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Mental Health Needs and Resources in Christian Communities of South Korea

Mark R. McMinn

George Fox University, mmcminn@georgefox.edu

Sang Hun Roh

Lisa G. McMinn

Amy W. Dominguez

Regent University

Eunnie R. Rhee

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Mark R. McMinn, Sang Hun Roh, Lisa G. McMinn, Amy W. Dominguez, Eunnie R. Rhee, Anne Boheon Maurina, Eunsil Kim, Marie-Christine Goodworth, and Paul Kyuman Chae

MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS AND RESOURCES IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES OF SOUTH KOREA

MARK R. McMINN, SANG HUN ROH,
LISA G. McMINN, AMY W. DOMINGUEZ,
EUNNIE R. RHEE, ANNE BOHEON MAURINA,
EUNSIL KIM, MARIE-CHRISTINE RUTTER
Wheaton College
PAUL KYUMAN CHAE
Sungshin Women's University

In an effort to understand the mental health needs and resources of Korean Christians, we collected quantitative and qualitative data through surveys and interviews with Korean pastors and Christian educators. Several mental health concerns were identified: the high level of daily stress faced by many Koreans, marriage and family concerns, conflicts between Korean culture and the teachings of the church, and a tendency to keep emotional discomfort suppressed. Mental health resources include deep spiritual commitment to a life of prayer, high levels of commitment to family and community, cultural values of persistence and patience, and reliance on Christian communities for spiritual hope and meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Doctoral programs in clinical psychology typically value diversity and seek students from a variety of cultural contexts, and recruitment of international students to such programs has both internal and external benefits. Internally, doctoral training programs are enriched by cross-cultural perspectives which enliven classroom discussions and enrich interpersonal relationships. Externally, international recruiting benefits students coming from less developed countries where it is difficult or impossible to receive doctoral training in psychology, and those countries are helped when students return after completing their doctoral degree.

The benefits of cross-cultural training are clear; however, the experience for international students can sometimes be lonely and difficult. In addition to interpersonal, language, and cultural challenges faced by international students, the question of relevance often looms: "Am I learning the information I need to be an effective psychologist in my home country?" For those recruiting international students for doctoral training in North America, it behooves us to learn about the cultures from which students come in order to provide training that is as relevant as possible. For this particular study, we were interested in identifying the needs and resources of South Korean Christians to help inform our doctoral training of South Korean students in a Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.) program housed in a distinctively Christian institution.

Because the Christian religion has grown rapidly in Korea (Hur & Hur, 1988), faith communities have naturally become a supportive resource for many. This research is an effort to gain understanding of the preventive and supportive benefits Christian communities offer, as well as the types of mental health needs that exist within these communities. By understanding these needs and resources, we hope to be better able to provide culturally appropriate training to those students who will return to South Korea upon completing their Psy.D. training.

ASSESSMENT METHODS AND FINDINGS

Various methods of data collection were used, providing both quantitative and qualitative perspectives on the mental health resources and needs of Christian communities in South Korea. Data collec-

tion began in July 1999 and continued through October 1999. Three of the questionnaires (described below) were distributed and collected in Seoul, Korea at the first annual meeting of the Korean Christian Counseling and Psychotherapy Association (KCCPA), which involved approximately 120 Korean mental health professionals. They were also distributed among pastors attending a training workshop at the Clinical Pastoral Education Graduate School of Korea (KCPE), consisting of approximately 200 pastors. Various questionnaires were randomly distributed among those attending these two events so that each participant received only one questionnaire per day. Thus, the total number of respondents for any given questionnaire is less than the number attending the KCCPA and KCPE meetings. Because participation was completely voluntary, and because the training schedules did not provide extra time for completing the questionnaires, approximately half of the potential respondents elected not to return completed questionnaires.

Questionnaires were developed in English and translated into Korean by two bilingual doctoral students, one of whom works as a professional translator. Because most respondents completed the qualitative questionnaires in Korean, their responses were translated into English by one of these doctoral students. The English translations of the responses were then entered into the Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (NUD*IST 4, 1997) software package for qualitative analysis.

Mental Health Needs Questionnaire

A quantitatively-scored questionnaire listed symptoms of a variety of disorders—depression, panic attacks, somatization problems, personality disorders, marriage and family problems, anger problems, alcohol abuse, dependency, and stress-related problems—and had respondents rate the frequency of these symptoms among Christian men and women in South Korea. Twenty one completed questionnaires were collected at KCCPA. Two of these respondents were male, 17 were female, and 2 did not report their sex. Their ages ranged from 26 to 51, with an average age of 40. An additional 58 questionnaires were collected among those attending the KCPE workshop. Thirteen of these respondents were male, 32 were female, and 13 did not report their sex. Their ages ranged from 27 to 56, with an average age of 42.

The ranked means for males and females are presented in Table 1. Repeated measures multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) revealed significant differences within the various mental health disorders for males (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.12$, $F(10, 30) = 21.2$, $p < .001$) and females (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.17$, $F(10, 52) = 26.3$, $p < .001$). Profile analyses of adjacent means, using a conservative alpha of .01 to control for Type I error, revealed significant gaps between parenting problems and dependency problems for males, $t(51) = 3.2$, $p < .005$, between panic symptoms and being abusive at home for females, $t(71) = 4.2$, $p < .001$, and between being abusive at home and excessive use of alcohol for females, $t(70)$, $p < .005$. No other significant differences were observed between adjacent means.

We also evaluated sex differences in the perception of symptoms. Again, a conservative alpha of .01 was used to control for Type I error. Only one significant difference was observed: males report females as having more panic symptoms than females report, $t(58) = 4.0$, $p < .001$. We then computed paired-samples t-tests to compare males and females on experienced symptoms of the various disorders, again using an alpha of .01. Males are perceived to experience fewer panic symptoms, $t(44) = 3.7$, $p < .005$, fewer somatic symptoms, $t(47) = 3.0$, $p < .005$, more alcohol use problems, $t(47) = 8.0$, $p < .001$, more stress problems, $t(50) = 3.0$, $p < .005$, and are seen as more likely to be abusive at home, $t(48) = 2.9$, $p < .01$.

Resource Assessment Questionnaire

A resource assessment questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions regarding common challenges facing men and women in Korea, and then requested information on the resources and strengths available to face these challenges. The questions requested information about cultural, spiritual, relational, social service, and other resources of Korean people. Sixteen respondents (14 male and 1 female—one did not report sex, average age of 38, ranging from 26 to 51) were from the annual KCCPA meeting. An additional 52 respondents (9 male and 40 female—three did not report their sex, average age of 41, ranging from 25 to 65) were attending the KCPE workshop.

The first part of the resource assessment questionnaire asked for particular challenges facing Christian men and women in Korea. Four prominent themes emerged for men. First, many noted conflicting values at work and church. For example, respon-

Table 1

Symptoms Affecting Korean Males				Symptoms Affecting Korean Females			
Symptoms	N	Mean	Std Dev	Symptoms	N	Mean	Std Dev
Too much stress	53	4.1	0.9	Too much stress	77	3.4	1.1
Parenting troubles	53	3.9	1.0	Parenting troubles	77	3.4	1.1
Dependency	52	3.3	1.1	Depression	76	3.3	1.0
Depression	56	3.3	0.9	Somatic symptoms	74	3.2	1.2
Marriage troubles	52	3.2	1.0	Dependency	77	3.1	1.2
Alcohol problems	52	3.1	1.3	Marriage troubles	75	2.9	1.0
Somatic symptoms	50	3.0	0.9	Anger problems	77	2.8	1.1
Anger problems	52	2.9	1.0	Personality disorders	75	2.5	0.9
Personality disorders	52	2.6	0.9	Panic disorder	74	2.5	1.0
Abusive at home	53	2.5	1.0	Abusive at home	75	2.0	1.0
Panic disorder	48	2.2	0.7	Alcohol problems	73	1.6	0.9

dents offered observations such as, “Social life and faith are disconnected,” and “Difficulty of socializing at work setting because of Korean church’s emphasis on abstinence from alcohol and smoking.” A second theme related to the lack of fellowship among Christian men was indicated by respondents who noted that the Korean church often has programs that bring women together, but that no such programs are available for men. Even if such programs were available, it is doubtful that men would have time to be involved. This relates to the third theme: men are highly stressed and pressured for time. Korean men work 6 days per week, often putting in very long days, and have little time or energy left for church-related social events. The economic turbulence of recent years has caused job related anxiety for many men, adding more pressure to meet the high expectations of employers. One respondent describes “the pressure as a breadwinner and the head of the family, pressure from the possibility of being laid off as a result of downsizing or any other societal adjustment, and the anxiety regarding the uncertainty of the future.” Fourth, Korean men experience challenges with their families related to changing social values and differences between Christianity and Confucianism. Respondents offered observations such as, “Confusion between the traditional view of male superiority in Korean culture compared to the more egalitarian view in the church,” and “Confusion and conflict of

the role of men (due to the deterioration of the patriarchal system).” We also identified four prominent themes for challenges facing Christian women. First, many women are expected to be highly involved in church activities as well as in maintaining home and family life. These roles often conflict producing priority conflicts and uncertainties. According to one respondent, “Duties at home are neglected due to too much time spent for church.” The second theme compounds this issue in that many Korean women attend church without their husbands. This often leads to marital distress and even some degree of persecution from their husbands and in-laws. Third, Korean women are often expected to be in service roles. This can be difficult for those who feel that their value comes from their service to male pastors in the church and to their husbands in the home. One respondent put it this way: “Due to sexual discrimination, women still assume all the labor while men get all the credit.” Others noted that the emphasis on service can distract women from an authentic spiritual quest, as their degree of service becomes easily confused with personal faith development (Kim, 1996). This relates to a fourth theme: Women experience significant cultural barriers to personal development. One person wrote: “There is no room for women to pursue self-actualization.” Another noted, “Due to the Confucianist idea of women’s inferiority ingrained in the society, even highly effective women can neither be

confident nor fully maximize their potential in settings which benefit their capabilities.”

Respondents were asked to describe resources for coping with these challenges. The resource of prayer was clearly the predominant theme in the responses offered. Establishing a life of prayer is central to Korean Christianity, including daily prayer meetings and personal and corporate periods of fasting for purposes of prayer. Those emphasizing prayer also tended to mention other spiritual resources including the value of the Bible. Other resources that were identified included cultural values, family unity, and church community. Cultural values of “perseverance and rectitude” were noted, forged through many trials and periods of oppression throughout Korean history. Family unity was also noted in the sense that Korean parents make great sacrifices for their children and foster a strong sense of loyalty and identity within the family. Church community was also identified as a resource, with respondents noting the importance of Christian fellowship and the vital role of small groups within the church.

Case Study Questionnaire

Respondents were also given a case study of a formerly active deaconess in a Korean church who is now experiencing symptoms such as a lack of energy and motivation, insomnia, poor appetite, and a dysphoric mood. At the same time as the onset of these symptoms, the deaconess withdraws from her church leadership roles, stops attending daily prayer meetings, and thinks about killing herself. Respondents were asked how they understood this situation, how often they see similar situations, how they might help the deaconess, and what resources are available to help people with similar problems. Eleven respondents (1 male and 9 female—one did not report sex, average age of 39, ranging from 24 to 51) were from the annual KCCPA meeting. An additional 56 respondents (18 male and 37 female—one did not report sex, average age of 42, ranging from 26 to 68) were attending the KCPE workshop.

The primary explanations for the cause of the symptoms were exhaustion and depression. Twenty-three of the 67 respondents mentioned exhaustion as a cause of the symptoms, often relating the exhaustion to the deaconess’s work in the church and her own spiritual nourishment. For example, one respondent wrote, “Exhaustion. She seems to

devote herself to the ministry without taking care of her spiritual life.” Another described it this way, “She seems to get her sense of self-worth through work; exhaustion and frustration, reaching her physical and emotional limits.” Sixteen respondents mentioned depression as a likely cause of the symptoms, though this was often related to a spiritual deficit of some sort. For example, “Depression ... The personal relationship with Jesus Christ has not seemed to be established”; or, “spiritual depression due to the lack of the personal relationship with God and his word.” Other possible explanations mentioned by several respondents included a lack of close relationships, lack of adequate recognition for her work, and being focused on her own strength rather than finding strength through God.

When asked to rate the frequency of this sort of situation in Korean churches, respondents tended to identify moderate rates of occurrence. On a five-point Likert scale, ranging from never to always, the mean score was 2.9 (standard deviation 1.0), with 37 of the 64 respondents circling the midpoint rating of 3.

Respondents were then asked how they would approach helping the deaconess with her problems. Many reported that she needs empathy, someone to listen to her, or individual counseling. For example, “First of all, try to give her comfort and then find out the root cause by listening to her life history from childhood to the current family relationships. Be her friend, listening to her attentively.” Most often the recommendations for counseling included an explicitly spiritual intervention (e.g., “in-depth counseling through the Bible and prayer”). Consistent with the understanding that her problem was caused by exhaustion and inadequate spiritual resources, many respondents recommended she receive rest and prayer for her condition. “Take rest for a while, attending worship services only and filling her mind and heart with God’s words through meditation. Meet people on a one-on-one basis—not a multitude. Keep praying.”

When asked what resources the respondents use or recommend when helping people with similar problems, many mentioned counseling or referring to another counselor—often indicating the importance of spiritual content in the counseling. Some also mentioned self-help books, and explicitly spiritual interventions (e.g., prayer, praise, Bible study).

Pastor Interviews

Thirteen Korean pastors came to Wheaton College for training in cognitive therapy in July, 1999. Three semi-structured focus groups were conducted over lunch meetings. These discussions were conducted through an interpreter and audio-recorded. The focus group discussions were based on the question: "What mental health needs and resources do you see in Christian congregations in South Korea?"

Three primary themes emerged. First, pastors were concerned about a general confusion between psychological and spiritual problems, noting that most Korean pastors are not open to counseling and think that spiritual resources are sufficient for dealing with all emotional problems. This sometimes leads to a state of shame in which people are afraid to admit to psychological concerns because it will be perceived as spiritual weakness. In extreme cases, some pastors have reportedly beaten parishioners in order to remove evil spirits (this is not a typical practice, but the pastors were aware of isolated occurrences). Related to this, the respondents noted that parishioners do not have Christian counseling centers available to them. They often go to pastors, feel shame for their problems, and eventually leave the church. The need for explicitly Christian counseling centers in Korea was emphasized.

Second, family issues were emphasized, especially by the women pastors in the focus groups. They noted that marital conflict due to financial stress, depression, alcohol abuse, and domestic violence is common. They related this to the patriarchal structure of the Korean family and to the intense time demands of Korean churches, which are also patriarchal. A typical situation might involve a male pastor, with a congregation including many female parishioners, who has high expectations for women in the church to be involved in daily prayer meetings, visiting those who are sick, volunteering at the hospital, and so on. The men are also overwhelmed with responsibilities, typically working 12-14 hour days, 6 days per week. Any church involvement beyond this intense work schedule further fatigues these men and separates them from their families. Though undoubtedly an exaggeration, one respondent reported: "The Korean church is destroying the family."

Third, the pastors referred to the national phenomenon of *han* (see Park, 19930, which is the corporate experience of deep-rooted anger, frustration, helplessness, and depression. Han is a historical and

cultural phenomenon rooted in a history of oppression, but with personal implications for emotional functioning. Because psychological problems or emotional expressiveness can easily lead to shame, many Koreans respond by keeping their emotions and concerns private. Over time, these suppressed emotions may result in somatic symptoms. It is interesting to note that one of the culture-bound syndromes reported in the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV) is *hwa-byung*, a somatic disorder attributed to suppression of anger (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Responses to Single Question

Twelve of the 13 pastors completed a written response to the question, "What are the most pressing mental health needs seen in Christian congregations in Korea?" These responses were later translated into English and included in the data analysis. All but one of the respondents listed marriage problems or concerns with raising children, or both. Marital problems involved a variety of causes, including gambling, alcohol abuse, conflict with in-laws, religious value differences, managing value differences between the church and the larger society, domestic violence, the high demands of employers, and extra-marital relationships. Respondents also described behavioral difficulties with children at school or home and conflict over the children's academic achievement.

Other problems identified included depression, alcohol abuse, cultural conflicts between Christians and the Korean culture (influenced by Confucianism), and wounded and internalized emotions. Two respondents also listed kleptomania as a problem with Korean youth.

NEEDS AND RESOURCES FOR SOUTH KOREAN CHRISTIANS

Perhaps the best way to summarize these findings is to describe four pairs of needs and resources. If not paradoxical, these needs and resources at least illustrate opposing tensions in the daily life of Korean Christians.

Daily Pressures and the Resource of Prayer

Contemporary life in Korea is filled with pressures. Men work long weeks, face financial and production pressures related to the crisis of the Asian economies that occurred in 1997, and often feel iso-

lated from meaningful interpersonal connections. These pressures should be understood in the context of a culture in which conformity to the expectations of the employer is valued above achieving personal satisfaction in the workplace; thus, fostering meaningful relationships at work is much less important than meeting the performance expectations of the employer. This sense of isolation may be more complex for Christian men than for non-Christian men because their religious values sometimes conflict with the values expected in the workplace.

Women also face significant pressures, as they often feel torn between family and church responsibilities. Women are increasingly involved in the workforce as well, yet without the same economic incentives and rewards as men. Forty-seven percent of South Korean women are in the workforce, but earn only about 54 percent of what men earn. By comparison, 68 percent of the women in the United States are in the workforce, earning about 75 percent of what men earn (Neft & Levine, 1997). Women in South Korea hold only four percent of all administrative and managerial positions, whereas women in the United States and Canada hold over 40 percent of such positions (Seager, 1997; Neft & Levine, 1997). Korean families, employers, and pastors are all shaped by the cultural heritage of Confucianism, which affirms patriarchy and sometimes leaves women wondering which powerful man they are supposed to please. For many centuries Koreans have esteemed and admired women who sacrificed their own development for their parents, husband, and sons (Kim, 1996). As a result, women sometimes have little opportunity to develop their gifts and interests because they are overwhelmed with commitments of service to others.

Yet with all these external and internal pressures facing Korean men and women, they have found solace in the faithful practice of prayer. Prayer has become an integral part of the fabric of life for Korean Christians. As with other activities, Koreans take on the task of prayer with diligence and discipline. Though daily prayer meetings may seem an extra obligation at times, the clear picture emerging from this research is that prayer is an extraordinary resource that allows Korean Christians to cope with the pressures of their lives by finding solace and hope in their connection with God and one another.

Family Problems and the Resource of Family

Marriage and family problems were mentioned in virtually every facet of this assessment. Parents are concerned about the conduct and academic achievement of their children, and marital problems appear to be ubiquitous. The sources of marital conflict are varied and look very much like the sources of conflict in Western countries. In addition, the patriarchal nature of Confucianism, coupled with the influx of more egalitarian ideas from the West, appears to be a potential source of conflict for many couples. Unfortunately, the church may inadvertently contribute to family conflict at times by placing high time demands on people already overwhelmed with the various responsibilities of work and family. This is especially pronounced for women who often feel squeezed by various expectations and time demands. When their husbands do not attend church (70 percent of Christians in South Korea are women; Sa, 1995), they may feel pressures from their husbands to withdraw from the church, which may result in marital conflict. Some of these husbands expect their wives to be available for service tasks in the home, and yet the wife is committed to various church activities that draw her away from the home.

Despite the many concerns about family life, the family is also perceived as an important resource for Korean Christians. Unlike the prevalent views in individualistic Western cultures, family unity is cherished and nurtured in Korea. This has been institutionalized through traditions and festivals and serves as the glue that holds a community-oriented culture together. Confucianism places high value on respect and honor, and these values have played a central role in Korean family life. Sacrifice is valued higher than self-actualization, which may make it difficult for Western observers to correctly understand the long work hours and drive for success displayed by many males and the tireless service offered by many females. These are not just individualistic activities designed to bring personal significance, but also community activities emerging out of respect for the family, the employer, and the church.

Church-Society Value Conflicts and the Resource of Cultural Values

Conflict exists between dominant cultural values and the values taught within the Christian faith in Korea. One indication of this is the conflict men face in trying to meet the social expectations of their

employers while honoring the teachings of the church regarding alcohol and tobacco use. Some apparently resolve this by developing a dual life—one for the work setting and another for the church.

More evidence of the church-society conflict is seen in the varying messages women receive about their roles in family and community activities. These messages are increasingly influenced by Western ideas of individualism and self-actualization, and yet the longstanding cultural traditions of Confucianism conflict with this influx of Western ideas. It is unclear exactly where the Church fits in this ideological clash. One of our respondents, a female assistant pastor, suggested that the Church has introduced greater dignity and freedom for women. This was not a prominent theme, however, and others reported that the Church reinforces the Korean values that inhibit autonomy and self-expression. When Christianity was introduced in Korea 100 years ago, it affected women's status by giving them the raw tools (e.g., literacy and education) for liberation from Confucianism (Kim, 1999). However, in the course of history, the Korean church itself has absorbed Confucianist ideas into its system, and women are thus more restricted than they have been in previous generations (Sa, 1995).

Despite the potential for church and cultural value clashes, Korean Christians are also quick to recognize virtue in Korean culture, and to view these values as resources that can contribute to their health. Two such values are perseverance and persistence. The Korean people have learned to persevere under enormous oppression and military aggression dating back to the late 16th Century. A national identity as a "persevering people" can sometimes foster fatalism or passivity, but these values of perseverance and persistence have been adaptive in many ways. The recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis of 1997 created great financial hardship throughout the country, and yet the cultural values of persistence and perseverance have allowed Koreans to rapidly rebuild a functional economy. Though these virtues lead to long work days and conditions of considerable stress, Koreans are inclined to endure and persist rather than to complain. These same values undoubtedly contribute to Korean Christians' capacity to pray fervently day after day, year after year. Similarly, our respondents wrote of moral virtue and compassion for others as cultural resources for Korean Christians.

Suppressing Emotional Pain and the Resource of Christian Community

Korean Christians experience emotional pain, as do people in every culture throughout the world. However, there is a tendency in Korea to keep this emotional pain private as a means of preventing shame for oneself or one's family, or as a way of showing respect for those in authority. Korean Christians may have additional motivation to suppress emotional pain due to the perception that psychological disorders are a result of spiritual deficits. For many Korean Christians, admitting to depression or anxiety might be perceived as acknowledging spiritual weakness. This tendency to hold in emotional pain, coupled with high amounts of life stress, makes some Koreans vulnerable to somatic problems and externalizing behaviors such as alcohol abuse and domestic violence. Thirty-eight percent of women in South Korea report being the recipients of domestic violence, compared to 28 percent of women in the United States, 27 percent in Canada, and 21 percent in the Netherlands. To keep these numbers in perspective, it should be noted that 80 percent of Pakistani women, 60 percent of Tanzanian women, and 59 percent of Japanese women report being the recipients of domestic violence (Seager, 1997).

A compensating resource is the strong sense of community that extends throughout the Korean culture and is especially pronounced within churches. Our respondents referred to the importance of relationships with other church members, small cell-groups, and relationships with pastors. These community resources help buffer the effects of suppressed emotional pain while providing a means of connection, relational significance, and hope.

CONCLUSIONS

Psychologists preparing to work in Korea would do well to master methods of stress management and marriage and family therapy. They should also develop the cultural and relational skills necessary to create a therapeutic environment in which clients feel free to talk openly. This sort of open environment is important to create in any successful therapeutic endeavor, but it may be particularly important and challenging for Korean clients who are inclined to value patience, endurance, and privacy while avoiding disclosures that might cause shame. The effective Christian psychologist in Korea will be an expert in understanding and encouraging appropriate expres-

sion of emotions while respecting and valuing the cultural norms. Moreover, many Korean Christian clients may be inclined to view emotional problems as spiritual problems, and thus avoid the shame that comes with describing psychological symptoms. This calls for Christian psychologists with excellent training in the various complexities of integrating psychology, theology, and Christian spirituality.

The church is an important resource for Korean Christians. It provides a means of connection and fellowship, and promotes the practice of prayer and other spiritual disciplines that provide hope and meaning. Christian psychologists working in Korea would do well to consider ways of collaborating with pastors to strengthen and support church communities and thereby enhance the existing resources already available to Korean Christians. At times this may involve helping pastors distinguish among the various biological, spiritual, psychological, and social causes for emotional distress rather than assuming a direct connection between religious practices and psychological health.

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AUTHORS

MCMINN, MARK R. *Address*: Wheaton College Dept. of Psychology, Wheaton, IL. *Title*: Rech Professor of Psychology. *Degree*: PhD, Clinical Psychology, Vanderbilt University, Licensed Clinical Psychologist. *Specializations*: Cognitive therapy, professional ethics, church-psychology collaboration, integration of psychology and Christian spirituality.

ROH, SANG HUN. *Address*: KangNamGu II WonDong SaemTer HyunDae Apt. 109-204, Seoul 135-230, South Korea. *Title*: Director of New Life Counseling Center and Professor of ACTS Graduate School in Korea. *Degrees*: PsyD, Clinical Psychology, Wheaton College; MDiv, Korean Seminary; MAs in Christian Education and Theology, Wheaton College. *Specializations*: Church-psychology collaboration, integration of Christianity and psychology, personality and spirituality, shame, and human potential.

McMINN, LISA G. *Address*: Wheaton College Department of Sociology, 501 College Avenue, Wheaton, IL 60187. *Title*: Associate Professor of Sociology. *Degrees*: MS, Sociology, Portland State University; PhD, Systems Science/Sociology, Portland State University. *Specializations*: Social change and gender-relations.

DOMINGUEZ, AMY W. *Address*: 1336 Chestnut Street, DeKalb, IL 60115. *Title*: Predoctoral intern, Northern Illinois University. *Degrees*: MA, Clinical Psychology, Wheaton College. *Specializations*: Church based assessment, substance abuse evaluation and treatment.

RHEE, EUNNIE R. *Address*: Wheaton College Department of Psychology, 501 College Avenue, Wheaton, IL 60187. *Title*: Predoctoral intern, Lydia Home Association. *Degrees*: MA, Biblical Theology, Wheaton College; MA, Social Service Administration, University of Chicago.

MAURINA, ANNE B. *Address*: Wheaton College Department of Psychology, 501 College Avenue, Wheaton, IL 60187. *Title*: Doctoral student in clinical psychology. *Degrees*: MA, Church Education, Calvin Seminary; MA, Marriage and Family Counseling, Southwestern Baptist Seminary.

KIM, EUNSIL. *Address*: 1327 College Ave., #24, Wheaton, IL 60187. *Title*: Graduate student, Wheaton College Graduate School. *Degrees*: BA, Psychology, Wheaton College.

RUTTER, MARIE-CHRISTINE. *Address*: 2765 Darley Avenue, Boulder, CO 80305. *Degrees*: MA, Clinical Psychology, Wheaton, College.

CHAE, PAUL KYUMAN. *Address*: Sungshin Women's University Department of Psychology, 249-1 3Ga Dungsung-Dong Sungbuk-Ku, Seoul Korea, 136-742. *Title*: Associate Professor of Psychology. *Degrees*: PhD, Clinical Psychology, Illinois Institute of Technology; MA, Seoul National University. *Specializations*: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Marriage and Family Therapy, Christian Cognitive Psychotherapy, Integration of Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality.