

Article 40

Understanding Depression, Anxiety, and Perceptions of Family and Counseling Among Korean American Adolescents: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards for accreditation (2016) mandate that counselor education programs include curricular instruction focused upon issues of social and cultural diversity. Nonetheless, many Korean Americans continue to view the counseling profession and related professional services with skepticism and uncertainty. The purpose of this pilot study was to test the effects of three counseling interventions and to determine pre- and post-intervention perceptions of Korean American adolescents related to depression, anxiety, family, and the counseling process.

Keywords: Korean Americans, academic success, depression, anxiety, counseling

Overview

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2016) mandates that counselor education programs provide curricular instruction surrounding social and cultural diversity, as well as teaching and learning experiences intended to enhance cultural competency among counselors-in-training. Nonetheless, some cultural groups continue to view the counseling profession and related

professional services with skepticism and uncertainty. Korean Americans constitute one such group (Park & Bernstein, 2008).

Korean Americans

Between 2000 and 2010, there was a 39% increase in the Korean American population (alone or in combination with other ancestries), making them one of the five largest groups of Asian Americans in the United States (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim, & Shahid, 2012). Korean Americans have reported feelings of sadness or worthlessness at higher rates than any other specific Asian American ancestries—and higher than average rates for all Asian Americans—but have also reported lower serious psychological distress than average across Asian Americans (Barnes, Adams, & Powell-Griner, 2008). Internationally, The Republic of Korea (South Korea) has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, higher than any other country with high rates of immigration into the United States (World Health Organization [WHO], 2014). Statistically, Korean Americans present a different mental health profile than other Asian Americans. To complicate matters, people of Korean descent express depression in an unusual manner, manifesting physical symptoms in their day-to-day lives that do not align well with Western diagnostic perspectives (Bernstein, Lee, Park, & Jyoung, 2008).

Lee (2006) reported that the process of creating a strong identity as a Korean American—rather than as a Korean or as an American—is deemed essential (Chae & Foley, 2010). Identity formation appears to be even more important to Korean Americans than to other Asian Americans (Chae & Foley, 2010). Acculturation may be defined as the contextualization of culture-of-origin beliefs and values within dominant or host cultural parameters (Smart & Smart, 1995). For many Korean Americans, the central dilemma may be whether the identity process is subsumed by acculturation or if acculturation is subsumed by their identity formation.

Active engagement with the acculturative process can bring about both psychological rewards and hardships. For example, highly acculturated individuals may find that they flourish socially, academically, and professionally because they have a good understanding of the host culture and of ways their culture-of-origin “fits” within host cultural demands and expectations. By contrast, those persons who find themselves out-of-step with, confused by, or in disagreement with the dominant group environment may experience extreme interpersonal distress, disappointment, or even anger (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004).

Such feelings can and often do give way to internalized confusion with related depression and anxiety (Constantine et al., 2004). To make matters even more puzzling, Kim and Cain (2008) uncovered some evidence suggesting that “intergenerational acculturation conflict” exists between traditional Korean American fathers and their adolescent children (p. 112). Kim and Cain described intergenerational acculturation conflict as discord deriving from the established belief that “respect for elders” is fundamental to the Korean family system and that such respect is best supported through distancing between children and their parents. Though clear differentiation between parent and child may be inherent to Korean society, Kim and Cain further noted that parent/child differentiation could run counter to the more expressive, egocentric tendencies of American society (Kim & Cain, 2008). Chae and Foley (2010) followed with additional reports indicating that acculturation was negatively related to

psychological well-being among Korean Americans. Indeed, for some Korean Americans, there appears to be such a thing as too much “Americanization.” The direct relationship between cultural traditionalism and depression and anxiety among Korean Americans—and particularly among Korean American adolescents—is ambiguous at best (Hovey, Kim, & Seligman, 2006). Still, anxiety and depression tend to co-occur (Allen, et al., 2009; Cheung, Leung & Cheung, 2011).

Korean families. Returning to the notion that Korean Americans may be more reluctant to seek counseling services (Park & Bernstein, 2008), Song and colleagues (2015) posited that hesitancy or caution among Korean Americans could be due to overarching Korean values and beliefs. Korean Americans profoundly value family and believe in the importance of honoring one’s family. Academic and professional successes are typical venues in which Korean Americans demonstrate respect for family (Song, Bong, Lee, & Kim 2015). The converse is also true. Korean Americans strive to avoid bringing any embarrassment, shame, or dishonor to their families. Ecological theory supports this position whereby individual personal values and beliefs tend to mirror those espoused within individual microsystems (e.g., family) and macrosystems (e.g., cultural group) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Establishing more public venues (e.g., counseling relationships) for working through one’s personal, academic, and professional difficulties may be viewed as disrespectful or dishonorable to the Korean American family.

On another note, adolescence is a developmental stage in which threat of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety—even suicide—can escalate. Some reports have suggested that adolescents who perceive their parents to be both low in warmth and high in control are at greater risk for negative psychological and emotional experiences (e.g., depressed mood, loneliness, hopelessness, intrusive thoughts, extreme agitation, etc.) (Hale, Van Der Valk, Engels, & Meeus, 2005). Equally concerning, where there is high adolescent/parent conflict, adolescents report more depression and anxiety (Sheeber, Hops, Alpert, Davis, & Andrews, 1997).

Korean Americans, adolescence, and academic success. According to the Confucian notion of familial honor and loyalty, Korean American adolescents frequently demonstrate strong personal motivation to achieve academic success. Moreover, scholastic accomplishments are believed to provide the surest gateway to professional entrée and distinction (Bong, Kim, Shin, Lee, & Lee, 2008; Lee, Puig, Lea, & Lee, 2013; Park & Kim, 2006). Kim, Cain, and McCubbin (2006) sorted out the importance of parental acceptance and support relative to Korean American adolescent academic achievement. Indeed, parental influence appears to be a significant predictor for academic success among Korean students, and student motivation seems directly related to student desire to honor parents and family and “to recompense” parents for parental help and support (Song et al., 2015, p. 823). Hand in hand with this desire to honor their parents is the Korean American student goal to gain entrance into top-tier universities and to obtain worthy employment positions. Unfortunately, desire for and pursuit of such academic and professional excellence can give way to psychological, emotional, and mental “burn-out” with threat of related depression and anxiety (Lee et al., 2013).

Academic pressures are a reality for many adolescents, and such pressures are often associated with stress, anxiety, and depression (Beiter et al., 2015; Misra & McKean, 2000). In Korea, data describing frequency and magnitude of depression and

anxiety among adolescents are unclear; however, academic stress and pressure to succeed among Korean adolescents is well known (Lee et al., 2013). Such academic stress may create a substantive mental health burden among Korean American adolescents and their families.

At first blush, this suspicion could “feel” counterintuitive. In other words, common wisdom would likely argue that academic success is positively related to feelings of self-efficacy and enhanced self-esteem; and to some degree, this argument is probably true. However, Constantine and colleagues (2004) determined that social self-efficacy did not mediate stress, depression, or anxiety. In other words, the worry is that these circumstances (i.e., desire to succeed academically, longing for academic and professional accolades and rewards, need to please others, etc.) can act together to bring about overwhelming stress and pressure with threat of ensuing student depression and anxiety even suicide.

From a Counseling Point of View

At the heart of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is the basic tenet that as depressive and anxious symptomatology derive from individual negative thought processes and behaviors, so in turn can they be reorganized into individual positive thought processes and behaviors (Corey, 2005). Research suggests that CBT is exceedingly efficacious when working with people suffering from depression and anxiety (Brown, Pearlman, & Goodman, 2004; Chiu, McLeod, Har, & Wood, 2009). Essentially, CBT counselors encourage their clients to develop and practice new skill sets (e.g., restructuring negative automatic thoughts) intended to reduce depression and anxiety (Hundt, Mignogna, Underhill, & Cully, 2012). Similarly, mindfulness may be considered the natural exponent to CBT (Cohen, 2014; Goodman & Calderon, 2012). Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) are gaining increasing clinical attention (Lang, 2013). Research suggests that even the simplest mindfulness exercise (e.g., breathing) improves mood and reduces anxiety (Goodman & Calderon, 2012).

Family counseling theory may be best understood through the lens of ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Ecological theory suggests that families are “microsystems” in which important interactions between family members, and between family members and objects and symbols within the environment, inform the developmental process. In other words, the family is quite literally and figuratively the cradle for child development. As important, families typically represent the values and beliefs of overarching, macrosystemic effects such as those shared by a given cultural group. Bowen further theorized that families evolve from generation to generation and that positive “intergenerational messages,” together with proper individuation and differentiation, are critical to understanding and promoting healthy child development (Corey, 2005).

Pilot Study

Mental health concerns and effects of counseling among Korean Americans have not been well studied (Kim, Bean, & Harper, 2004). Thus, the purpose of this pilot study was threefold: (a) to test the effects of three counseling interventions—cognitive

behavioral therapy, mindfulness, and family counseling—upon participant depression and anxiety levels; (b) to measure perceptions of family; (c) to measure perceptions of valuing of counseling. To examine pre- and post-intervention levels of depression and anxiety, as well as perceptions of family environment and valuing of counseling among Korean American adolescents, a quasi-experimental, one group, pre-/post-test design was utilized. Prior to conducting the study, the research team obtained approval from the university's Institutional Review Board. The research questions and the purpose of the study were explained to the participants and to their parents/guardians both verbally and in written form. Both participants and their parents/guardians were asked to give informed consent.

Methodology

Participants

Five Korean American high school adolescents volunteered to participate in the pilot study; however, only four students completed the study. There were three males and one female. Participants were derived from a metropolitan area (population greater than one million) located in the southeastern United States. These young people met with a doctoral-level counseling student for a total of three sessions (4 hours) in the fall of 2014. The first session lasted for 1.5 hours; session two, 1 hour; and session three, 1.5 hours. During sessions one and three, the session leader administered four inventories: the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988); the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI; Beck & Steer, 1990); the Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos & Moos, 1986); and the Counseling Valuing Inventory (CVI; Liles, Kim, & Exner, 2015).

Instrumentation

The Beck Depression Inventory is a 21-item, discrete-response (i.e., multiple choice) self report, intended to measure levels of internalized depression (Beck et al., 1988). The Beck Anxiety Inventory is also a 21-item, discrete-response self-report, intended to measure levels of internalized anxiety (Beck & Steer, 1990). Both the BDI and the BAI have established validity and reliability. The Family Environment Scale is a 90-item, forced-choice (i.e., true/false) inventory, measuring perceptions of family environment. There are nine subscales to the FES, and each subscale consists of 10 items. Subscales include: Cohesion, Expressiveness, Conflict, Independence, Achievement Orientation, Intellectual-Cultural Orientation, Active-Recreational Orientation, Moral-Religious Emphasis, Organization, and Control. The FES has established validity and reliability, and has been normed against multiple groups, including adolescents (Boyd, Gullone, Needleman, & Burt, 1997). The Counseling Valuing Inventory was developed for this study's purpose and is intended to measure perceptions of counseling value. The inventory consists of both Likert scaled items ($n = 15$) and items asking for participants to "list" reasons for academic success, challenges to academic success, sources of academic pressure, and sources of social support for academic success. There is also one open-ended item inviting participants to "add anything else" as desired.

Implementation

As stated, the study was conducted over three sessions for a total of 4 hours. The session leader was an advanced doctoral student pursuing her doctoral degree in rehabilitation counseling and rehabilitation counselor education and possessed relevant professional credentials (e.g., certification). One of the researchers provided on-site supervision. This researcher holds a doctorate in counseling and counselor education, as well as relevant professional credentials (i.e., LPC, NCC). During the first session, the session leader introduced inventories (pre-test), explained the purpose of each inventory, and administered them. Following, she engaged group members in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, with particular focus upon (a) cognitive and behavioral perfectionism, (b) thought monitoring and restructuring, and (c) desensitization through controlled breathing (Brown, et al., 2004). During the second session, the session leader invited participants to talk about the construct of mindfulness and the impact mindfulness may have in reducing anxiety. Participants were introduced to three mindfulness exercises, including more sophisticated breathing exercises, imagery, and physical relaxation. Participants were asked to practice these exercises both during the session and during the intervening time between second and third sessions. The third session focused upon conversations surrounding family. Open-ended questions about the nature of families—how family systems operate generally, and how they operate specific to overarching values and beliefs—were posed for participant discussion.

Though this study was designed from a post-positivist point of view, participants were asked at study's conclusion to share impressions of their experiences within the study. Given the small number of participants, these narratives are related in whole (i.e., without analysis; without interpretation) in the Discussion section of this paper.

Results

Table 1 outlines pre-/post-test descriptive statistics for depression, anxiety, and valuing of counseling mean scores. Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests indicated that differences between the pre-/post-tests for the Beck Depression Inventory scores ($z = -1.826, p = .068$), Beck Anxiety Inventory scores ($z = -1.473, p = .141$) and Valuing of Counseling Inventory scores ($z = -.365, p = .715$) were not statistically significant.

Likewise, Table 2 outlines pre-/post-test statistics for the nine subscales of the Family Environment Scale. The Wilcoxon Signed Rank test was conducted to examine whether there were statistical differences between pre-/post-tests on FES scores for participants. Overall, none of the FES subscales indicated statistically significant differences between pre-/post-test scores, as follows: Cohesion ($z = -.272, p = .785$); Expressiveness ($z = -1.00, p = .317$); Conflict ($z = -1.289, p = .197$); Independence ($z = -.816, p = .414$); Achievement Orientation ($z = -.447, p = .655$); Intellectual-Cultural Orientation ($z = -.816, p = .414$); Active-Recreational Orientation ($z = -.1732, p = .083$); Moral-Religious Emphasis ($z = -1.289, p = .197$); Organization ($z = .00, p = 1.00$); and Control ($z = -1.30, p = .194$).

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics for Anxiety, Depression, and Valuing of Counseling **

	Pre-test		Post-test	
	M	SD	M	SD
Anxiety	27.50	4.79	26	3.91
Depression	14	4.32	5.25	6.39
Valuing of counseling	3.66	0.19	3.87	0.21

*Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for Family Environment Scale**

	Pre-test		Post-test	
	M	SD	M	SD
Cohesion	6.75	.96	6.50	1.73
Expressiveness	3.50	1.29	4.00	1.41
Conflict	2.25	.96	3.50	2.65
Independence	4.50	1.29	5.75	2.75
Achievement Orientation	6.75	2.06	6.50	1.73
Intellectual-Cultural Orientation	6.25	2.75	5.00	1.83
Active-Recreational Orientation	5.25	1.25	4.50	1.00
Moral-Religious Emphasis	5.00	.00	6.50	2.08
Organization	7.00	1.63	7.00	.82
Control	5.00	1.15	4.00	2.16

*Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of three counseling interventions upon depression and anxiety, as well as perceptions of family and counseling value among Korean American adolescents. Counseling interventions included cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness, and family counseling. The limitations of the study are reflected in the small sample size, reduced effect, and insufficient qualitative data. Though statistical significance could not be found, the exploratory nature of the study still maintains some merit from the point of view of the counseling paradigm.

At the outset of the study, participants informed mild levels of depressive symptomatology ($M = 14$) on the BDI (Beck et al., 1988); however, at the conclusion of

the study, the sample mean score had dropped by nine points ($M = 5$). Though the difference in scores was not significant ($z = -1.826, p = .068$), the actual change in mean scores was notable. Kim and Cain (2008) reported that depression among adolescents is a fairly common experience across groups ranging from 29% (American Indian) to 22% (European Americans) to 18% (Mexican Americans) to 17% (Asian Americans) to 15% (African Americans). Of interest to this study are Korean Americans who constitute the fifth largest sub-group of Asian Americans, as well as one of the fastest growing cultural groups in America. In 2005, there were 1.2 million Korean Americans residing in the United States (Cheung et al., 2011). Many Korean Americans are likely to agree—at least in part—with the culturally traditional way of thinking which suggests that depression is the natural outcome of an imbalance in one's life (Shin, 2010). If this is the case, then some interventions utilized in this study (e.g., mindfulness) would likely have met with positive regard or even enthusiasm among participants and the greater Korean American community. In one participant's words:

I thought this was a great idea to have. I enjoyed how we talked about our problems and focused on solutions to overcome it. I have noticed that counseling wasn't a bad idea after all. Next time if I am having any problems, I will see a counselor. This was fun!

Participants also demonstrated mild levels of anxiety. Differences in pre-/post-test anxiety scores on the BAI (Beck & Steer, 1990) produced no statistical significance. Nonetheless, remaining sensitive to the co-morbid nature of depression and anxiety (Allen et al., 2009; Cheung et al., 2011) is important. One participant commented:

I think that this experience was good first of all. I thought it was a lot of fun and I enjoyed playing games. I also thought that this experience was very helpful. I shared a lot with the group and got to look back and think about things I have never thought about. It helped me to see what goes on in my life and helped me to reflect on my life. I enjoyed the experience and it helped me to get a better perspective about counseling.

As discussed earlier, the notion of family is important to Korean Americans, and this certainly seemed to be true for this group of adolescents. Though differences in scores across subscales proved insignificant, pre-/post-test mean scores for family cohesion were relatively high, suggesting that this group of Korean American adolescents enjoyed warm, supportive, and loving families (Moos & Moos, 1986). Likewise, conflict mean scores were low, informing little if any family conflict between participants and their parents. Of additional interest were achievement orientation and family organization mean scores, all of which were above average, indicating that participants and their families tended toward personal achievement as well as toward system order and discipline. These discoveries were heartening in view of previous research suggesting that adolescents demonstrate less depression and anxiety, as well as greater academic success when they feel their parents' support, acceptance, and love (Bong et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2006; Lee et al., 2013; Park & Kim, 2006). One participant explained it in this way:

Though I was very negligible [sic] about coming to [university] and going through the counseling, I was very pleased with the experience that I felt through

counseling. I enjoyed talking about how I thought about a certain subject and very pleased about coming here. Even though I was obligated by my mother to go to this program. In the end, I was very enthusiastic that I came. As an extrovert, communicating with the people in the room and interacting with them was very fun and enjoyable.

For cultural reasons, Korean Americans tend to be reluctant to seek out counseling (Park & Bernstein, 2008; Song et al., 2015). Thus, of particular interest to this study were participant perceptions of the counseling experience. An inventory was developed to measure perceptions of the value of counseling. The difference in pre-/post-test scores was not significant, although the post-test mean score was slightly higher. Nonetheless, participants expressed appreciation for the counseling experience, and particularly for the guidance of the doctoral student who lead the intervention sessions. One participant stated:

Coming to [university] campus, and meeting with kind and funny Ms. Jones [counselor pseudonym] was great experience for me. Talking about our life and about the school was interesting for me. It was great, taking about our family and how they support us openly. It was fantastic experiences meeting and talking about Ms. Jones counselor [sic].

These expressions of gratitude for the session leader make sense from the point of view of the therapeutic alliance (Chiu et al., 2009). In other words, a counselor's ability to establish an atmosphere of warmth and acceptance and to cultivate relationships predicated on respect and authenticity is crucial to the therapeutic process. Extending beyond the therapeutic alliance, Cohen (2014) established a clear connection between "teacher" and "student" and the positive impact this connection is likely to have upon mindfulness and other meditative experiences. In her efforts to further our understanding of Korean American adolescents, depression, anxiety, and perceptions of family and counseling, the session leader also brought forth elements of fun and laughter, enveloped in a safe cocoon of care and concern.

Limitations and Thoughts for the Future

There were several limitations to this study. Most notably, the participant group was both small and one of convenience, reducing overall effect. Likewise, the nature of the quasi-experimental designs lack randomization, further reducing overall robustness of the study. Though three of the instruments have established validity and reliability (i.e., BDI, BAI, and FES), the Counseling Valuing Inventory was developed specifically for this study and has not been adequately tested for psychometric integrity. Data were collected at the beginning of the study (before interventions) and at the conclusion of the study (following interventions). Discrete intervention effects may have been more evident had pre-/post-tests been implemented before and after each intervention. Finally, time limitations likely impeded the full exploration of counseling interventions tested herewith. Replication of the study is desired.

Though statistical results were not significant, the study's clinical significance (Thompson, 2002) is still notable. Research should continue in the area of Korean Americans, depression, anxiety, and perceptions of family and counseling. The number

of Korean Americans in the United States is increasing rapidly, and the acculturative process—with both its rewards and hardships—is likely to remain a challenge for this vibrant group (Constantine et al., 2004).

Desire for academic achievement is a shared experience among most Korean American adolescents (Lee et al., 2013). Though academic achievement can serve as a gateway to grander future opportunities (e.g., top-tier university education), the pressure-cooker environment of academic stress cannot be ignored. The desire to succeed academically, the longing for academic and professional accolades and rewards, the need to please others, and other equally compelling elements can—in concert with one another—prove psychologically and emotionally overwhelming to these young people. Future research could bring about discoveries to help mitigate unforeseen and negative circumstances.

Finally, as a profession, counseling is uniquely poised to provide a venue for self-exploration and self-care, not only for Korean American adolescents, but for their larger families as well. Confucian philosophy promotes the goal for both individual and collective harmony and balance. With their keen valuing of all cultural peoples and their fundamental focus upon personal development and wellness, professional counselors offer up special opportunities for Korean Americans.

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