The Father Figure in Korean Mind and Psychopathology in Terms of Father-Son Relationship*

Professor Moo-Suk Lee, M.D., Ph.D.**

한국인의 마음속에 있는 아버지 상과 부자관계를 통해 본 정신병리

이 무 석**

In this paper, I would like to explore the father figure in the Korean mind in terms of father-son relationships. First of all, I will relate to you the case of a patient of an obsessive-compulsive disorder in order to show how an unhealthy father-son relationship can cause an obsessive-compulsive disorder. And then, I’d like to write about the role of fathers and father-son relationships found among bonobos, a monkey species which I believe has great commonality with human beings. Finally, I will discuss the father figure in Korean myths and in the traditional Korean family. What I would like to point out here is that the father-son relationship in Korea is not about power or authority, but is more about affection, about a father’s sacrifice for his son, and about the son’s respect for his father. This could be the archetype of the father-son relationship of mankind, and if this becomes distorted into a master-servant relationship, it can cause psychopathology such as obsessive-compulsive disorders.

As we are well aware, we can hardly attribute a cultural phenomenon to any particular race or ethnicity. It is because that the phenomenon could be universal or it could represent the personal characteristics of an individual. However, myth can be a window into racial unconsciousness. In the case of ethology, especially the bonobos, I believe we can find a window into some aspects of human nature.

1. The father figure in a patient with an obsessive-compulsive disorder (Lee 1997)

(Case illustration)

The patient was a man in his 30’s, let’s call him “K”. K was a very intelligent high government official who received his Ph. D. in the United States. His problem was obsession. He thought that he had killed hundreds of pedestrians while he was driving. If the police found out, he would have to go to jail, and his family would become bankrupt and would become homeless, begging for mercy. None of this was true and he knew that. However, he was tormented by this thought, day and night. Later, during psychotherapy session, I found this obsession had something to do with his friend’s farewell party. One of his friends was moving to another country, so his friends got together to throw a farewell party. First they had dinner and then went to have drinks at a saloon where women serve customers. There, K met a beautiful woman. She looked fragile but extremely sexy. Listening to her life story, he sympathized with her. She was very kind to him. When she moved, he saw her sexual parts. He was sexually aroused. He had never had an affair before, mainly because he was afraid of getting venereal diseases. He didn’t even use public toilets. He thought that the germs on the toilet would travel up his urine and he would get syphilis, even though he knew that this was not plausible. He was a bit surprised that...
he was sexually attracted to a woman like her, even though nothing really happened. He said good bye to her, and he asked one of his friends to give him a ride home. When he came home, it was very late at night. He saw that the lights through window in his apartment were still on. Suddenly, he felt guilty because he wanted to have sex with another woman. He awoke at dawn that morning for no particular reason. Since then, he had had this obsession that he ran over hundreds of people while he was driving. K became extremely anxious. Early the next morning, K went to his friend’s place to check his friend’s car. He examined the car to see if there was blood on his car, but found no blood stain on it. He suffered from this obsession from that time. Finally, he decided to seek professional help.

K was the oldest of three sons. His father was a soldier who educated his children in a Spartan way. For example, when he went to work, the children had to salute him, like in the military, standing in line at the front door. He always told his children to be strong and masculine. He said that only the strongest survive. The father never overlooked any small mistakes and his punishment was always severe and cruel. Once, he was locked out of the house completely naked, and one day, while K was eating breakfast, his father kicked him in his chin with his boots. K didn’t remember why any of these incidents had happened. His father used to say, ‘Without me and my education, you’d become beggars, living on the street.’ K always had in his mind this frightening image of his father in the form of a harsh and sadistic superego. The father in his mind internal object would not forgive him for feeling a sexual desire for the woman at the saloon. The father was taking him for someone who had killed hundreds of people. This was the psychodynamics of his obsession. The interesting thing was that the end of the storyline of his obsessions was that his family would become homeless, begging for mercy. This was exactly what his father used to tell him when he was little. Unfortunately, his brothers also had mental illnesses. One of them had suffered from schizophrenia for more than ten years. K was afraid of his father, even though K was now a grown man. Even though he had a Ph. D. and had become a high government official, he felt very small in front of his father. He could not dare to look into his father’s eyes. One day while he was undergoing psychotherapy, he decided to confront his father. He told his father what had been on his mind since he was a little boy. At first, he was still nervous, but when he looked up at his father, he just saw a weak old man. He was not afraid of his father any more, but he still couldn’t get the oppressive father image off his mind. The case of K showed that an authoritarian and oppressive father was the cause of a psychopathology, such as the obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Coercive orders by the father result in aggressive and repulsive behaviors of the children. Or, at best, the children will do no more than what they are told to do. The children like K in this case tend to become obsessive. The father of patient K was one of those who belonged to this category of strict fathers. But this military style education goes beyond the norm in the basis of Korean father-child relationship. The Korean children generally understand their father and do as they are told to, rather than disobey him, when their father talks to them implicitly and with affection. In other words, the Korean children generally obey their father as he teaches and instructs them with confidence in and affection for them.

2. The father-son relationship in bonobos

The primatologists suggest that bonobos are the apes that are closest to human beings. When we study bonobo society we can imagine what the archetype of human society might have been. In the African jungle in Jaire, professor Kano of Kyoto University found a distinct species of monkey. They were the bonobos. Until then, they were known as pygmy chimpanzees, but they had totally different family and social structures from those of chimpanzees. Chimpanzees have a patriarchal society. The chief male chimpanzees controls the food as well as the females. It is a case of power and authority ruling the society. They hunt and kill other apes for food. Sometimes they kill other chimpanzees’ young ones (infanticide). On the other hand, bonobos have female chiefs. The oldest female becomes the chief, and her son leads the males. Professor Kano claims that high-ranking females are respected out of affection, not because their rank high. female rank order is
largely based on seniority rather than physical intimidation; older females are generally higher status than younger ones.” The bonding between mother and son is very strong and it lasts for a long time. Bonobos thus, have a matriarchal society in which food is shared equally. Professor Kano has called mothers the “core” of bonobo society. The male bonobos do not kill others’ young ones (no infanticide). In the chimpanzee society, male chimpanzees kill the young the female brings with her, and older males reign over young ones. However, adult male bonobos take care of young bonobos, even though they are not their own. The role of male bonobos is to protect their group from outside invaders. Bonobos are inborn pacifists, and their intelligence is much higher than that of chimpanzee’s. For example, when experimenter told a bonobo ‘to take a lighter out of her pocket and burn the paper,’ the bonobo did exactly what it had been told to do. Bonobos walk on two feet like human beings and carry things using their hands (bipedal locomotion). Molecular biologists have discovered that 98% of the bonobos’ DNA is identical with human DNA. Evolutionists say that bonobos are evolutionary beings that come between chimpanzees and human beings. I personally do not believe in the theory of evolution, so I will just consider bonobos as creatures that come between chimpanzees and human beings. All that to say, bonobos and human beings have many things in common. It can be concluded that human nature would be more similar to that of bonobos, than that of chimpanzee, that is a peaceloving nature. The male bonobo’s taking care of other’s young would be a good example (Waal, Lanting 1997).

3. The father-son relationship reflected in Korean myths

In Greek myth, Kronos killed his father Uranus by cutting off his penis and Zeus did the same thing to his father Kronos to become the king of Olympus. Oedipus also killed his father. However, there is no such story in Korean myths. Rather, fathers usually give their land to their sons. In Korean myths, grown up sons become independent from their father and build their own country or some become gods (Kim 1991).

The myth of ‘Tangun’, a historic figure, illustrates the Korean father-son relationship. Hwan-in, the god of heaven and earth, had a son named Hwan-oong. Hwan-in knew that his son wanted to rule the earth, so he sent his son to rule the earth along with 3000 of his people. It was a voluntary thing. Later, Hwan-woong married a woman who originally had been a bear but became human thanks to her patience. Their son was Tangun, the first ancestor of Koreans. Tangun set up a country, Korea. In this myth, we cannot find anything that deals with a conflict over land between father and son.

Korean fathers respect their sons. When necessary, they also give part of their land to their sons. In Korean culture, the father-son relationship is built on affection and love (Kim 1991). Sometimes fathers may become strict, but sons hardly feel that they fall victims to father’s authority or power. According to professor Kwangil Kim (1991), the reason why there is no son killing his father in Korean myth is not because there is no desire to kill the father, but because the ethic of hyo (filial piety) is much stronger than that desire. The hyo ethic requires that children listen to their parents, try their best to please their parents and show their respect for them. Sometimes holding down one’s feelings is necessary to develop personality and the desire to kill the father is sublimated as ‘hyo.’ In Korean culture, there are things that sons are not supposed to do. For instance, when entering a place, the son should not go before his father, he cannot sit with his legs stretched in front of his father, and when his father enters a room where he is lying down, he is supposed to get up. At the table, he cannot touch any food that the father has not tasted yet, and if he finishes eating before his father, he has to put his spoon and chopsticks on his rice bowl and wait for his father to finish. After the father puts his spoon and chopsticks on the table, then the son should do so. When the father pours a drink for him, the son should hold the glass with both hands, and when he drinks it, he is supposed to turn his body away and cover the glass with his hand. No Korean sons smoke cigarette in front of their fathers. These are examples of hyo and showing respect for the father (Lee 1985).

When there is a conflict between father and son, mother usually becomes a mediator and restores peace in the family. Let’s take a myth from Kokooyr(o).

A queen gave birth to several princes but all the princes had animal feet. The king thought that this was an ominous sign and ordered them killed.
However the queen sent them to a neighboring country. There, the princes grew up to become generals. Later the generals attacked their father’s country. The queen went to see them and looked at their feet to see if they were really her sons. After she recognized them she persuaded them, to go back to their country. After seeing the breasts of their mother, the sons returned to their country (Lee 1985).

This story is a very good example to show how the mother can solve a conflict between father and son. If mothers do not work as a mediator in the family, sons would feel uneasy and uncomfortable. Let’s return to K’s story. The person he hates most is not his father, but his mother. When he was shivering in the cold, he expected his mother would come out and bring him in, but she didn’t. When his father was beating him, he expected his mother to stop his father, but she just stood aside, doing nothing. Still, it is not only Korean mothers who act as mediators between father and son.

4. The traditional way of child education and father-son relationship in Korea

In the traditional Korean family, three generations live together. As children get older, they change the people they sleep with. When they are born, they sleep next to the mother and the mother breast feeds them. When they become two years old they usually have a little brother or sister, and they move to the grandmother’s room, as they do not need the mother’s milk any more. If there are more than two children sleeping with the grandmother, one of them, usually a boy, moves to his grandfather’s room. This usually coincides with the time when they are five or six years old. Boys then start to have more contact with male members of their family, such as the father and grandfather, and begin running their errands.

However, they do not feel distant from their mother, nor do they love their mother less. Rather, for a son, the father is someone more distant and strict as an educator, while the mother is always warm and caring. As the son grows up, he finds out his mother went through a lot of difficulties and made sacrifices for him, and he loves his mother even more. When he enters puberty, he does not communicate with his father very often. The things they talk about are farming, work, relatives, and rights and obligations. The son feels awkward talking about emotional things with his father.

When he wants something from his father, instead of asking him directly, he asks his mother, and the mother asks the father. The mother can also be the father’s messenger to the son. So, Korean family has the long lasting and strong mother-son bonding.

When the son is about seven years old, he starts to not listen to his mother and grandmother, and the father needs to become more strict. Sometimes the father scolds or punishes the son. Family members tell the son “if your father finds out about this, you will be in trouble”, or “I will ask your father to punish you” to give the son the impression that the father is someone strict and someone he should respect.

When the son reaches the age of the puberty father teaches the son the knowledge and manners necessary in social life. The father sends the son off to school. When there is a visitor, the father lets his son join them so that the son can observe and learn about interpersonal relationships. Through rituals to worship the ancestors the son learns his family’s history (Lee 1985). This kind of father-son relationship can be found more commonly in educated, urban families than in rural families. It is because the high social class of urban areas emphasizes the importance of dignity and respectability and refer to Confucian values when they teach their children. Thus these factors contribute toward suppressing human nature in their efforts to educate their children. In other words, the father-son relationship in rural families rather comfortable and based on human nature while educated urban parents stress theory and knowledge.

Korean fathers take responsibility for their sons’ behavior. Sometimes the father pays his son’s debt. When his son does something ethically wrong, the father feels guilty and blames himself. Even though he is not legally responsible, the father thinks that it’s his own fault. Such an attitude, though this may defy any reasonable explanation, derives from his affection for the son.

The son thus feels very grateful to his father because he realizes that his father’s teaching is very important. We often say that children are mature when they come to feel grateful to their parents. The son thanks his father for giving him life, education and family and wants to show his father how grateful he is and to return his love. That’s the spirit of ‘hyo’ (孝). ‘Lyoo and Cho (1992) call ‘hyo’ a masochistic way of resolution for the repressed aggression against their father, but I have a different opinion. Hyo is the effort of mature children to return everything
they have received from their parents and to show them their gratitude. It has to come from the bottom of a person’s heart. Hyo, which is not accompanied by psychological maturity, may appear to be Hyo, but is not Hyo in the real sense.

There is another Korean folktale about a girl named Sim Chong. She has a blind father, and her mother passed away right after she was born. So, Sim Chong’s father had to ask village women to breast-feed his daughter. Sim Chong in her adolescence take good care of her father, and her only wish was for her father to be able to see. She finds that she could make this happen only if she consecrated 24000kg of rice to Buddha. She exchanges her life with for rice, and makes her father recover from his blindness.

Sim Chong’s action is independent and voluntary. She is also very mature, and I cannot find any self-hatred or feelings of hatred toward her father in her. Like in this story, if the action comes from the mature gratitude for one’s parents, and when the action is voluntary, that’s the action of Hyo. However, we need to make clear that parental love and the child action of Hyo is very different from a conditional trade. For instance, children do not think “Alright, my parents gave me this and that, so I will give them something in return.” It is rather a basic human nature and a natural phenomenon. When parents do not love their children, or when children hate their parents, they feel guilty. The proper relationship between parents and children does not involve any other interests. Parents are meant to love their children, and children are meant by nature to feel grateful to their parents. We can confirm this in the Korean traditional father-son relationship.

We cannot say that these characteristics are found only in Korean culture because they are common characteristics of human beings expressed in different forms, according to the culture. I think each people’s myths can tell us about each people’s unconsciousness, and ethology can teach us the ways in which apes are similar to human beings.

5. Summary

In summary, chimpanzees exhibit a father-son relationship built on power. On the other hand, bonobos and human beings have affection-oriented relationships. In Korean father-son relationships, there is a mutual respect and love which shows human nature. It is not something taught or acquired through training. If this relationship changes into something like the chimpanzee’s relation-ship, mental illnesses will occur. K’s story proves this. As a result, a mental disorder will be cured when the relationship is restored to its natural balance. Winnicott’s (1965) holding environment, Kohut’s (1978) mirroring of the self object, and John Bowlby’s (1958) attachment natural tie between children and mother, all emphasize how important the maternal environment is in curing mental illnesses. All religions also teach that love can save mankind. Jesus preached love, Buddha mercy, and Confucius benevolence. Therefore, the role of psychiatrist and psychoanalyst is to help patients recover their lost human nature.

At the end of this paper, I would like introduce the ethologist Harlow’s experiment (1962) on mother deprivation. The mother deprived monkey didn’t show intimate social behavior. For example, no grooming behavior was seen among mother-deprived monkeys. However, when they were in a open place with trees and allowed to play freely, they groomed each other. Interestingly, although these monkeys were never exposed to such grooming behaviour, their natural behavior re exerted themselves when brought back to their natural environment. It can be said that the suppressed primitive nature of the monkeys is reawakened in their natural environment. Yet, when the monkeys were locked in a small place again, their intimate behavior disappeared. This result can be also applied to human beings as well. In short, we need an environment in which human nature can be displayed at its best. That environment is one which promotes feelings of safety, respect and the spontaneity without criticism or coercion. It is an environment that has remedial effects like the mother’s breast.

I would like to express appreciation for professor Sunghee Kim’s help to write this paper. He is 83 years-old. He was trained at the Department of Psychiatry of Sendai Imperial University Hospital in Japan from 1940 to 1944. His mentor was professor Marui. Dr. Marui gave him personal analyses six times a week for three months. During these psychoanalysis sessions, the free association did not need any interpretation. During that period in Japan, he also learned about psychoanalysis from
Dr. Kosawa in Tokyo. Professors Marui and Kosawa laid the groundwork for Japanese psychoanalysis. After coming back from Japan he opened department of psychiatry in Chonnam National University Medical School. Prof. Sunghee Kim (Japanese name) devised ways to cure schizophrenic delusion using an open ward system and free association, instead of electric shock treatment or medication (Kim S.H. 1975). The author recognise that he is the first Korean psychoanalyst. According to him, the original family structure of mankind was matrilineal, and a mother's love is essential in curing all mental illnesses. Particularly we can find it in Korean family. I learned about the Korean father figure from him.

References

국문초록

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