

Korean Married Women and Holiday Stress: Examination of a Conflict between Autonomous and Family-Orientated Self

Eun Suh Kim
Seoul International School

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between Korean married women's holiday stress and their attitudes towards the self and family. 185 subjects were instructed to answer an anonymous mobile survey via the application Google Forms. To maximize control over extraneous variables, the questionnaire was targeted to respondents of similar socioeconomic standing within Seoul. Results indicate that conflicting values regarding the duties towards family and self are correlated with high perceived stress during traditional holidays and strong sense of intimacy appears to be a key factor mitigating feelings of stress during the holidays.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 14th century, Korea has been ruled by a Neo-Confucian belief system, which places great value on maintaining harmony in one's life by upholding propriety and following rituals and conventional habits of society (Park and Chesla, 2007). Though Korea is now one of the leaders of East Asian economy, the traditional belief system continues to dominate, with filial piety still being considered a great virtue. Thus, patriarchal hierarchy and lineage have and presently do heavily influence Korean family values.

Within Korean society, women have traditionally been placed in a position of subversion (Chang and Song, 2010). Today, this tendency can be most prominent during the Korean traditional holidays (Embrain Trend Monitor), during which extended family members gather and the women are usually responsible for providing manual household labor in preparation for the patrilineal family's holiday traditions and ancestral rituals. These obligations, along with additional extended family related factors, are often burdensome and cause psychological distress that may somaticize as physical pain in extreme cases, which has resulted in an individual's adverse reactions to holiday associated stressors being named the "holiday stress syndrome" (BestDoctorQ&A).

Though with the country's modernization women are no longer solely confined to caring for and maintaining the household (Sun and Cho, 2008), for the vast majority of families, a different dynamic takes hold during the traditional holidays— women are not only assigned, but, albeit begrudgingly, take on the brunt of the household chores that go in to preparing for and executing the holiday traditions (Chang and Song, 2010), especially those of their husband's family, i.e., the in-laws. Why do Korean women, even those who have been highly educated and modernized, continue to submit themselves to such situations, despite accompanying feelings of degradation and stress?

A group discussion type study by Mi-Jeong Kim and Sun-young Choi (2005) on married women's attitudes towards the self and family during traditional holidays suggests the existence of an "acting self". The authors posit that through considering the daughter-in-law role an act that must be performed, the woman is able to blend her true self with the one that is catering to her in-law's needs (Kim and Choi, 2005). Considering the implications of this line of thought, the current study hypothesizes that two selves—one oriented towards independence and autonomy and the other towards family—coexist within Korean women, which causes them to feel conflicted and stressed during holiday seasons. Additionally, the study hopes to further examine the specific dynamics at play in this culturally unique phenomenon by distinguishing whether those with similar strengths of the dual selves, especially when both selves are strong, are more likely to feel stressed. Furthermore, the study seeks to understand whether those who are strongly committed to their in-laws, either out of duty or intimacy, and those who are never committed to their in-laws, are less susceptible to the conflict of the two selves and less likely to feel stress.

In light of the societal concern over decreasing marriage rates and marital satisfaction, and increasing marriage age and delay of childbirth (Chang and Song, 2010), understanding the factors that affect an individual's well-being and satisfaction with regards to family life will not only prove insightful from an academic point of view, but more importantly, be of great value to bettering the quality of family life for individual members of Korean society, especially women.

METHODS

185 subjects were instructed to answer an anonymous mobile survey via the application Google Forms. To maximize control over extraneous variables, the questionnaire was targeted to respondents of similar socioeconomic standing within Seoul. Respondents were gathered via various social organizations and gatherings, and the link to the questionnaire was spread through these networks.

The five-section questionnaire begins with questions gathering basic sociodemographic information such as economic standing, years of marriage, existence of offspring, and employment status. The following sections present 4-point Likert-type questions (Analysing Likert Scale) gauging the respondents' attitudes towards a variety of self and family variables. The second section gauges the individual's attitude towards her immediate family and in-laws, such as concept of family, and level of intimacy and duty felt towards in-laws, and the third asks about the individual's own holiday experiences. The fourth section presents questions pertaining to the individual's feelings regarding her own self. The final section gauges the respondent's self-reported level of stress felt during the holidays, and opinions on interpersonal dynamics and expected roles as a daughter-in-law during traditional holidays.

RESULTS

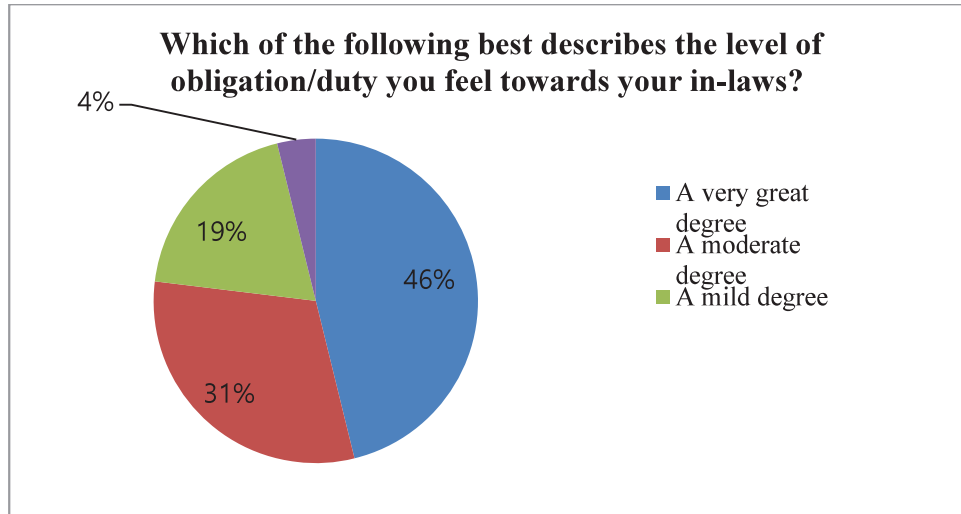
Answers to the sociodemographic questions revealed the subject pool was considerably homogenous, as the majority of respondents identified themselves as belonging to the "high" economic and college educated tier.

On the whole, of the 185 total participants, approximately 70% responded that they usually, if not always, place the needs of their family before their own. And though the majority indicated that a woman does not have to withdraw from her career after marriage, over 80% of those who had previously been employed identified the reason for leaving their pre-marital occupations as family related, such as pregnancy and child rearing. These results indicate that Korean married women do indeed possess a strong family oriented tendency overall, despite expressing autonomous desires such as the need for recognition based on individual merit.

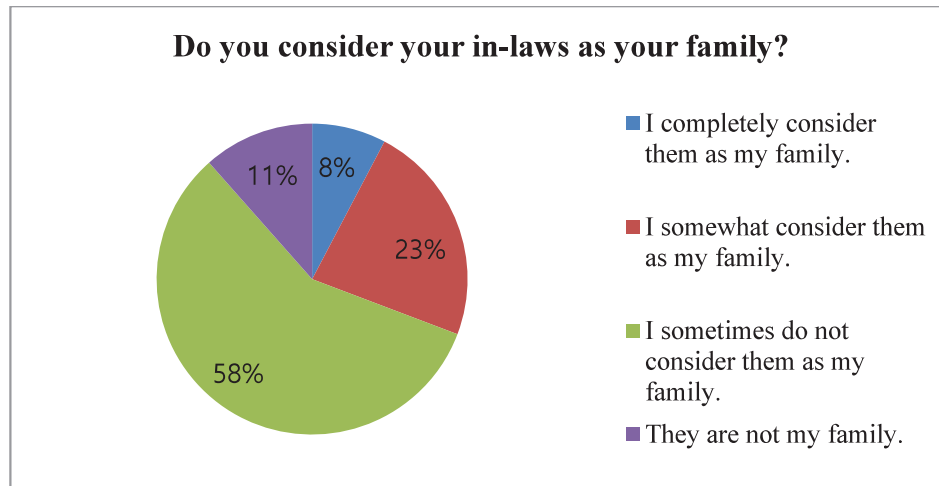
Regarding level of stress felt during the traditional holidays, half of the total respondents reported feeling moderate to extreme levels of stress. And roughly the same amount of people, 46%, reported feeling pressure and anxiety to the point of wishing the holidays would not come. The analysis of the 27 individuals who reported the highest level of stress (extreme-stress) revealed a trend of feeling a high sense of duty towards the in-laws (Figure 1) while not considering them to be part of one's family (Figure

2). When asked to evaluate the level of respect one receives from the in-laws, 74% of the extremely stressed women felt disrespected by their husband’s family and pressured to perform the roles of daughter-in-law.

**FIGURE 1
EXTREME-STRESS GROUP’S LEVEL OF DUTY FELT TOWARDS IN-LAWS**



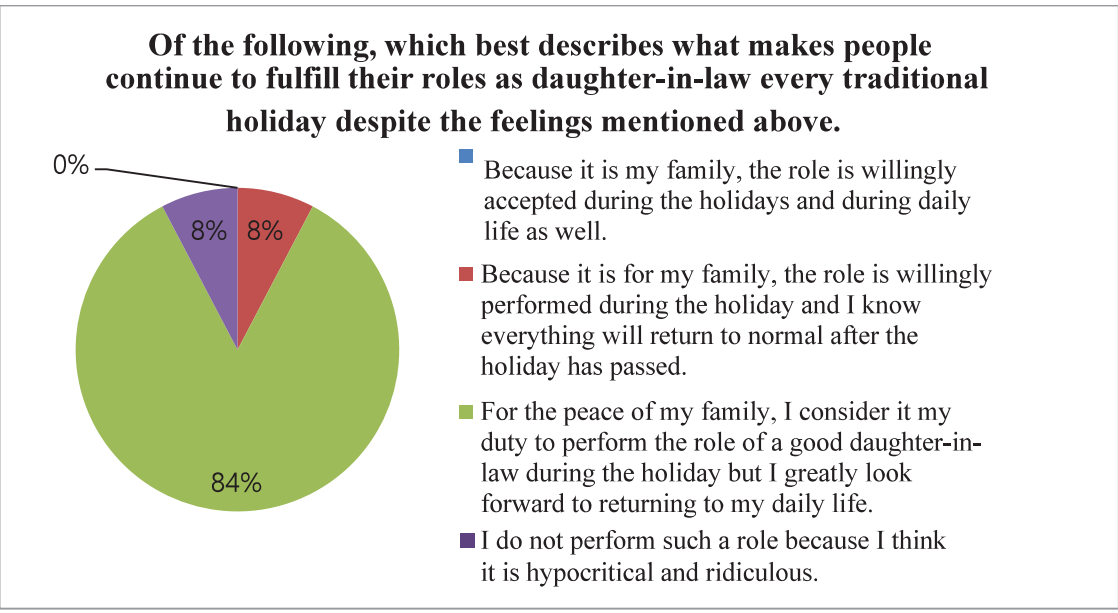
**FIGURE 2
EXTREME-STRESS GROUP’S FAMILY BOUNDARIES**



These extreme-stress women also had a tendency to report higher level responses to questions gauging both self-autonomous as well as family-centric values. For the statement, “I am satisfied to be identified as someone’s mother or wife,” 17 of the 27 subjects responded negatively. Interestingly, for the statement immediately following, “Thinking of breaking away from the boundary of my family is unthinkable and makes me extremely uneasy,” half of the respondents concurred. However, responses to questions such as “I want to have my own space and time separated from my family,” indicated a clear majority of the respondents seek personal time away from the family. Additionally, these women reported that they performed immense amounts of manual labor during the holidays, and felt extreme degradation. Still, as can be seen in Figure 3, they near unanimously identified these household chores as part of the

duties of the daughter-in-law that must be undertaken as part of married life and for the harmony in one's family, but also looked forward to returning to their daily routines after the holidays.

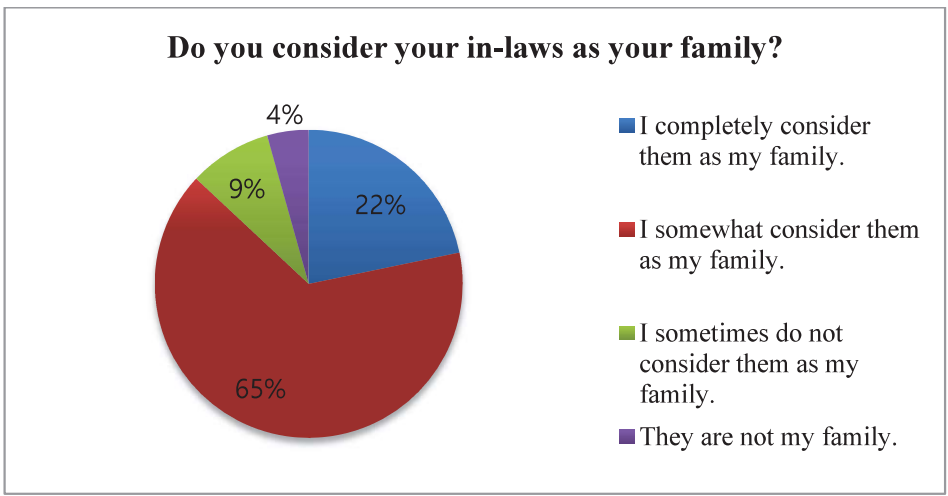
FIGURE 3
EXTREME-STRESS GROUP'S RATIONALE FOR PERFORMING
THE EXPECTED ROLES OF DAUGHTER-IN-LAW



The findings indicate that conflicting values regarding the duties towards family and one's autonomous self are correlated with higher perceived-stress during traditional holidays.

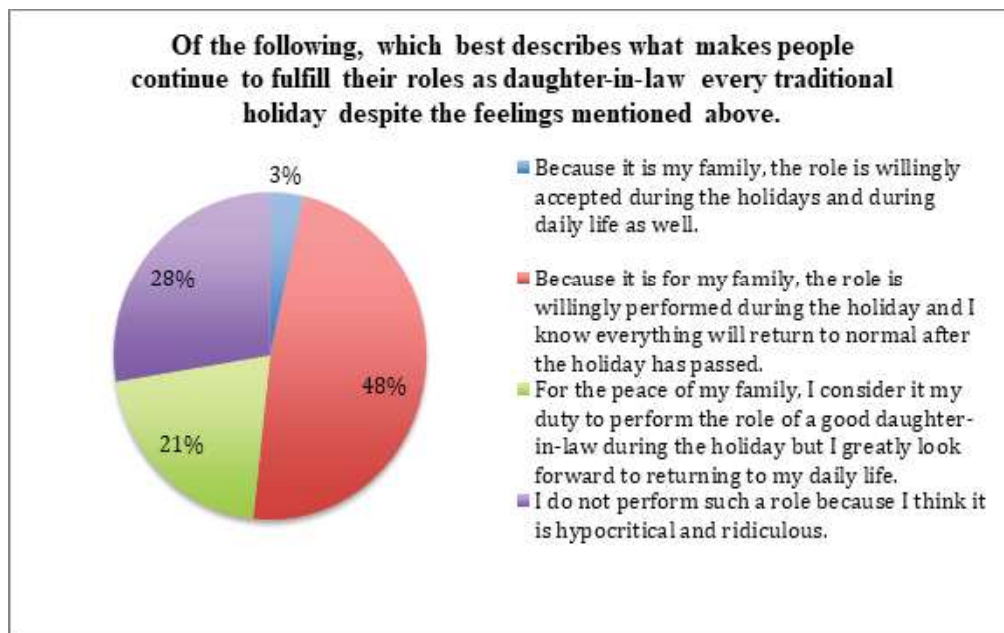
Analyzing the respondents who reported that they did not feel stressed during the holidays revealed interesting disparities. In contrast to the extreme-stress group's Figure 2, the no stress group's family boundaries depicted in Figure 4 indicate that a clear majority of those who reported feeling no stress during the holidays considered their in-laws to be definitely/mostly part of their families.

FIGURE 4
NO-STRESS GROUP'S FAMILY BOUNDARIES



Similar to the extreme-stress group, most of these women reported that they felt moderately to high sense of duty to their in-laws. However, the no-stress women also tended to feel higher levels of intimacy towards their in laws, with 83% reporting that they felt close to their in-laws. In contrast, only 45% of the extreme-stress group had identified as feeling “adequately close.” Additionally, as shown in Figure 5, when asked to identify the reason Korean women continue to perform the role of the daughter-in-law each holiday despite the associated emotions such as stress, 72% replied that the role is willingly taken on because it is unquestionably integral to one’s family affairs.

FIGURE 5
EXTREME-STRESS GROUP’S RATIONALE FOR PERFORMING
THE EXPECTED ROLES OF DAUGHTER-IN-LAW



Though both extreme and no-stress groups replied that they looked forward to returning to the normal daily routine after the holidays have passed, the no-stress group’s response contrasts with the extreme group’s tendency to view the daughter-in-law role as a duty, something that must be endured and released from, not willingly taken part in.

Finally, an analysis of the relationship between the level of commitment to in-laws, stemming from either sense of duty or intimacy, and stress felt during traditional holidays, partially confirms the initial hypothesis. Those who felt a high level of intimacy or low sense of duty were the least stressed, while those with a lower sense of intimacy or higher sense of duty tended to feel more stressed. As predicted, a strong sense of intimacy appears to assuage stress. However, feeling a strong sense of duty, in the absence of intimacy, is associated with greater feelings of stress during the holidays.

Based on the results, this paper posits that many Korean women knowingly enter into a situation that requires them to temporarily depart from or erase the selves they have built around self-autonomy and self-respect in order to maintain the relationship between her husband and uphold family order. An important finding is that while both the extreme-stress and no-stress respondents tended to report feeling a high sense of duty towards their in-laws, the no-stress group displayed higher levels of intimacy and also overwhelmingly considered their in-laws as part of their family. This may be an indication that feelings of intimacy are a key factor in mitigating feelings of stress during the holidays despite the burden of obligation to fulfill the role of daughter-in-law. Thus, it may be necessary to further investigate the effect

increasing intimacy between extended family members has on one's satisfaction with family-in-law dynamics and traditional holiday duties prescribed by Korean culture. The current findings point to the necessity of further study on the Korean family, especially in light of contemporary societal concerns such as delayed marriage and decreased birth rates, indicators that the Korean family is undergoing qualitative and functional change.

REFERENCES

- Analysing Likert Scale/Type Data [PDF document]. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Leonidas...Likert_scale_analysis/.../Likert.pdf.
- [BestDoctorQ&A] 'Holiday Stress (Adjustment Disorder)', what kind of illness is it? [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sm9YrbPWnM0>.
- Chang, K., & Song, M. (2010). The stranded individualizer under compressed modernity: South Korean women in individualization without individualism. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61(3), 539-564. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01325.x.
- Embrain Trend Monitor. (2013). Chuseok Related Survey < 4 year ("9vs"10vs"11vs"13) Tracking Survey> [PDF document]. Retrieved from <http://kiss.kstudy.com/thesis/thesis-view.asp?key=3204518>.
- Kang, D. S., Kim, J. S., Kim, S. S., Jung, J.K., Pack, H.J., Chung, S.Y., Lim, C.S., & Choi, S.W. (2010). The stress of traditional biggest holidays among Korean married women. *Korean Journal of Family Medicine*, 31(3), 215-221. doi:10.4082/kjfm.2010.31.3.215.
- Kim, M., & Choi, S. (2005). The married women's selfhood and the family order cleavage-covering it over: Focusing on the married women's experiences on myung-jeol and je-sa. *Feminism Studies*, 5, 133-187. Retrieved from <http://www.dbpia.co.kr/Article/NODE01079534>.
- Lee, S.M. (2013). Korean families between familism and individualization: Focused on the differences of familism and gender of the latent structure of intergenerational relations. *Family and Culture*, 26(3), 1-36.
- Park, M., & Chesla, C. (2007). Revisiting Confucianism as a conceptual framework for Asian family study. *Journal of Family Nursing*, 13(3), 293-311. doi: 10.1177/1074840707304400.
- Shim, Y. (2011). In search of "Community Family Model of the 21st Century": From the perspective of the Second Modernity and Individualization Theory. *The Journal of Asian Women*, 50(2), 7-44. Retrieved from <http://www.dbpia.co.kr/Article/NODE01743037>.
- Sun, Q., & Cho, S.R. (2008). From a Confucian tradition to the postmodern world: Korean middle-aged women's traditional roles and modern expectations in a globalized society. *International Forum of Teaching Studies*, 4(2), 5-11.