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Authors

McGarr, Art

Majer, Ernest L

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The 2017 Pohang, South Korea, Mw 5.4 main shock was either natural or triggered, but not induced

Art McGarr and Ernest L. Majer

Corresponding Author: Art McGarr, mcgarr@usgs.gov

U.S. Geological Survey, Earthquake Science Center

350 N. Akron Rd.

Moffett Field, CA 94035

Ernest L. Majer, elmajer@lbl.gov

Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory

1 Cyclotron Rd.

Berkeley, CA 94720

Key words: Induced seismicity; triggered earthquakes; natural earthquakes; Enhanced

Geothermal Systems (EGS)

Highlights:

- 1) The 17 November Mw 5.4 Pohang, South Korea, main shock could have been either triggered or natural.
- 2) The Pohang main shock was not induced by the nearby EGS project.
- 3) The dominant source of seismic hazard in and around the city of Pohang is natural crustal strain accumulation.

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33 Conflict of interest statement: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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35 **ABSTRACT**

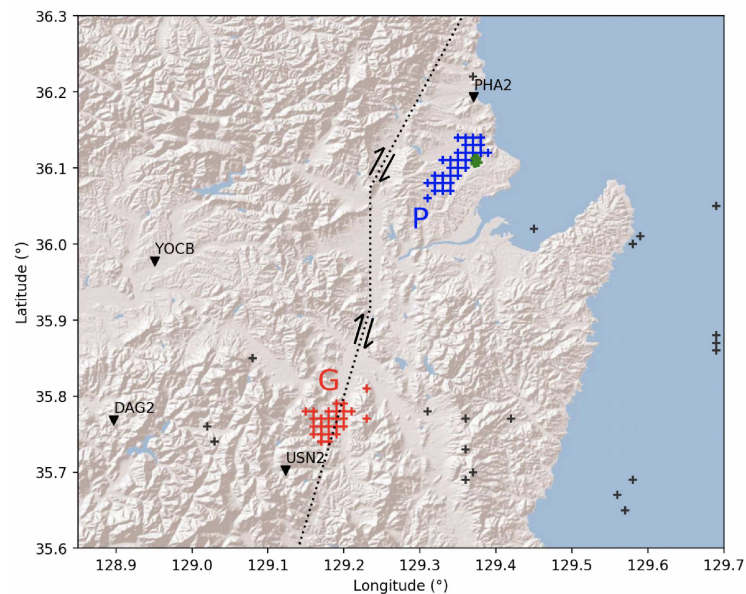
36 Understanding the cause of the November 2017 Pohang main shock is of considerable
37 importance to the future of the geothermal industry because of its large magnitude compared
38 to prior expectations based on case histories of other projects involving underground fluid
39 injection. Of the three possibilities – induced, triggered or natural, “induced” can be ruled out
40 based on the disproportionately large seismic moment of the main shock. Whether natural or
41 triggered, the source of seismic hazard at Pohang was tectonic strain accumulation, not fluid
42 injection. Arguably, the most timely indicator of seismic hazard and risk in the environs of
43 Pohang was the September 2016 Mw 5.4 Gyeongju earthquake, which was natural and located
44 about 40 km south of Pohang along the same active fault system.

45 **INTRODUCTION**

46 On 15 November 2017, the southeastern coastal region of South Korea experienced
47 damaging ground motion from a moment magnitude (Mw) 5.4 earthquake near the port city of
48 Pohang (Figure 1). Had there not been a nearby Enhanced Geothermal System (EGS) project,
49 there would have been little doubt that this earthquake was due to crustal strain accumulation
50 along the Yangsan fault zone. The proximity of the EGS project, however, led to suspicion that
51 the Pohang main shock was caused by injection activities, as reported initially by Grigoli et al.
52 (2018) and Kim et al. (2018). This suspicion evolved into the Summary Report (2019), prepared
53 on behalf of the South Korean Government and summarized by Ellsworth et al. (2019).

54 The question of the extent to which the occurrence of the Mw 5.4 Pohang main shock was
55 influenced by a nearby geothermal project is of considerable importance because of
56 implications for the future of the geothermal industry, especially in South Korea. Of the
57 numerous published reports on the Pohang earthquakes, nearly all conclude that these
58 earthquakes were either induced or triggered by injection activities intended to develop this

59 geothermal resource (e.g., Kim et al., 2018; Grigoli et al., 2018; Ellsworth et al., 2019; Yeo et al.,
60 2020; Westaway, 2021; Farkas et al. 2021; Yoo et al., 2021; Chang et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2020;
61 Wassing et al., 2021; Hofmann et al., 2019; Woo et al., 2019; and Alcolea et al., 2021).
62



63
64 *Figure 1. Locations of seismicity in southeastern South Korea, including the Pohang*
65 *earthquakes (blue symbols) and the Gyeongju earthquakes (red symbols) determined*
66 *by the Korea Meteorological Administration (KMA) National Earthquake Comprehensive*
67 *Information System (NECIS). Locations of the Pohang foreshocks identified by the*
68 *Summary Report (2019) are represented by the small cluster of green symbols. Black*
69 *crosses show epicenters of earthquakes not associated with either the Gyeongju or the*
70 *Pohang sequence. The Yangsan fault system (dotted line), and the stations in the South*
71 *Korean regional network used for the detection of earthquakes using template matching*
72 *(black triangles) (Skoumal et al., 2019) are also shown. The port city of Pohang is*
73 *located a short distance to the southeast of the Pohang earthquakes, around the bay.*
74

75 The hypothesis that the Pohang main shock was natural, however, is difficult to rule out, as
76 noted in numerous articles including Grigoli et al. (2018) and Ellsworth et al. (2019). To add
77 some balance to the discussion concerning the cause of the Pohang main shock, we consider all
78 three possible origins for the Pohang main shock: induced, triggered, and natural. It turns out
79 that the hypothesis of an induced origin for the Pohang main shock can be readily dismissed,
80 but choosing between triggered and natural causes is more challenging.

81 **Induced, triggered, or natural?**

82 The initial motivation for this study came from remarks by Ellsworth et al. (2019) who
83 claimed that the 2017 Mw 5.4 Pohang main shock is a counter-example to the relations
84 developed by McGarr (2014) relating maximum seismic moment or magnitude to the net
85 volume of injected liquid. We will show that this claim has no merit. To this end, we begin with
86 the definitions of “induced” and “triggered” earthquakes given by Ellsworth et al. (2019):

87

88 **“Induced earthquakes** occur within the volume of rock in which pressure or stress
89 changes as a consequence of injection. Their magnitudes are consistent with the spatial
90 dimension of the stimulated volume. They can occur both during injection and after
91 injection ceases. They may release tectonic strains or strains created by injection pressure
92 or volume.”

93

94 **“Triggered earthquakes** are runaway ruptures, initiated by anthropogenic forcing, that
95 grow in size beyond the bounds of the stimulated region. They release tectonic strain.”

96

97 These definitions are useful for distinguishing between induced and triggered seismicity at
98 the Pohang EGS site. As will be shown, however, resolving the question of whether the Pohang
99 main shock was triggered or natural is more challenging because the two possibilities have
100 much in common.

101 We start by first showing that the Pohang main shock was not induced and is, therefore, not a
102 counter-example to the relations developed by McGarr (2014). We then consider the other two
103 possibilities, triggered and natural.

104

105 **The 2017 Pohang main shock was not induced by injection operations**

106 The reason for including the definition of induced seismicity is to highlight several problems with
107 the claim by Ellsworth et al. (2019) that the Pohang main shock represents a counter-example to
108 the relationships developed by McGarr (2014). First, in the last paragraph on page 1854 of
109 Ellsworth et al. (2019) we read:

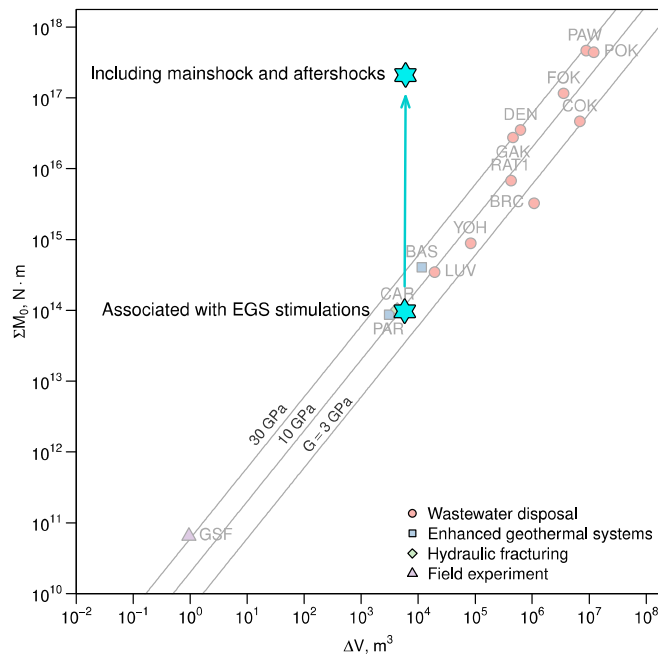
110 “Part of the rationale for selecting the magnitude thresholds comes from an empirical hypothesis
111 that the largest magnitude of induced earthquakes is bounded by a function of the injected volume
112 (McGarr, 2014).”

113 This characterization by Ellsworth et al. (2019) is incorrect because the relationships between
114 seismic moments and injected volumes were developed **analytically**, not **empirically**, using 13
115 equations in Section 3 of McGarr (2014). Furthermore, the title of McGarr (2014) is “Maximum
116 magnitude earthquakes **induced** by fluid injection” because that article is intended for
117 induced, not triggered, earthquakes. Indeed, one of the five assumptions in the
118 development of the relations between moment release and injected fluid volume is “The
119 induced earthquakes are localized to the region where the crust has been weakened due to
120 fluid injection.” (Section 3 of McGarr, 2014). This assumption is consistent with the
121 definition from Ellsworth et al. (2019), given above, for induced, but not triggered,
122 seismicity.

123 In contrast, the title of Ellsworth et al., (2019) is “Triggering of the Pohang, Korea,
124 earthquake (M_w 5.5) by Enhanced Geothermal System Stimulation”. If the Pohang main
125 shock is, in fact, a triggered earthquake, then it would not have been expected to adhere to
126 the seismic moment limits developed by McGarr (2014) because the upper bounds on
127 moment (see Section 3 of McGarr, 2014) were intended only for induced earthquakes;
128 triggered earthquakes were not considered.

129 Evidence against an induced origin for the Pohang main shock is seen in Figure 2, which
130 shows that the volume of injected liquid at the Pohang site is too small by several orders of
131 magnitude to account for the moment release of the Pohang earthquake sequence (Upper
132 blue star in Figure 2). In a similar vein, Figure 8 of Ellsworth et al. (2019) indicates that the
133 main shock rupture area, based on aftershock locations, was substantially larger than the
134 area affected by pore pressure increase (Figures 6 and 8 of Ellsworth et al., 2019; see also
135 Bethmann et al., 2021) before the main shock occurred in November 2017. Both types of
136 evidence are consistent with the definition, given by Ellsworth et al. (2019), for “triggered”,
137 but are not compatible with “induced”. These observations are also in accord with a natural
138 origin for the Pohang main shock.

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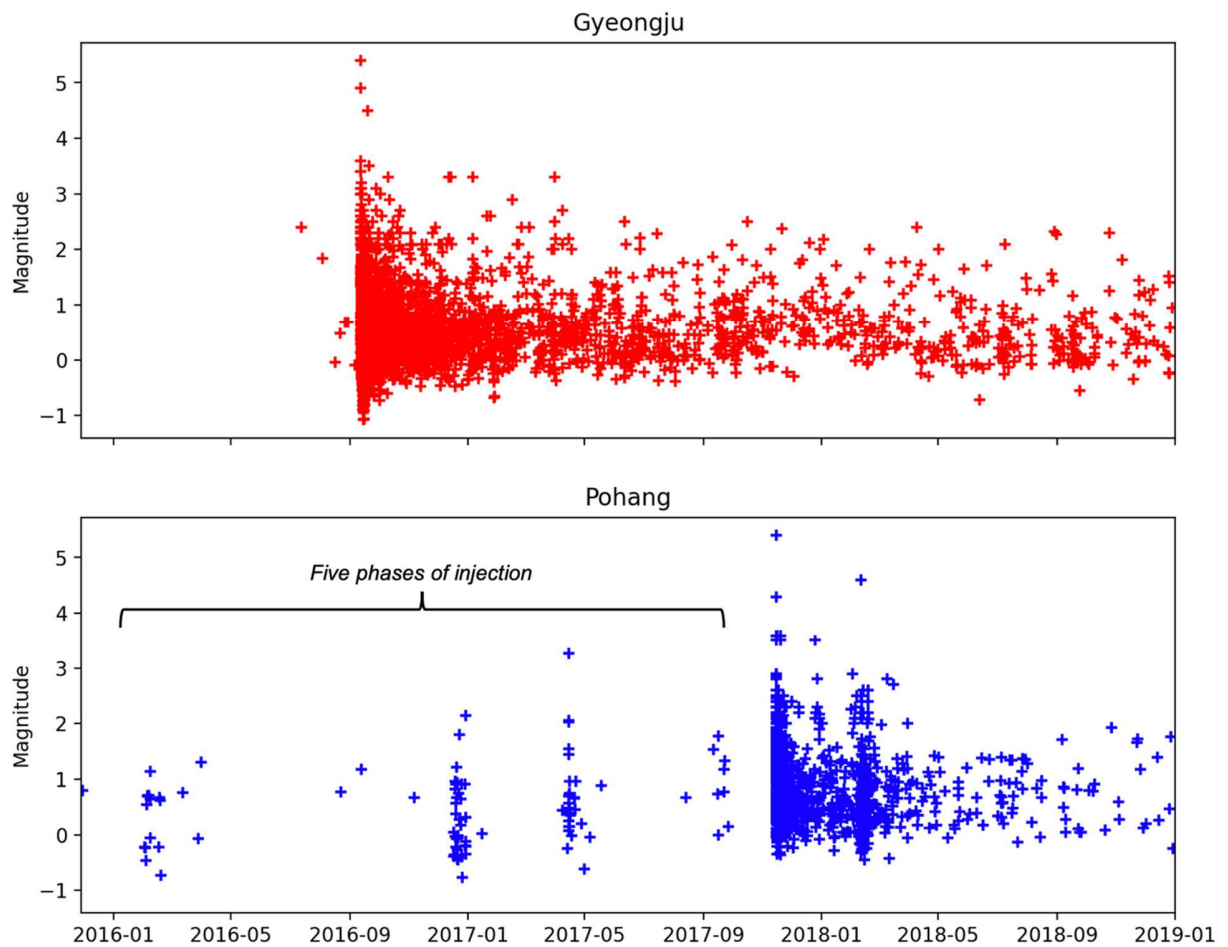
141 *Figure 2 (Adapted from Figure 1 of McGarr and Barbour, 2018) Moment release ΣM_0 as a*
 142 *function of injected volume ΔV compared to upper bound lines for 3 values of shear modulus G .*
 143 *The upper-bound lines were calculated using $\Sigma M_0 \leq 2G\Delta V$ (McGarr 2014). Lower blue star*
 144 *indicates moment release near Pohang from beginning of EGS project until beginning of*
 145 *November 2017. Upper blue star shows moment release from beginning of EGS project until*
 146 *January 2019.*

147

148 **2016 Gyeongju and 2017 Pohang sequences are similar**

149 Having explained why the Pohang M 5.4 main shock was not induced and therefore not a
 150 counter-example to the relations for maximum seismic moment developed by McGarr
 151 (2014), we now address the more challenging question of whether the Pohang main shock
 152 was triggered or natural. To this end, we first compare the 2017 Pohang sequence to its
 153 natural counterpart located about 40 km to the south along the same active fault zone
 154 (Figure 1), the 2016 M5.4 Gyeongju earthquake.

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158 Figure 3 Gyeongju (upper panel) and Pohang (lower panel) sequences. Also shown in the lower
159 panel are the magnitudes of the earthquakes induced by the five phases of injection.

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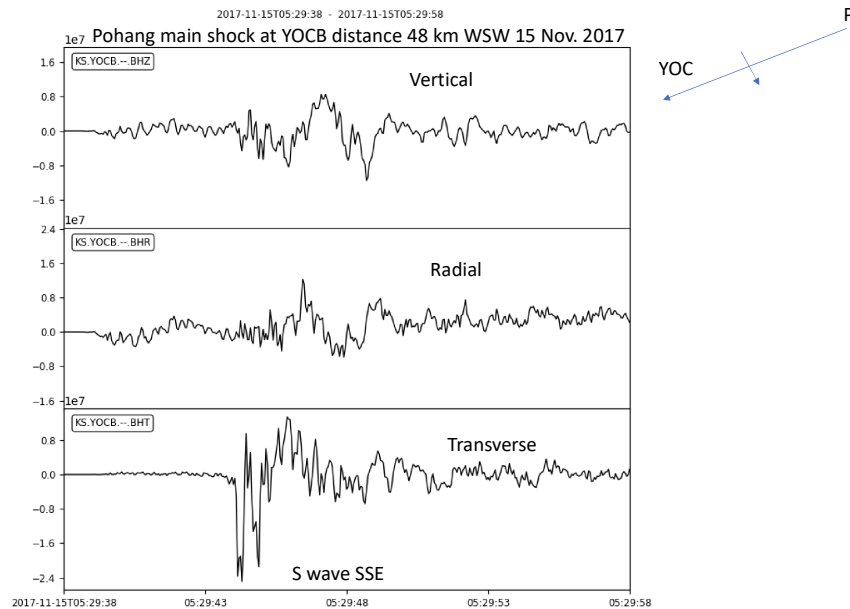
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As observed by Grigoli et al. (2018), the region of southeastern South Korea that includes
162 Pohang was already in a state of elevated seismic activity before the 2017 Pohang earthquake,
163 activity that included the 2016 Gyeongju earthquake sequence (Figures 1 and 3). The two
164 earthquake sequences show considerable similarity: both were located along the Yangsan fault
165 zone, an active fault system (Hwang et al., 2010); the two main shocks had moment magnitudes
166 of 5.4; both were preceded by a small number of foreshocks; and each main shock was
167 followed by a lengthy sequence of aftershocks (Figure 3).

168

Seismograms recorded by the regional network Station YOCB (Figure 1) from both the
169 Gyeongju and Pohang main shocks show waveforms (Figures 4a and 4b) that are consistent
170 with the tectonic setting. Most notably, the transverse components of their S waves are

171 impulsive, of high amplitude, and consistent with right-lateral shear across the Yangsan fault
172 zone (Figure 1).

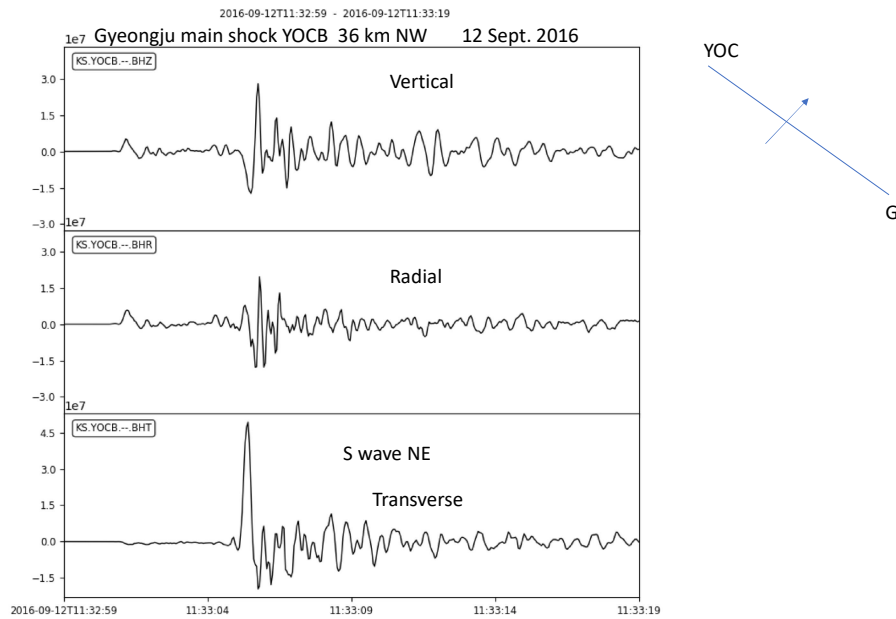


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175 *Figure 4a Ground displacement from Pohang main shock. At upper right is a map view of the ray*
176 *path from the Pohang main shock (P) to station YOC (Figure 1) showing the SSE polarization of*
177 *the horizontal S wave. Following the S wave, the lower-frequency Love wave (transverse*
178 *component) is followed by the Rayleigh wave (radial and vertical components), which shows*
179 *retrograde elliptical ground motion. The upward drift seen on the radial trace is likely an artifact*
180 *introduced during integration from ground velocity to displacement. Each unit on the vertical*
181 *scale is 0.1 micron.*

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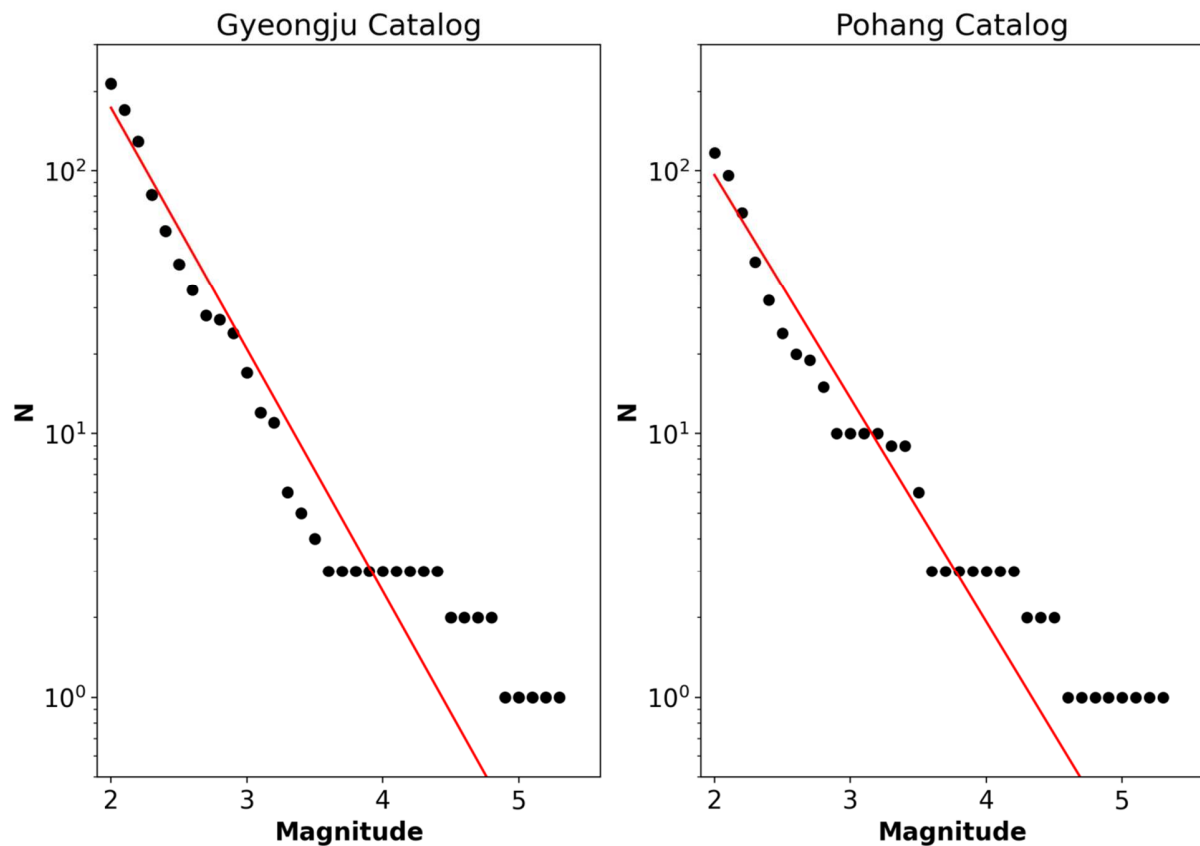


183

184 Figure 4b Ground displacement from Gyeongju main shock. At upper right is map view of ray
 185 path from Gyeongju main shock (G) to station YOC (Figure 1) showing NE polarization of
 186 horizontal S wave. Each unit on the vertical scale is 0.1 micron.

187

188 Similar remarks apply to the magnitude-frequency distributions, which both have typical b -
 189 values close to 1 (Figure 5). The larger uncertainty for the b -value at Pohang is due to the
 190 smaller number of events owing partly to the shorter duration of recording considered there.
 191 Interestingly, both distributions show similar behavior at magnitudes greater than 3.6 or 3.7
 192 (Figure 5).



193
194

195 Figure 5 *Magnitude-frequency distributions for Gyeongju and Pohang sequences. Note that b -*
196 *values, determined using maximum likelihood method (Aki, 1965), for both sequences, are 0.9.*
197

198 There are a few differences between these sequences, however. The main shock of the
199 Gyeongju sequence was preceded by an Mw 4.9 foreshock by less than an hour. And the
200 Pohang aftershocks include a magnitude 4.6 earthquake on 10 February 2018 that was followed
201 by a secondary aftershock sequence (Figure 3).

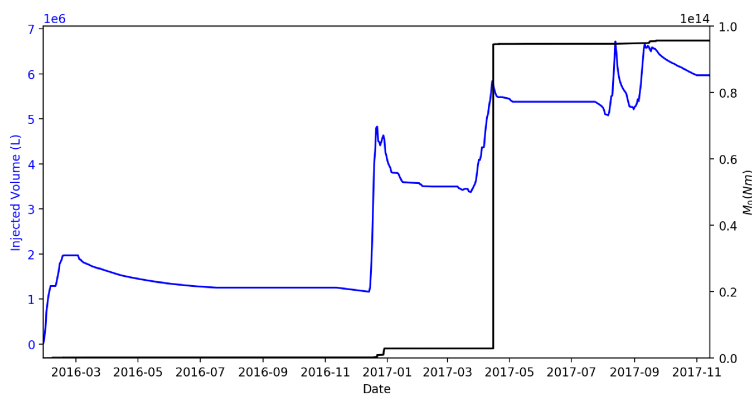
202 The main difference between the Pohang and Gyeongju main shocks, however, is in their
203 distributions of slip with depth. For the Pohang main shock, slip was distributed between about
204 2 km and 6 km whereas the slip for the Gyeongju main shock showed a depth distribution of
205 similar extent that was centered at about 15 km depth (Kim et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2018;
206 Ellsworth et al. 2019); evidence for this difference is seen in Figures 4a and 4b. Whereas Figure
207 4a shows surface waves following the impulsive S wave, no surface waves are seen following
208 the S wave in Figure 4b. The shallower slip range of the Pohang earthquake is likely a

209 consequence of an elevated brittle-ductile transition, commonly found in the environs of
210 geothermal resources.

211 In summary, from the seismic data, it is clear that the two earthquake sequences, Pohang
212 and Gyeongju, have much in common. The Gyeongju sequence was natural, the result of strain
213 accumulation along the Yangsan fault system. The similarity of the Pohang sequence to its
214 Gyeongju counterpart is consistent with either a natural or a triggered cause for the Pohang
215 main shock. If the Pohang main shock was triggered, then its time of occurrence and, possibly,
216 hypocentral location may have been affected, but neither perturbation would have been
217 expected to affect its moment release significantly.

218 Measures taken by the operator to avoid felt earthquakes

219 Because the EGS site is located in the outskirts of Pohang, a major population center of
220 about 500,000, the operator evidently attempted to reduce the likelihood of felt earthquakes in
221 several ways. First, the average injection rate was kept exceedingly low, about 10 m³/day, by
222 distributing the five phases of injections over about 600 days (Figure 3). In contrast, EGS
223 stimulations are often completed in less than a week resulting in average injection rates of the
224 order of 2000 m³/day (e.g., Majer et al., 2007; Bommer et al., 2006; Deichmann and Giardini,



225
226 *Figure 6 Injection in liters (blue line) and moment release (black line) as functions of time during*
227 *the injection activities at the Pohang EGS site. The 1st, 3rd and 5th injection phases were into*
228 *borehole PX-2 whereas the 2nd and 4th were into PX-1.*
229

230 2009; Albaric et al., 2013). Second, the injections alternated between the two boreholes PX-1
231 and PX-2. Third, after each injection, there was flowback to reduce the net injected volume and
232 pore pressure of fluid in the formation (Figure 6). Fourth, the Pohang stimulation plan for PX-1
233 was based on the EU “DESTRESS” program, with “soft” cyclic stimulation designed specifically to
234 minimize the potential for induced seismicity (Hofmann et al., 2018; Yoon et al., 2019).

235 In more detail, within each of the five injection phases at Pohang, there was a series of
236 separate small-volume injections. For example, the first phase, which used PX-2, entailed 16
237 separate small-volume injections distributed over about 3 weeks (Park et al., 2017).

238 **Concluding discussion**

239 The claim by Ellsworth et al. (2019) that the Pohang main shock is a counter-example to the
240 relationship, developed by McGarr (2014), between seismic moment release and net injected
241 volume is inappropriate because that relationship was intended for earthquakes induced, not
242 triggered, by fluid injection. Accordingly, even if the main shock was triggered (Ellsworth et al.,
243 2019), there is no reason to expect the moment release at Pohang, South Korea, to adhere to
244 the relations developed by McGarr (2014).

245 From the start of the Pohang EGS Project until early November 2017, however, moment
246 release in the vicinity of this project appears to have been limited by the net injected
247 volume (Figure 2, lower blue star) as expected for induced seismicity (McGarr, 2014;
248 McGarr and Barbour, 2018). From mid-November onward, in contrast, the moment release
249 near this project exceeded the same limit by a factor of several hundred, indicating that the
250 Mw 5.4 main shock was almost certainly not induced (Figure 2, upper blue star); this
251 implies that the Pohang main shock was either triggered (Ellsworth et al., 2019) or natural.

252 The 2017 Pohang and 2016 Gyeongju main shocks, and their sequences, were similar in
253 many ways. Both sequences were located in the environs of the Yangsan fault zone and had
254 the same *b-values* and maximum magnitudes. Because the Gyeongju sequence was natural,
255 it follows that an earthquake of Mw 5.4, or larger, near Pohang, could have occurred with or
256 without nearby EGS injections. The similarity of the Pohang and Gyeongju sequences
257 supports both triggered and natural causes for the Pohang main shock.

258 An important difference between our interpretation and those reported previously (e.g.,
259 Ellsworth et al., 2019; Yeo et al., 2020; Palgunadi et al., 2020) is the implication from our

260 study that the most useful evidence for assessing earthquake hazard and risk near Pohang
261 was provided by the Gyeongju main shock, which occurred about 14 months before its
262 counterpart at Pohang. If the 2016 Gyeongju earthquake had been located near the Pohang
263 EGS site, the consequences would probably have been similar to what actually happened 14
264 months later in November 2017.

265 Although we have not been able to determine whether the Pohang main shock is natural
266 or triggered, this uncertainty may be of little consequence because, in either case, the
267 extent of rupture, and its damaging effects in Pohang, resulted from natural crustal
268 tectonics, although the timing of this earthquake may have been perturbed owing to the
269 EGS injections. This implies that the only effective mitigation strategy would have been to
270 act on the information provided by the 2016 Gyeongju earthquake by preparing for an
271 earthquake elsewhere along the Yangsan fault zone (Figure 1), including near Pohang, of
272 moment magnitude at least 5.4.

273

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281

282 **DATA AND RESOURCES**

283 All data needed to evaluate the conclusions in this paper are present in the paper. Additional
284 data may be requested from the authors.

285

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