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Mental Health Needs and Resources in Christian Communities of South Korea

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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 ($\lambda = 0.12, F(10, 30) = 21.2, p < .001$) and females ($\lambda = 0.17, F(10, 52) = 26.3, p < .001$). 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-
ment needs and resources in Korea.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptoms Affecting Korean Males</th>
<th>Symptoms Affecting Korean Females</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Symptoms</strong></td>
<td><strong>Symptoms</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Too much stress</td>
<td>Too much stress</td>
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<td>Parenting troubles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dependency</td>
<td>Depression</td>
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<td>Depression</td>
<td>Somatic symptoms</td>
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<td>Marriage troubles</td>
<td>Dependency</td>
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<td>Alcohol problems</td>
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<td>Somatic symptoms</td>
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<td>Personality disorders</td>
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<td>Personality disorders</td>
<td>Panic disorder</td>
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<td>Abusive at home</td>
<td>Abusive at home</td>
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<td>Panic disorder</td>
<td>Alcohol problems</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.7</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Symptoms Affecting Korean Males

- Too much stress: 53 (Mean: 4.1, Std Dev: 0.9)
- Parenting troubles: 53 (Mean: 3.9, Std Dev: 1.0)
- Dependency: 52 (Mean: 3.3, Std Dev: 1.1)
- Depression: 56 (Mean: 3.3, Std Dev: 0.9)
- Marriage troubles: 52 (Mean: 3.2, Std Dev: 1.0)
- Alcohol problems: 52 (Mean: 3.1, Std Dev: 1.3)
- Somatic symptoms: 50 (Mean: 3.0, Std Dev: 0.9)
- Anger problems: 52 (Mean: 2.9, Std Dev: 1.0)
- Personality disorders: 52 (Mean: 2.6, Std Dev: 0.9)
- Abusive at home: 53 (Mean: 2.5, Std Dev: 1.0)
- Panic disorder: 48 (Mean: 2.2, Std Dev: 0.7)

Symptoms Affecting Korean Females

- Too much stress: 77 (Mean: 3.4, Std Dev: 1.1)
- Parenting troubles: 77 (Mean: 3.4, Std Dev: 1.1)
- Depression: 76 (Mean: 3.3, Std Dev: 1.0)
- Somatic symptoms: 74 (Mean: 3.2, Std Dev: 1.2)
- Dependency: 77 (Mean: 3.1, Std Dev: 1.2)
- Marriage troubles: 75 (Mean: 2.9, Std Dev: 1.0)
- Anger problems: 77 (Mean: 2.8, Std Dev: 1.1)
- Personality disorders: 75 (Mean: 2.5, Std Dev: 0.9)
- Panic disorder: 74 (Mean: 2.5, Std Dev: 1.0)
- Abusive at home: 75 (Mean: 2.0, Std Dev: 1.0)
- Alcohol problems: 73 (Mean: 1.6, Std Dev: 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
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).
MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS AND RESOURCES IN KOREA

cultural phenomenon rooted in a history of oppres-
sion, 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 inter-
esting to note that one of the culture-bound syn-
dromes reported in the current Diagnostic and Sta-
tistical Manual (DSM-IV) is hwa-byung, a somatic
disorder attributed to suppression of anger (Ameri-
can Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Responses to Single Question

Twelve of the 13 pastors completed a written
response to the question, “What are the most press-
ing mental health needs seen in Christian congrega-
tions in South Korea?” These responses were later translat-
ed 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 gam-
bling, 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 Confucian-
ism), 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 Kore-
an Christians.

Daily Pressures and the Resource of Prayer

Contemporary life in Korea is filled with pres-
sures. Men work long weeks, face financial and pro-
duction pressures related to the crisis of the Asian
economies that occurred in 1997, and often feel iso-
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
MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS AND RESOURCES IN KOREA

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.

References


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