and dimensions of positions within the situation under analysis. In this study, the X-axis indicates the degree of perception that “despair leads to death” while the Y-axis reflects the perception that “despair is a social structural problem” (Figure 8). The intersection of these axes results in the formation of

various positions, and in some cases, corresponding positions may not exist.

On the X-axis, positions were arranged such that if one strongly agrees with the statement “Despair leads to death,” they are placed on the right, while those who disagree are placed on the left. On the Y-axis, positions were arranged such that if one strongly agrees with the statement “Despair is a social structural problem,” they are placed at the top, while those who disagree are placed at the bottom. Position A asserts that while despair does not directly lead to death, it is a social structural issue. Position B asserts that despair does not directly lead to death and is a personal issue.

In the context of youth and workers’ despair, some groups argue that despair is a societal issue, while others claim it is a personal issue. This divergence can be attributed to differing perceptions of meritocracy. For instance, criticisms of redistributive policies for socially disadvantaged groups, such as low-income families or multicultural households, as “reverse discrimination” reflect a strong tendency in Korean society to view failure in competition as an individual’s responsibility.

As opportunities diminish and competition intensifies in the changing industrial society, those who succeed in competition often develop a sense of moral superiority, believing they possess sufficient ability and have exerted enough effort. Conversely, those who fail are increasingly seen as deserving of discriminatory treatment. In some cases, individuals who fail may internalize this perspective, acknowledging their perceived lack of ability and effort, and thus view the resulting despair as a personal issue.

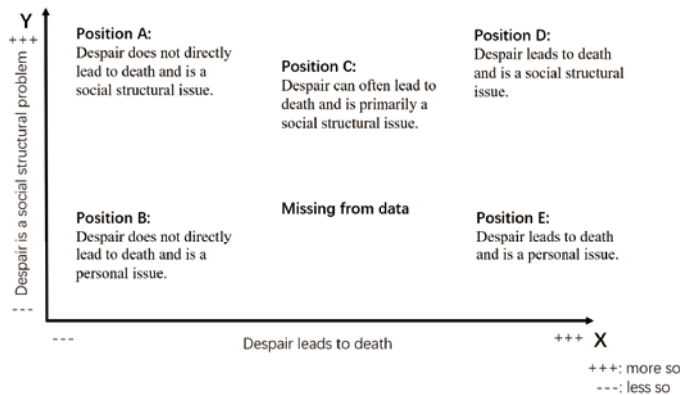


Figure 8. Positional map of despair

Position C maintains a moderate stance, suggesting that despair can often lead to death and is generally perceived as a societal issue. The situational map highlights that factors such as layoffs and financial hardship can contribute to deaths caused by despair, which are largely attributed to social structural problems. Examples include the suicides of laid-off SsangYong Motor workers and self-employed individuals struggling financially due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, no position was found that argues despair often leads to death and is primarily a personal issue.

Position D asserts that despair leads to death and is perceived as a societal issue. In contrast, Position E argues that despair leads to death but is viewed as a personal issue. The suicides mentioned in the situational map demonstrate that despair can directly result in death and is often perceived as a societal issue, although it is sometimes also interpreted as a personal issue. However, not everyone in the same despairing situation chooses suicide, as personal factors—such as self-efficacy, stress coping skills, and problem-solving abilities—play a significant role.

Conclusion

This study utilized the Big Kinds database to collect South Korean news articles from 2009 to 2024, focusing on the theme of despair. By identifying keywords closely associated with despair, a situational analysis was conducted, resulting in the creation of situational, relational, and positional maps. These analyses provided a foundation for examining the issue of despair in South Korea from situational, relational, and positional perspectives.

Firstly, the situational map analyzed the phenomenon of despair by identifying and listing the main factors that represent it, thereby providing an overview of the situation. In South Korea, young people and workers experience despair due to large-scale unemployment and non-regular employment. Additionally, the economic downturn following the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in suicides among self-employed individuals. This indicates that despair in South Korean society is closely linked to the overall stability of the economy and society. Terms such as “burnout society,” “overworked society,” “risk society,” and “despair society” are frequently used in Korean news to describe the current state of South Korea, signifying a life driven by survival competition. Symbolic terms like “dirt spoon,” “N-po generation,” “population cliff,” and “Hope Bus” have emerged, starkly illustrating a situation where hope seems unattainable despite relentless efforts.

Secondly, the relational map focused on specific groups to analyze the interactions and connections among them within the context of despair. This study revealed that despair is closely tied to social cultural values such as meritocracy. In a society that prioritizes meritocracy, various demographic groups—including Korean adolescents, young people, and workers—experience multiple layers of despair. Among these groups, young people and workers facing employment insecurity are particularly vulnerable to feelings of despair.

Thirdly, the positional map, a form of discourse analysis, examines issues of despair from a positional perspective. This study identified two key issues. The first is the dichotomy between the view that despair can lead to death and the view that it does not. The second is the tension between seeing despair as a social problem and viewing it as a personal issue. Korean media outlets currently emphasize that despair significantly contributes to death and is a societal concern. However, people’s positions on these issues can vary, and perceptions may shift as social conditions change. Consequently, how South Korea addresses despair will likely influence the way despair is perceived in the future.

Deaths of despair in Western countries and South Korea are primarily attributed to social causes rooted in the deterioration of the labor market during the post-industrial era, rather than individual factors. In Western nations, the decline in living standards among lower-class workers is identified as a key driver of despair. In contrast, South Korea experiences despair across a broader spectrum of demographic groups, fueled by intense competition in university entrance exams during adolescence, high youth unemployment, job insecurity among workers, and frequent industrial accidents. Despair is a multifaceted social phenomenon shaped by interconnected factors, making it difficult to propose straightforward solutions. To address this issue, comprehensive national policies are needed to foster hope for the future among young people, ensure job stability for workers, and strengthen the social safety net.

In South Korea, despair often arises from the complex interplay between personal and societal challenges. While pursuing social solutions is essential to addressing deaths of despair, resolving structural issues alone may not fully alleviate the suffering of individuals. In other

words, addressing deaths of despair necessitates tackling both societal issues and the underlying challenges faced by individuals. The meritocratic culture leads individuals to develop unrealistic expectations about their abilities and adopt an excessively self-critical attitude. Additionally, meritocracy attributes failure solely to personal responsibility, a tendency that causes people to become easily frustrated and engage in persistent rumination. As previous research indicates, such rumination significantly heightens an individual’s sense of despair.

To overcome despair, it is crucial to reaffirm the value of life and cultivate a sense of gratitude for one’s present circumstances. Numerous studies have demonstrated that gratitude can reduce the emergence of suicidal ideation (Kleiman et al. 539–546; Stockton et al. 240–244). As an “antidote” to negative emotions, gratitude helps counteract their harmful effects. Individuals with high levels of gratitude tend to exhibit greater hope for the future, while those with low levels of gratitude are more vulnerable to negative emotions such as despair, which can lead to suicidal thoughts (Laird et al. 251–272). Additionally, high levels of gratitude foster the development of various personal resources, including social support and problem-solving skills (Fredrickson et al. 365–376). Because individuals with high gratitude tend to adopt a positive outlook and maintain optimistic expectations for the future, they are more likely to confront problems directly. In contrast, those with low gratitude are more inclined to avoid problems in a negative manner (Wood et al. 1076–1093), making them more susceptible to despair.

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