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Affective Hurdles to Grievability in South Korea: How Morality, Meritocracy, and Normativity Shape Public Mourning

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Abstract

This paper examines how grief is regulated in South Korea through socially constructed norms that determine which deaths are publicly mournable. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of grievability and affect theory, it introduces "affective hurdles"—conditions families must navigate to gain recognition for their loss. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with families affected by disasters, the study identifies three key hurdles: moral authenticity, fantasized meritocracy, and family normativity. These criteria shape whose grief is acknowledged and whose is dismissed. Families often tailor their narratives to align with prevailing norms—emphasizing their loved ones' moral character, educational or economic promise, and traditional family structures. While these efforts can amplify certain voices, they may also silence others and reproduce exclusionary standards. The paper highlights how grief becomes a political field of struggle and how activism aimed at securing recognition often reinforces the very barriers it seeks to overcome. Ultimately, it calls for broader, more inclusive understandings of mourning and loss.

Keywords: grievability, mourning, affect, disasters, bereaved families, activism

Affect and Grievability

During fieldwork in South Korea for my doctoral dissertation, I visited multiple sites of disasters and post-loss activism spaces to interview bereaved family members (*yugajok* [유가족]) who had become active participants. These families, affected by a range of fatal incidents from the early 2000s to the late 2010s—including the Sewol ferry sinking and work-related deaths such as industrial accidents and suicides—were central to what I later called *yugajok* activism. My interviews focused on how these families came to engage in activism and how they sustained their participation over time.

While *yugajok* activism may seem primarily driven by grief or indignation toward responsible entities—often the government—it reveals deeper complexities when examined closely. Focusing on some of the most significant and influential emotions underpinning their participation in social movements, I explored how emotions shift throughout the involvement process, building on discussions within social movement studies. Yet much remained unaddressed, particularly the ambiguities and occasional conflicts within the feelings that derive from and constitute activism. These complexities urge a more nuanced theoretical lens, moving past surface-level explanations of grief or outrage to consider deeper affective undercurrents at play.

This paper explores these aspects, drawing on several insights from affect theory. Introducing the concept of affect expands the scope beyond exploring the most salient emotions driving activism. In *Politics of Affect,* Brian Massumi highlights this distinction, noting that emotions are only "a partial expression of affect."[1] While debates about the conceptual relationship between emotion and affect can sustain lengthy discussions on their own,[2] this paper employs affect as a broader framework for understanding the underlying and not always fully expressed properties of activism.

I focus on two primary aspects: first, underlying feelings, memories, and tendencies that are less explicitly articulated but still prompt actions and reactions. These underlying elements are sensed only vaguely and recognized indirectly, yet their presence becomes evident when one compares the affective landscapes of different

times, places, or movements. Such comparisons reveal coherence within these affective contexts, indicating the prevalence of particular sensibilities or perceptions. Although not always expressed or fully formulated, Massumi observes that "[t]hey're still there, but virtually—in potential."[3] Affect thus proves useful for examining experiences that are often unspoken or underexpressed, yet implicitly shape the present.

Second, I examine the transition of feelings, cognition, and capacities that evolve throughout activism. Drawing on Deleuze's reading of Spinoza's concept of *affectus*—"the continuous variation of someone's force of existing"[4]—I highlight how individuals and their capacities constantly affect and are affected through their encounters with social norms and public perceptions. This approach also aligns with Sara Ahmed's focus on "the processes of production or the 'making' of emotions,"[5] which considers not only the resulting feelings provoked by discernible factors but also how encounters and embeddedness influence individuals' capacities for action.

The interplay of affecting and being affected by activism is dynamic and ongoing. Examining individual actors reveals how they are challenged and shaped by social norms and public perceptions, no less than how they challenge and reshape them. Indeed, more energy—or affect—may arise in navigating this tension, as actors remain bound by societal expectations and judgments while attempting to confront them. Affect theory exposes previously untold dimensions of activism, not merely by broadening existing conceptual boundaries but by disrupting them, enabling an exploration of transitions and uncertainties.

In this context, Judith Butler's concept of grievability opens up multiple intersections for examining the affective dynamics within post-loss activism. They argue that social norms are inscribed in frames of recognizability, which render not all deaths grievable, and not all those living recognized as lives.[6] Certain losses, they observe, fail to register as fully grievable because the lives behind them were never fully recognized in the first place. Referring to this as the "differential allocation of grief,"[7] they suggest considering how existing norms

operate to allocate recognition differentially.[8] This includes examining the conditions of life that make it livable. By interrogating the social conditions that render some lives "ungrievable," we can challenge the frames that normalize this exclusion and foreground the political and ethical responsibility of society to confront such discrimination.

With this framework, this essay asks: How do these normative frames shape the affective experiences of bereaved families and influence their activism? Investigating which norms operate to differentially allocate grievability in South Korea—and how they do so—aims to confront their potential consequences: regulating the affect of public mourning and constraining its political potential to demand a more egalitarian and ethical society. This will be done by tracing how bereaved families are exposed to such frames of recognizability and how that affects the families' activism diachronically across multiple cases. As *yugajok* activism gained visibility alongside the recurrence of disasters, newer families came to experience a different set of affects—ones shaped by, and in response to, those who came before.

Situating Grievability in South Korea

Public mourning has become a politically charged terrain in South Korea, especially after the 2014 Sewol ferry tragedy. While Koreans have been shocked by numerous disasters—from the 1994 Seongsu Bridge collapse to the 2024 Jeju Air plane crash—over the last three decades, it was only after the 2014 Sewol ferry tragedy that the politics of mourning became central in the discursive field. Themes of grief, mourning, and melancholia, previously discussed primarily in the context of state violence, reemerged once the initial speechlessness at the sight of the sinking ferry subsided. Jung Weonok highlighted bottom-up politics of mourning as a strategy for the melancholic subject, and Kim Jong-Gon conceptualized political mourning—practiced through solidarity with the dead—as a way for the living to sustain life.[9] Kim Hong-Jung introduced the notion of "sovereign depression," foregrounding the impossibility of mourning stemming from shattered public trust in the state.[10]

However, these emerging discourses on public mourning soon met with backlash aimed at questioning the victims' deservingness. Some losses, claimed antagonistic voices, did not deserve collective mourning. What began online escalated into a binge-eating protest that targeted hunger-striking families and mourners demanding state accountability. This overt political rejection of mourning sought to discredit the activism of victims and grieving families, whose actions challenged the legitimacy of the state. The event became emblematic of how the grievability of disaster victims was publicly contested. By the time of the Itaewon crush tragedy, the neighborhood's distinctiveness—representing diversity in ethnicity and sexuality as well as festivity within Korea's dominant norms of homogeneity and productivity—was quickly used to frame the victims as undeserving. Korean society was tested by debates over whether certain lives are less grievable than others, and whether some disasters should be excluded from collective mourning based on their context.

While previous studies have largely focused on how grievability was denied in specific high-profile tragedies, this paper expands the lens to examine how Korean society more broadly judges deservingness across multiple contexts. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2021 at various sites of Korean *yugajok* activism—including memorial events, protests, and meetings—I present findings from thirty-three in-depth, semi-structured interviews, some with participants who experienced losses as far back as the early 2000s. When citing interview excerpts, I use pseudonyms to protect participants' anonymity and do not disclose the locations of interviews to avoid revealing identifiable information. I also draw on secondary materials such as books, newspaper articles, and previously published interviews.

This essay investigates whose deaths are mourned more, whose are neglected, and how these disparities affect those left behind. In other words, it explores the affective hurdles that those impacted by disasters must overcome to reach grievability in Korean society. As bereaved families encounter the stark reality of limited grievability allocated to their loved ones, they are prompted to claim public recognition, facing

barriers not only of indifference but also of interrogation, humiliation, and adverse judgment. Beneath *yugajok* activism lies an intuitive sense of denied grievability—one they believe their loved ones deserve.

This denial extends to the recognizability of the living, especially the families themselves, since, as Butler states, grievability underpins recognizability. Essentially, *yugajok* activism grapples with the sense that their family losses—and, by extension, they themselves—are deemed unrecognizable. In Butler's terms, it is "living with a somatic sense of dispensability" that evokes a deep sense of abandonment.[11] Since "grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters,"[12] accepting the low grievability of their losses would mean accepting that their loved ones had not lived recognizable lives. For these families, reclaiming the grievability of their losses is inseparable from reclaiming the recognizability of their own lives and the lives of the deceased. Activism thus becomes a continuous movement, striving for the recognition of both the living and the dead.

By examining three criteria—moral authenticity, fantasized meritocracy, and family normativity—this paper reveals the affective and normative dynamics that structure Korean society's differential allocation of public mourning and recognition after disasters.

Moral Authenticity

> My question throughout the whole process was, "Why?" Why does my son have to be treated like that? Aren't they supposed to help us? The police should find out why he died; labor inspectors are supposed to find the cause, too. Judges should punish those who did something wrong. But why do we get all that [the blame]? Why? Why blame us? Why? Why? Why? It's my son who died but why do they get to blame us like that? Why?
>
> — Mother A, Interview

In the aftermath of a disaster, families often strive to absolve their loved ones from blame. Deceased victims, unable to defend

themselves, are frequently accused—typically by those responsible for safety management, such as superiors or authorities—of causing the fatal incidents through negligence or irresponsibility. Claims of carelessness, intoxication, or disobedience are often used to shift the blame onto the victims. This initial framing of the deceased's recognizability as victims profoundly impacts their families, driving them to take direct action to prove their loved ones' innocence.

A few high-profile cases highlight this pattern. For example, some commentators condemned the victims of the Sewol ferry disaster for having been on an excursion, using the now-infamous phrase in Korean, "*nollŏgada chugŏtta* [놀러가다 죽었다]" (roughly, "they died while out having fun").[13] These losses were often unfavorably contrasted with those of ROK Navy personnel who perished in the sinking of the *Cheonan.* Deaths that occur in the line of duty are often granted unquestioned grievability, not only in the South Korean context. Marita Sturken, in her study of post-9/11 memory in the United States, similarly observed this phenomenon. She described how grief for firefighters and police officers was prioritized over that for office workers and janitors—a practice she called the "hierarchy of the dead."[14] In both cases, invoking the deaths on duty—a presumed marker of moral authenticity—served to diminish the grievability of others.

In response, families and supporters of victims often undertake the crucial task of asserting the recognizability of the deceased. For the Sewol ferry disaster, bereaved families argued that most victims were students on a school field trip, a form of official duty for students. However, this defense failed to silence antagonists or curb expressions of hatred. In some cases, it may even have reinforced the hierarchical framing, further undermining the grievability of other passengers who were not on board for official purposes.

As this example illustrates, invoking the deceased's status as "good citizens" is often the first step in securing grievability. Because the deceased cannot affirm their own moral standing, others must vouch for it in terms that align with dominant social norms. Moral authenticity—measured by adherence to socially valued behaviors—

becomes the key criterion. The closer these behaviors are to the cause of death, such as self-sacrifice in saving others, the more readily grievability is granted.

Yet, as Kim Hong-Jung argues, the framing of moral authenticity is inherently exclusive and exclusionary. It rests on a "myth of uniqueness" that elevates some victims while delegitimizing others.[15] Most disaster victims, who die unexpectedly in the course of ordinary life, are unlikely to have engaged in overtly moral acts, let alone left behind witnesses to attest to them.[16] For individuals who die on official state duty, however, this high bar is automatically met, regardless of the legitimacy of their tasks. For most civilians, it remains an exceptionally difficult threshold.

An exception is the Chuncheon landslide of 2011, in which ten university students were killed when their lodging was swept away by rain-loosened soil. The parents of the victims successfully countered malicious accusations because the students had visited Chuncheon as volunteer instructors for an elementary school summer invention camp. Mother B, who lost her daughter in the tragedy, recalled:

> Some mothers said, sarcastically, "Thank God, our children died during their volunteer program." Sadly, this was true. Our children weren't denounced because they had been in Chuncheon to take part in a summer invention program for elementary school kids. Well, initially, the city tried to shift blame onto our children, claiming they had failed to evacuate because of excessive drinking. But after some mothers protested, affirming that our children had been there to volunteer, the accusations stopped.[17]

Memories of earlier incidents where victims were blamed prompted these parents to emphasize the volunteer program from the outset. While this group was able to reclaim their children's grievability, the case underscores that such recognition hinged on their moral authenticity. Without it, the students could easily have been accused of negligence and irresponsibility.

In most other cases, only a select few victims—such as those who die while helping others evacuate—are readily recognized as having demonstrated moral conduct. In South Korea, their sacrifices may be officially reviewed for state recognition as serving the public good (*ŭisasangja* [의사상자]), which amplifies their grievability.[18] While such recognition can be interpreted in various ways, Ahmed warns that privileging certain losses inevitably excludes others from counting as losses at all.[19]

This differentiation has broader implications for bereaved communities. It may create another hierarchy of the dead, fostering subtle tensions over who is deemed more deserving of grievability. Additionally, it may mislead some families into focusing on obtaining state recognition, even when the state bears significant responsibility for the disaster. In such cases, the pursuit of individual recognition can undermine collective activism, fragmenting efforts to address systemic failures.

Fantasized Meritocracy

Alongside moral authenticity, meritocracy significantly shapes South Korea's differential allocation of grief. Meritocracy is so deeply ingrained in the national ethos that critiques often target the unfairness of its application rather than questioning the system itself. Kwon Myung-A traces this phenomenon to South Korea's post-neoliberal shift in mentality, where practicality replaced politics based on ideology or identity. In the absence of alternative value systems, competition for survival and the hierarchical reward system have filled the void. Reducing human value to material productivity or one's relative position in the hierarchy of meritocracy has made the differential recognition of life—and, by extension, the grievability for death—a justifiable consequence.[20] Disaster victims are no exception. As Lee Haesoo rightly observes, the politics of mourning in South Korea is strongly influenced by neoliberal governmentality.[21] Grief, too, is distributed according to the perceived merit of the deceased or

their commitment to meritocratic ideals.

Recent mourning narratives often invoke disaster victims' dedication to self-improvement—or the myth thereof. Progressive media outlets, which tend to emphasize economic inequality and social justice issues, are the primary purveyors of this narrative since conservative media rarely acknowledge the deaths of those perceived to lack merit. Even so, these sympathetic portrayals underscore how firmly meritocracy serves as an affective hurdle to grievability in Korean society. News articles frequently highlight victims' struggles in challenging circumstances and their aspirations for higher—stable—socioeconomic positions. For instance, coverage of the unopened cup noodles in the bag of a young metro worker fatally injured at Guui Station and the stack of exam prep books left in the dorm room of Kim Yongkyun, a power plant worker, emphasized their dreams for a better future.[22] These narratives, designed to evoke pathos, demonstrate how commitment to meritocracy is deemed to secure a degree of grievability.

Two contrasting cases, however, illustrate a more nuanced affective landscape. In April 2021, the deaths of two young men, Sun-ho and Jung-min, became public. Sun-ho, a 22-year-old worker, died in a workplace accident at Pyeongtaek Port. His death received minimal media coverage for two weeks and drew little public attention. Meanwhile, Jung-min, a 21-year-old medical student, went missing after a night of drinking with a friend and was found dead six days later in the Han River. His case received a deluge of media attention, initially due to his father's plea for information, and later due to rumors circulated that he had been murdered. This story dominated public discourse for weeks. Online searches for Jung-min's case outnumbered those for Sun-ho by approximately 50 to 1, and his story was reported ten times as often across various news outlets.[23] Labor activist Kim Jinsuk captured the disparity succinctly on Twitter: "Same death, different attention," mourning Sun-ho's death—the ungrieved.[24]

Given how Sewol ferry victims and Chuncheon landslide victims were falsely vilified for being on excursions or drinking, one might expect Jung-min's case—marked by similar features—to be met with

criticism. Instead, it garnered a frantic outpouring of grief. His status as a medical student at a prestigious university in Seoul seemed to shield him from censure. Public mourners gathered at the riverside park and in digital spaces, doubting the official police conclusion that his death was accidental and instead framing it as a murder covered up by corrupt authorities.[25] "It's such a shame this happened to a young man *who should have carried the future of this country on his back*," one mourner lamented. Media coverage echoed this sentiment, commenting that the case "has gripped the nation for a month amid sorrow that *the future doctor could have had a promising life*" (my emphases).[26] Some strong supporters installed a commemorative space at the site and maintained it for over three years, and Jung-min's family received countless messages of condolences. His unrealized personal career was conflated with the nation's future, revealing a convoluted affective landscape where grief and meritocracy were intertwined. Compared to the muted responses to work-related deaths like Sun-ho's—let alone those that never even reached the media—the intense reaction to Jung-min's case was extraordinary.

This reaction aligns with Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism." In an era marked by uncertainty and diminished prospects for achieving the "good life" once cherished and expected in the twentieth century, Berlant contends that human and political life remain tethered to attachment driven by a desire to cling to the fantasy of the normative life, to remain close to the ideal of the good life.[27] This fantasy of the future prompts patience and postpones questions about the unbearable conditions of the present, which often border on the livable. Optimism, in this context, "manifests in attachments and the desire to sustain them."[28] It is cruel because, while the fantasy of the good life is no longer realizable, the desperate attachment to it—allowing for adjustment to the current realities—can obstruct actual flourishing.

Drawing on Berlant's insight, the frantic mourning for Jung-min reflects resistance to the collapse of optimism. Since South Korea's neoliberal turn, medical careers have come to symbolize the singular life path believed to exclusively and reliably guarantee both stability

and prosperity—an increasingly unattainable ideal. It is a fantasy because studying medicine is a privilege available to only a select few applicants.[29] Medical disciplines dominate the admissions market so overwhelmingly that applicants prefer to enter the least popular medical programs over the most competitive non-medical STEM majors at the most prominent universities. Such high exam scores often correlate with socioeconomic backgrounds capable of affording years of costly prep school services from an early age.[30] As a result, heavily invested doctors are predisposed to pursue lucrative medical specialties in high-income, urban regions. Meanwhile, the shortage of doctors in low-paid, but essential fields, particularly in less populated areas, has grown increasingly severe. Ironically, the more medical careers come to represent the fantasy of the "good life," the less they contribute to the flourishing of public health.

Medicine's status as a promising career represents a dual fantasy. Jung-min's death exposed the strong attachment to the ideal of a "good life," even as it is hardly attainable. He embodied his family's significant investment in his education and their primordial hope for success. Many parents in Korea can resonate with this, as they face immense pressure to devote their financial capacity to child-rearing, often at the expense of their own stability and with even less certainty for the future. Adding to this is the frustration of the recipient generation, who foresee being unable to sustain themselves independently, let alone support their aging parents. The frantic reactions reflected that Jung-min's death represented not only the loss of his life but also the collapse of the imagined redemption of these efforts—a shattering of fantasy itself, exposing its inherent volatility. The excessive vilification of his friend as a murderer by Jung-min's supporters, in this vein, was an outlet for this grief. Framing the loss as an exceptional and emotionally legible tragedy allowed them to preserve the fantasy in its place.

Regardless of the differentially allocated grievability, children symbolize hope and the future for their families. Sun-ho's father illustrated this poignantly by showing how he had saved his son's phone number in his smartphone: "hope of [my] life."[31] Yet

these families confront judgmental gazes that seem to devalue the grievability of their loss based on meritocratic criteria. These attitudes affect the families significantly, compelling them to defend their deceased loved ones within the framework of meritocracy. One of my interviewees, a mother whose son died at work in his late teens, reflected on the prejudiced views that attributed such deaths to their educational trajectory, as though underprivileged educational capital made sense of early exposure to fatal risks. "I've heard this so many times from other people, while in activism," she recalled, "like, 'Why did you have your son go to a Meister [vocational] high school?'" Mother C perceived these comments as insinuations that her son's death was a foreseeable consequence of his educational background. Although it was systemic inequities that concentrated disaster risks among the underprivileged, meritocratic logic reversed the perceived causality, framing underprivileged status itself as the cause of the disaster risk. Such insensitive remarks implied that their loss deserved less societal concern, if not taken for granted.

These dynamics produce ambivalence in grieving parents. On one hand, they argue that every child deserves equal grief, regardless of their position in the meritocratic hierarchy. When confronted with discriminatory views, they push back or seek solidarity with like-minded allies. At a vigil, one mother asked a young journalist close to her son's age: "Some people say, 'You should have raised him better to get a professional job.' But that's not what I should get criticized for, right?" He immediately affirmed her. On the other hand, many parents feel compelled to highlight their children's competence, hard work, and promising futures, implicitly countering the skeptical gazes questioning the children's worth—and by extension, the recognizability of their lives. This tendency is more evident when recounting their children's secondary or higher education, which reflects their relative positions within the highly hierarchized education system. Parents frequently emphasized their children's academic achievements, career aspirations, and even school decisions, offering unprompted justifications to assert their children's worth.

Both reactions reveal how parents experience their children's

grievability as threatened by society. They see this broader devaluation as part of what exposed their children to risk in the first place, forcing them to prove competence and productivity in unsafe circumstances. Yet alongside this resistance, parents simultaneously wrestle with self-recrimination, wondering if their choices or circumstances contributed to their children's deaths.

One mother confessed: "My mind keeps pondering that if my son had had better parents, he would not have run into this environment . . . . I know it's not right, but . . . once after the accident, everything seemed to be my fault, like, if I had not done something, his death could have been prevented."[32]

One father expressed regret for trusting in fair medical treatment and not insisting more forcefully when his son was not receiving timely care during the chaotic early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. "Would things have been different if I had driven a fancy car?"[33] Even when families consciously understand they are not to blame, regret proves difficult to detach. This uneasy oscillation continues to linger.

Family Normativity: Who Gets to Mourn in Public

Bird in high heels
walks on asphalt, crying

Mascara drips down
My night feathers are infinitely, infinitely large

Critics tell me,
Condolences are for us
You're too filthy for them

. . . .

Tonight, there's no place for me
to hide except in this bathroom
I'm calmed by the sound of

water streaming from the faucet
I mourn in here

. . . .

The sound of rain hitting the tiles pushes me off the deep end

Tonight, there's no place for me to put down my poem

— Kim Hyesoon, "Phantom Pain Wings"[34]

Kim Hyesoon's "Phantom Pain Wings" can be read as a depiction of families who are not allowed to mourn their loss in public, narrating displacement and exclusion from public mourning. The bird, having lost its wings, feels pain from its loss. Having lost something infinitely large, it mourns but is told that it is too filthy to receive condolences with other mourners. It retreats to the bathroom, out of public sight, where it is comforted by the sound of streaming water. The sound is not as aggressive as the pouring remarks outside, which would soak into its already aching, nonexistent wing. Bereaved families who are unwelcome in public mourning can only grieve in limited, private spaces. If they insist on revealing their loss publicly, they fear that the harassing rain will violate their lost loved ones.

This section addresses how families' mournability is intertwined with their lost loved ones' grievability, through the lens of family normativity. For a family to have their losses recognized as publicly grievable, it is culturally required to pass as a normative family. The range of normality is quite narrow, premised on immediate family and kinship based on blood relations.[35] If the deceased child was born out of wedlock, raised by guardians other than biological parents, or if the parent was divorced, separated, or a stepparent, the family's ability to amplify their voices is often restricted. Those whose fulfillment of parental duties is perceived as flawed may face backlash, as their legitimacy is subject to scrutiny both within and beyond activist spaces. The heteronormativity of the "family" unit

remains unchallenged within bereaved families' activism so far. Victims' families who fall outside the limited range of normativity are less likely to reveal themselves, making their full existence difficult to examine in research or activism.

In discussing non-normative loss, Ahmed writes that queer losses are not simply "ungrievable" because queer lives are not recognized as lives that can be lost.[36] Within the framework of family normativity, it can similarly be said that non-normative families are not recognized as "families" with the right to speak about their losses. Their losses are not admitted as losses because they are not acknowledged as having familial relationships in the first place.

Yet the affective landscape is more complex in the Korean context, particularly from the perspective of those involved in activism. The experiences of non-normative families—suspicion, denunciation, or exclusion—and how these *affect* subsequent families joining activism go beyond simple erasure. Bereaved families' engagement in activism often exposes their private lives to media scrutiny, compromising the social standing of those whose life stories deviate from the normative family script. For instance, when the father of a Sewol ferry disaster victim launched a hunger strike to demand the Sewol Ferry Special Act, his privacy was severely infringed, with opponents attacking his marital status to discredit his cause. Another bereaved mother recalled how her legitimacy was questioned within family activism, and how her participation was unwelcome because she was a stepmother.[37]

Malicious probing into whether active parents are legitimate speakers affected bereaved parents. Some parents were discouraged from stepping forward, while others self-censored, unsure if they had the right to speak or could claim innocence under suspicious gazes. One interviewee, a mother who had divorced and moved out years before her loss, recounted how she became hesitant to join activism. Having seen other divorced parents publicly denigrated, she could not help but hesitate. Speaking on behalf of her deceased son meant risking the exposure of her private life, the dilution of her cause by gossip, and damage to her reputation in her neighborhood.

More than anything, she feared that her non-normative family

background would undermine her son's grievability. Even if she could endure blame for failing to uphold idealized family norms—such as staying in a marriage despite intolerable circumstances—the thought that antagonists might shift the blame onto her son, attributing his death to his family background, was unbearable.

> I wanted to know why he died and how he died, you know, what killed him, but when people find out that I left him when he was young, then, they would go like, "Oh, he was brought up by grandma and grandpa, without parents? Of course, no wonder he went to work at construction sites." Things usually flow like that . . . Just like that . . . I was so scared that my son's death would be treated like just another case of a bad family background killing its own kid.[38]

This concern, that revealing non-normative private lives might degrade the grievability of the deceased, affects how bereaved communities present themselves. When multiple families collaborate to emphasize the moral and meritocratic worth of their loved ones, seeking to overcome the affective hurdles addressed earlier, exposing non-normative traits within some families can heighten vulnerability to judgmental gazes. Because of fears of dismissal as merely an underprivileged group, tensions may emerge within the community. While the shared experience of loss fosters solidarity and mutual relief, external threats—such as hate speech or public scrutiny—can generate discomfort about having non-normative families overrepresent the group.

In her analysis of pathos, Myung A Kwon describes how socially affirming certain identities and relationships, while excluding others, defines which citizens are worthy of protection and which are not. Echoing the fascist mechanisms of extermination, those considered unworthy are cast as non-citizens, and their lives rendered ungrievable when lost.[39] The marginalization of bereaved families produces similar outcomes, though through more affective means. Families occupying

liminal positions on the spectrum of perceived normativity, even those with legal status such as divorce, anticipate that their losses will be better publicly grieved if overshadowed by "qualified" group members who conform more closely to normative ideals. As a result, disaster victims and their families who fall outside normative family structures are compelled to remain silent, mourning only in private.

Conclusion

Whose death is deemed worthy of grief? Who gets to speak for the *undergrieved*? Drawing on insights from affect theory, this paper has examined these questions within the contemporary Korean context. It has done so by focusing on two key aspects of affect: first, the underlying feelings, memories, and tendencies that, though not always clearly articulated, drive actions and reactions. By analyzing the mentalities and presuppositions that shape whether grievability is readily acknowledged, exaggerated, or systematically denied, this paper has identified moral authenticity, fantasized meritocracy, and family normativity as significant forces. These forces produce disparities in who is recognized as a grievable life—what I have referred to as *affective hurdles to grievability.*

Second, each section has also illustrated how the bereaved families' capacity for activism waxes and wanes over time. The paper has analyzed various attempts to claim grievability and the mixed outcomes these efforts produce. While adapting to societal expectations and judgments may at times strengthen a family's ability to advocate for their cause, such adjustments can inadvertently marginalize other families or undermine more expansive forms of solidarity.

Across the cases examined, grieving parents often find themselves navigating impossible trade-offs between asserting their child's innocence and worth and resisting the exclusionary standards of recognition that demand such proof. Whether through narratives of morality, merit, or normativity, the affective labor of these families reveals how grief becomes a site of social struggle.

Ultimately, these efforts reveal the structural difficulty of

overcoming affective hurdles to grievability. Within a governmentality that selectively recognizes certain "livable" lives, attempts to secure grievability by emphasizing one's morality, merits, or normativity risk reinforcing the very conditions that produce exclusion. A fuller understanding is needed of how these hurdles are constructed—how grief becomes conditional, and for whom. Without such a shift, each effort to claim grievability may only raise the threshold of recognition, making these hurdles even harder to overcome as loss accumulates, one after another.

In this light, I end by calling for attention to those whose deaths remain *undergrieved*—even by their own families. This study has used family as a lens to examine actions emerging from the gap between socially allocated grief and the grief families—also victims—believe society owes them. Yet this approach also reveals its limitations: the losses of individuals whose families refuse to mourn, or who lack stable familial ties altogether, often remain unrecognized and invisible.

Thus, I hope this paper's exploration of family activism for grievability also opens space to engage with unrecognized mourning communities. The growing number of precarious populations—both domestic and migrant, along with individuals for whom survival itself is a continuous struggle against exclusionary societal norms, leaves many deaths ungrieved and many survivors unable to mourn. By shedding light on these dynamics, this paper seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the complexities of grievability and the unseen landscapes of mourning. Attending to how grief unfolds unevenly is essential not only for acknowledging those who are easily dismissed from public mourning, but also for imagining how it might be transformed.

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Notes

[1] Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2015), 5.

[2] The discussion on the relation can be no less diverse than the definition of affect itself. See Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Gilles Deleuze and Timothy S. Murphy, "Sur Spinoza," *Webdeleuze*, 1978, accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/14.

[3] Massumi, 5.

[4] Deleuze and Murphy.

[5] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics*, 11.

[6] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009).

[7] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 37.

[8] Butler, *Frames of War*, 6.

[9] Weonok Jung, "The Shock of the Sewol Ferry Disaster and the Politics of Mourning [세월호 참사의 충격과 애도의 정치]," *Culture/Science* [문화/과학] 79 (2014): 48–66; Jong-Gon Kim, "The Sewol Ferry Trauma and Solidarity with the Dead [세월호 트라우마와 죽은 자와의 연대]," *New Radical Review* [진보평론] 61 (2014): 71–88.

[10] Hong-Jung Kim, "Heartbreak: Tragedy of Sewol Ferry and Sovereign Depression [마음의 부서짐: 세월호 참사와 주권적 우울]," *Society and Theory* [사회와이론] 26 (2015): 143–86.

[11] Judith Butler, *What World Is This?: A Pandemic Phenomenology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 92–93.

[12] Butler, *Frames of War*, 14.

[13] This pejorative judgment resurfaced after the 2022 Itaewon crowd surge, prompting survivors and bereaved families to defensively emphasize the victims' innocence and diligence. For an analysis of the politics of mourning that emerged after the Itaewon tragedy, see Haesoo Lee, "A Tabooed Carnival and the Hierarchy of Mourning [금기가 된 카니발과 애도의 위계]," *Culture/Science* [문화/과학] 113 (2023): 84–107.

[14] Ahmed, 157. Referring to Marita Sturken, "Memorialising Absence," in *Understanding September 11*, eds. Craig J. Calhoun, Paul Price, and Ashley S. Timmer (New York: The New Press, 2002).

[15] Hong-Jung Kim, "The Origin and Structure of Authenticity [진정성의 기원과 구조]," in *Sociology of Mind* [마음의 사회학] (Paju: Munhakdongne, 2009), 35.

[16] Perhaps the opposite is more plausible in real life. The Inhyeon-dong Fire (1999), which engulfed a crowded bar, exemplifies how victims could be denounced for their tragic fates. Despite factors such as the store manager's interruption of

the evacuation and the illegal use of toxic materials in the building contributing to the casualties, many young victims who suffocated to death were blamed simply for being at a bar. Survivors who managed to escape were subjected to unfiltered humiliation from the media and the public. They also faced expulsion from school under the stigma of being deviants, all while grappling with their own trauma. See Jeong-hwan Yi, "Disaster Took Away 57 Youths... Schools Tried to Expel the Deceased [젊은이 57명 앗아간 참사… 학교는 죽은 아이들을 퇴학시키려 했다]," *OhmyNews*, October 30, 2019, accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002582435; Hyung-min Kim, "They Died Twice Accused of Being 'Punks' [그들은 '날라리'로 몰려 두 번 죽었다]," *Hankyoreh* [한겨레], April 25, 2014, accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/634560.html.

[17] Bereaved Mother B, interview by author, November 2021.

[18] *Act on Honorable Treatment of and Support for Persons Who Died or were Injured for Public Good*, Korea Legislation Research Institute, accessed August 29, 2025, https://elaw.klri.re.kr/kor_service/lawView.do?hseq=64728&lang=KOR.

[19] Ahmed, 157.

[20] Myung A Kwon, *Infinite Political Loneliness* [무한히 정치적인 외로움] (Seoul: Galmuri, 2017).

[21] Lee, "A Tabooed Carnival [금기가 된 카니발과 애도의 위계]."

[22] Jaewook Yi and Joon-ho Bang, "19-Year-Old's Dream Lost in Solo Shift [나홀로 작업에 날아간 '19살의 꿈']," *Hankyoreh* [한겨레], May 29, 2016, accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/745877.html; Jiwon Nam, "Yongkyun's Dream Was 'Permanent Employee'... Exam Prep Books Left in Dorm Room [고 김용균의 꿈은 '정규직'… 텅 빈 기숙사에 남은 수험서들]," *Kyunghyang Shinmun* [경향신문], December 18, 2018, accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.khan.co.kr/article/201812182059001.

[23] Hyein Kim, "Selective Attention to Deaths of Two Young Men [두 청년 죽음에 대한 '언론의 선택적 관심']," *Mediaus*, May 6, 2021, accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.mediaus.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=213101; Bong-gu Kim, "Han River Med Student '100 Times' vs Pyeongtaek Port Part-Timer '2 Times'... Different Degree of Attention [한강 의대생 '100번' vs 평택항 알바생 '2번'… 남다른 관심의 온도]," *Hankyung* [한경], May 9, 2021, accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.hankyung.com/article/2021050924907.

[24] Hye-min Chung, "Han River Sohn Jung-Min 'Searched 100 Times' More than Pyeongtaek Port Lee Sun-Ho... Why Same Death, Different Attention [한강 손정민·평택항 이선호 검색 '100배차'…같은 죽음 다른 관심 '왜']," *News1*, May 10, 2021, accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.news1.kr/society/incident-accident/4300757.

[25] Yeji Chang, "Three Months after Deaths at Han River... In 'Distorted' Name of Justice [한강 사망사건 석달… '비뚤어진' 정의의 이름으로]," *Hankyoreh* [한겨레], July

9, 2021, accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/1002952.html.

[26] Haye-ah Lee, "(Yonhap Feature) One Month on, Med School Student's Death Confounds a Nation, Prompts Calls for Truth," *Yonhap News Agency*, May 26, 2021, accessed August 29, 2025, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210526000800315.

[27] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[28] Berlant, 11.

[29] As of 2022, 29 out of the "top" 30 undergraduate science programs (so-called *igwa* [이과], as opposed to broadly construed humanities)—requiring the highest exam scores for admission—are medical disciplines. Yoonju Yi, "Only 1 Out of Top 30 Departments Is Non-Med.. . Why Top Students Throng to School of Medicine [지난해 정시 이과 상위 30개 학과 중 '非의학' 딱 1개…수재들이 의대에만 몰린 이유는]," *Hankook Ilbo* [한국일보], October 3, 2022, accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2022092919030004590.

[30] Yonhui Kim, "Raised Admission Quota for Med, 'Who Should Be Admitted?' [의대 정원 늘어나면 '누가 의대에 가야 할까?']," *SisaIN* [시사인], December 2023, accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.sisain.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=51706.

[31] Daeun Shin and Junyong Pak, "'Hope of Life' Fallen under 300kg-Metal Plate... JH Fainted [300㎏ 철판에 깔린 '삶의 희망'…재훈씨는 정신을 잃었다]," *Hankyoreh* [한겨레], July 29, 2021, accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/labor/994182.html.

[32] Bereaved Mother D, interview by author, April 2021.

[33] Kwanwook Kim, "Son's Life Molded with Hands and Feet [발과 손으로 다져간 아들의 생명]," in *Sticky Affects* [달라붙는 감정들] Kwanwook Kim et al. (Goyang: Almond, 2024), 60.

[34] Hyesoon Kim, "Phantom Pain Wings," in *Phantom Pain Wings*, trans. Don Mee Choi (New York: New Directions, 2023).

[35] This is similar to the politics of mourning examined after 9/11 in David L. Eng, "The Value of Silence," *Theatre Journal* 54 (2002): 90.

[36] Ahmed, 155–56.

[37] Eo-ri Seo and Myŏngsŏn Yi, "He Called 'Mom' in the Footage... I Can Fight for 10 Years [동영상 속 '엄마' 소리에…10년이라도 싸우겠다]," *Pressian* [프레시안], August 25, 2014, accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.pressian.com/pages/articles/119748.

[38] Bereaved Mother E, interview by author, October 2021.

[39] Kwon, *Infinite Political Loneliness* [무한히 정치적인 외로움], 255–87; Myung A Kwon, *Obscenity and Revolution* [음란과 혁명] (Seoul: Chaeksesang, 2013), 83–184.

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