The effects of spiritual experience and church commitment on mental health and work performance among South Korean immigrants in the United States: mixed methods study

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BACKGROUND

Since the passage of the Immigration Reform Act in 1965, Korean American immigrants have become the fifth-largest Asian American ethnic group in the U.S., totaling 1,706,822 in 2012. Among international students in the U.S., the South Korean student group is the third largest, with over 63,000 students, or 6.5 percent of total foreign student enrollment in 2016. Reports show that these immigrants often suffer from acculturative stress due to cultural gaps between South Korea and the United States. To overcome the difficulties of living in a foreign country, Korean immigrants and international students tend to establish strong social bonds with each other by attending Korean church services and activities.

It has been reported that daily spiritual experiences and social support are inversely associated with depression among elderly Korean immigrants. However, Korean young adults have been forced by pastors to focus on evangelism and training, rather than the spiritual growth and disciple-making. It is still little is known whether Korean young adults' church commitment is linked to the development of mental health and work capacity.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this research was to conduct a sequential mixed methods study that included a screener for assessing level of religious belief and involvement in church activities (quantitative) followed by in-depth qualitative interviews about the relationship between church attachment and mental health as well as work/school performance (qualitative), in order to obtain preliminary findings and generate insights regarding future research.

The research was guided by two key research questions: 1) Do young Korean immigrants reporting a high level of religious belief but low involvement in church activities experience similar or different mental health characteristics and work performance compared to individuals who are actively involved in church activities? and 2) What factors could link a person's level of participation in church activities to mental health as well as work/school performance?

METHODS

The sequential mixed methods design—a screener (quantitative) followed by in-depth interview (qualitative)—was used. In order to better understand the attachment to church and its effect on mental health and work performance among young Korean immigrants, this study examined two dimensions of this relationship, level of religious belief and involvement in church activities.

The sample was recruited entirely from a large Korean Protestant church in Virginia, referred to as "K church." Among a total of purposively selected 23 young adult Korean immigrants from a Korean Protestant church, 22 of them were pre-screened as having strong religious beliefs. This sample was divided in two groups, depending on their time commitment to church (active/inactive): Group 1 included 12 high-active church members, and Group 2 included 10 inactive church members (Table 1). The total duration of interviews including screeners ranged from 30 to 101 minutes, with an average time of 61 minutes.

After interviews were completed, a total of 22 original Korean transcripts (except 1 from Group 3) with no personal identifiers as a unit of analysis were entered into a QSR NVivo software file (QSR International, Pty, Ltd).

Table 1. Participant subgroups

Group 1: High-active member (12 participants)	Participants #2, #3, #5, #9, #10, #11, #12, #13, #14, #15, #16, #20: Strong believers who are high participants and typically in leadership positions at K church. They demonstrate their strength of belief by spending a great deal of time in church activities every week.
Group 2: Inactive/low-active member (10 participants)	Participants #1, #4, #6, #7, #8, #17, #18, #19, #21, #22: Strong believers who are not high participants and are not in leadership roles at K church. They focus more on their livelihood than on church activities but still maintain a high level of belief in God.
Group 3: Low-level believer (1 participant)	Participant #23: A low-level believer who attends church for many other reasons, such as hanging out, killing time, refreshing himself, seeking a future spouse, and avoiding loneliness.

RESULTS

There were common characteristics of legal status and living arrangement in Group 1—all (12/12) were citizens of the U.S. and 67% (8/12) lived with their parents. All of Group 1 participants were 1.5 generation immigrants who came to the U.S. as children or adolescents with their first-generation parents. On the other hand, Group 2 participants were far more diverse with respect to legal status and living arrangements (Table 2).

Both Group 1 and Group 2 contained strong believers, and the screening survey proved that the level of *belief*, *Spirit*, and *happiness* were not much different between them (Table 3).

Table 2. Sample characteristics

Demographics	Overall: $n_o = 22$	Group 1: $n_1 = 12$	Group 2: $n_2 = 10$
Age (year)			
24–29	6 (27%)	3 (25%)	3 (30%)
30–35	8 (36%)	5 (42%)	3 (30%)
36–41	7 (32%)	4 (33%)	3 (30%)
42–47	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	1 (10%)
Gender			
Male	10 (45%)	4 (33%)	6 (60%)
Female	12 (55%)	8 (67%)	4 (40%)
Legal status			
U.S. citizen	18 (82%)	12 (100%)	6 (60%)
Permanent resident	2 (9%)	0 (0%)	2 (20%)
Nonresident alien	2 (9%)	0 (0%)	2 (20%)
Living arrangement			
Alone	5 (23%)	2 (17%)	3 (30%)
With parents	12 (55%)	8 (67%)	4 (40%)
With single parent	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	1 (10%)
With friends	3 (4%)	1 (8%)	2 (20%)
With live-in lover	1 (5%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)
Relationship status			
Single	18 (82%)	10 (83%)	8 (80%)
Girlfriend/Boyfriend	3 (14%)	1 (9%)	2 (20%)
Married	1 (5%)	1 (9%)	0 (0%)

Table 3. Religious strength

Measurement constructs	Overall scores ($n_o = 22$)	Group 1 scores ($n_1 = 12$)	Group 2 scores ($n_2 = 10$)
Belief (max: 20)	16.9	17.9	15.6
Practice (max: 57)	36.0	43.1	27.5
Spirit (max: 45)	31.4	31.3	31.5
Happiness (max: 174)	121.9	126.5	116.3

CONCLUSIONS

Group 1 achieved spiritual and mental health by adopting leadership roles in church, while Group 2 demonstrated their religious beliefs primarily as part of their livelihoods. Regardless of leadership roles and level of activity at church, strong beliefs can prevent depression, improve mental health, and support motivation to work hard. However, There was no guarantee that time dedication for church would improve Group 1's work/school performance because they were suffering from a time conflict between work and church activities and could not focus their energy on one thing.

The major significance of this study is to serve as a guide to further research on religious belief and practice potentially associated with mental health and social adjustment for Koreans, as well as other immigrants.

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