Relationship Satisfaction in Native Koreans and Korean Americans as a Function of Alexithymia, Emotional Intelligence, and Marital Vows Orientation

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Alexithymia describes a lack of emotional consciousness and is often associated with the Asian personality (Dion, 1996; Le, Berenbaum, & Raghavan, 2002; Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). From the Asian perspective, this rings hollow. In particular, the Korean culture rests on a foundation of “jeong.” Jeong is a very difficult concept to translate but it stresses the emotional connections within intimate relationships and is a central concern for Koreans, permeating one’s private life (Kalton, 1994). This paper aims to explore the gap between stereotypes of Korean emotional experiences versus felt emotional experiences within the context of intimate relationships. In addition, we examined how emotional factors may shift as a function of minority statuses within another culture.

Some studies have demonstrated a negative relationship between alexithymia and intimate relationships. For example, Vanheule, Desmet, and Meganck (2007) examined 561 individuals from clinical and student populations and assessed how alexithymia was linked to specific interpersonal problems. They found that alexithymia was related to interpersonal distance and nonassertive social functioning. In addition, Humphreys, Woof, and Parker (2008) found that higher levels of alexithymia predicted lower relationship satisfaction. Montebroccci, Codispoti, Baldaro, and Rossi (2003) found that alexithymia was positively related to discomfort in intimacy. Finally, Hesse and Floyd (2008) found that alexithymia was negatively related to affectionate experience, happiness, nonverbal immediacy cues, affectionate communication, and closeness in intimate relationships.

Accordingly, the Western idea of successful intimate relationships includes both intense emotional experiences between partners and high emotional intelligence (EI). It has been assumed that non-Western cultures would also display a strong positive relationship between relationship satisfaction and intense emotional awareness and encounters between the partners. However, there is virtually no data on non-Western cultures to support such generalizations.

Although alexithymia and EI are independent constructs, there is a significant negative relationship between the two constructs in the West. For instance, Parker, Taylor, and Bagby (2001) compared EI scores with alexithymia levels and found that a significant negative relationship exists between the two constructs. However, it is possible that in cultures where harmonious social interactions and the subtle expression of emotions are highly valued, the inability to
experience simple full-blown emotions and overtly express them can serve as a facilitating factor in social interactions. Therefore, in Asian culture, the relationship between the two factors may not be negatively correlated as reported by researchers studying Western couples.

Another factor that may play a role in this complex link between culture and intimate relationships is the individuals’ attitudes and values about marriage. Bromley and Bushing (1988) stated that two distinct types of social relationships exist; “tribal” (covenantal) and “industrial” (contractual), reflecting the difference in social relationships among collectivistic and individualistic cultures. Thus, the lack of emotional expression in a spouse may be tolerated less by an individual who values self-actualization (contractual type) than in a spouse who values vow-taking (covenantal type). Also, individuals who see the dyad as the primary unit may inhibit emotional displays, which could disrupt the harmony within the relationship.

Method

Measures

All native Koreans were given scales that had been translated and back-translated. In addition to the demographic form, the scales administered included the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (Taylor et al., 1997), Assessing Emotions Scale (Schutte et al., 1998), Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), and Marital Vows Scale (Ripley, Worthington, Bromley, & Kemper, 2005).

Participants

Thirty-six Korean American couples had a mean age of 32 and a mean relationship length of 7.89 years. The 45 married Native Korean couples had a mean age of 31 and a mean relationship length of 11.1 years. The 9 Mixed-Culture couples consisted of 9 Korean American females, 8 Caucasian males, and 1 African American male. These 9 couples had a mean age of 38 and an average relationship length of 14.36 years.

Results

Korean American Couples

Overall, EI was negatively correlated with alexithymia, \( r = -0.37, p = 0.00 \). This indicated that individuals with higher EI tended to have lower alexithymia. Although the direction of the relationship was similar to previously found results, the correlation appeared weaker, although not significantly weaker, than reported in previous research, \( r(24) = -0.65 \) (Schutte et al., 1998). EI was negatively correlated with difficulty identifying feelings, \( r = -0.38, p = 0.02 \); difficulty describing feelings, \( r = -0.39, p = 0.00 \); and externally oriented thinking, \( r = -0.27, p = 0.02 \). EI was significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction, \( r = 0.23, p = 0.05 \). Relationship satisfaction was negatively correlated with alexithymia, \( r = -0.41, p = 0.00 \); difficulty identifying feelings, \( r = -0.43, p = 0.00 \); difficulty describing feelings, \( r = -0.31, p = 0.01 \); and externally oriented thinking, \( r = -0.25, p = 0.03 \). Relationship satisfaction was also significantly correlated with marital values, \( r = 0.41, p = 0.00 \).

Native Korean Couples

Overall, EI was negatively correlated with alexithymia, \( r = -0.58, p = 0.00 \). This finding was similar to previous research, \( r(24) = -0.65 \) (Schutte et al., 1998). EI was negatively correlated with all three factors of the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20): difficulty identifying feelings, \( r = -0.48, p = 0.00 \); difficulty describing feelings, \( r = -0.51, p = 0.00 \); and externally oriented thinking, \( r = -0.48, p = 0.00 \).

EI was significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction, \( r = 0.52, p = 0.00 \). Relationship satisfaction was negatively correlated with alexithymia, \( r = -0.47, p = 0.00 \); difficulty describing feeling, \( r = -0.35, p = 0.00 \); difficulty identifying feelings, \( r = -0.49, p = 0.00 \); and externally oriented thinking, \( r = -0.26, p = 0.01 \). Relationship satisfaction was also significantly correlated with marital values, \( r = 0.30, p = 0.00 \). This indicates that individuals with more covenantal values toward marriage reported being more satisfied in their relationship.

Mixed-Culture Couples

Overall, EI was negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction, \( r = -0.58, p = 0.00 \). No other significant relationships were found among the variables.

Between-Group Analyses

An ANOVA indicated that the three groups had significantly different mean alexithymia scores, \( F(2, 177) = 4.75, p = 0.01 \). Dunnnett’s C post hoc test indicated that Native Korean couples (\( M = 50.19, SD = 10.47 \)) were more alexithymic than Mixed-Culture couples (\( M = 43.32, SD = 6.53 \)). Result also indicated the three groups differed significantly with regard to their mean EI scores, \( F(2, 177) = 9.13, p = 0.00 \). Tukey’s HSD (Honestly Significant Difference) post hoc analysis (test of homogeneity of variance was significant only for this variable) indicated that both Korean American (\( M = 125.42, SD = 11.25 \)) and Mixed-Culture couples (\( M = 125.69, SD = 9.65 \)) were more emotionally intelligent than Native Korean couples (\( M = 117.52, SD = 13.82 \)). Analysis of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale indicated differences among the groups on relationship satisfaction, \( F(2, 176) = 2.96, p = 0.01 \). Dunnnett’s C post hoc analysis indicated that Korean American couples (\( M = 111.68, SD = 13.46 \)) were more satisfied in their relationship than the Native Korean couples (\( M = 104.96, SD = 20.70 \)). The analysis of Marital Vows scale indicated that
there was a significant difference among the groups on their values toward marriage, \( F(2, 173) = 3.36, p = .04 \). Dunnett’s C post hoc analysis indicated that Korean American couples \((M = 46.50, SD = 5.03)\) were more covenantal in their view of marriage than Native Korean couples \((M = 44.31, SD = 5.34)\).

A Fisher r to z transformation revealed that the strength of the relationship between EI and relationship satisfaction was significantly different in Korean American and Native Korean couples, \( z = -2.11, p = .03 \). Both were positively correlated and statistically significant but the correlation between the two factors in Native Korean couples was significantly stronger (0.23 vs. 0.52). Higher EI was a stronger predictor of relationship satisfaction in Native Korean couples than in Korean American couples.

When Korean American couples were compared with Mixed-Culture couples, the strength of the relationship between EI and relationship satisfaction was significantly different as well, \( z = 3.14, p = .00 \). The direction of the relationship was opposite for the two groups and both relationships were statistically significant (0.23 vs. 0.58). Higher EI was a predictor of lower relationship satisfaction in Mixed-Culture couples but in Korean Americans, higher EI predicted higher relationship satisfaction. Similarly, Native Korean couples were also significantly different from Mixed-Culture couples, \( z = 4.48, p = .00 \) (\( r = .52 \) vs. \( r = -.58 \)).

**Discussion**

**Korean Americans**

The Korean American couples’ EI was inversely correlated with alexithymia. Contrary to what we expected, the findings on Korean Americans were similar to previous research. This finding suggests that the relationship between EI and alexithymia generalizes across geographical/ethnic cultural boundaries.

Within Koreans, higher levels of alexithymia and lower EI predicted less relationship satisfaction. These two findings replicate previous research and suggest that an individual’s inability to get in touch with and communicate feelings may result in not getting their needs met with their partners. This finding confirmed that within romantic relationships, emotional factors are just as important in Korean American couples as has been reported in European American couples. Perhaps, emotional control is more important for Asians in public and formal settings whereas more expressive, high-level emotional processing is valued among Korean Americans motivated to have positive intimate relationships with their partner.

In regard to views about marriage, Korean Americans with more covenantal views of marriage reported higher relationship satisfaction than those who endorsed more contractual views of marriage. This suggests that viewing the relationship as a whole rather than stressing individual happiness promotes higher relationship satisfaction among Korean Americans. Perhaps, the emphasis on the dyad leads to a more tolerant attitude toward what is perceived as their partner’s faults or interpersonal differences. Also, it is likely that those who hold covenantal views on marriage have views more consistent with collectivism or traditions. In turn, these individuals are more likely to put in the effort to “make things work.” This would lower the likelihood of marital distress and motivate the individuals to avoid the stigma of divorce within the community. Furthermore, when individuals put in a great deal of effort to make things work, but feel unsatisfied in their relationship, they will experience cognitive dissonance. To reduce this cognitive dissonance, they may rationalize away many negative attitudes toward their partner to feel more satisfied in their relationships. The overall findings appear similar to previous research on European Americans.

**Native Korean Couples**

The Native Korean sample, which included 45 married couples currently living in the Seoul metropolitan area in South Korea, yielded surprising results. It was hypothesized that emotional factors would have less of an impact or differentially impact the relationship satisfaction of Korean couples living in Korea when compared with the previous findings. On the contrary, results indicated similar findings to the previous research. Three of the four significant relationships among the factors replicated the previous research. This suggests that these emotional factors do have a similar impact on intimate relationship beyond Western cultural boundaries.

EI and alexithymia were negatively correlated, which indicates that individuals who are more emotionally intelligent tended to have lower levels of alexithymia. The direction of the relationship was the same as previous research and the strength of the relationship was similar to previous research (Schutte et al., 1998). The results indicated that individuals with higher EI tended to be more satisfied in their relationships. This finding was also similar to previous findings (Brackett, Warner, & Bosco, 2005; Smith, Ciarrochi, & Heaven, 2008; Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2007). The very strong relationship between EI and relationship satisfaction found among Native Koreans compared with Korean Americans, suggests that contrary to Western stereotypes, emotional values and sensitivities are vibrant and forceful among a significant group of Native Koreans. On this one measure, emotional processing appears to permeate their cultural cognitive style. Also, individuals with higher levels of alexithymia tended to be less satisfied in their relationships, which is also consistent with previous research. It appears that emotional functioning is important in intimate relationships even in a culture where emotional restraint is valued for the benefit of group harmony. What is most surprising is that these results held true even though the group, as a whole,
had higher alexithymia levels than the Mixed-Culture couples and lower EI compared with other two groups.

Covenantal views of marriage were linked to higher relationship satisfaction in this group. More emphasis on the dyad seems to promote higher satisfaction.

**Mixed-Culture Couples**

No significant relationship between alexithymia and EI was found among the Mixed-Culture sample. Their relationship between alexithymia and EI is moderated by some still unknown variables. Furthermore, the small sample size may have contributed to the nonsignificant finding.

Odder still is that EI and relationship satisfaction were negatively correlated in the Mixed-Culture couples. This finding is opposite to what was previously found (Schutte et al., 2001). Possibly, in Mixed-Culture relationships, the cultural differences are more pronounced for the emotionally intelligent partner, who is sensitive and aware of the nuances of cultural and emotional communications, but this awareness is not necessarily related to acceptance. Indeed, high-EI individuals may be hypersensitive to differences in communication, rituals, values, and lifestyle.

**Discussion**

Similar to previous research, EI predicted the magnitude of relationship satisfaction among individuals. However, the degree and the direction of influence varied across groups. Higher EI was a significantly stronger predictor of relationship satisfaction among Native Koreans compared with Korean Americans, most likely as a function of minority/majority culture status. Possibly, minority couples (Korean Americans) with high EI are sensitized to the stereotyped expectations projected from the majority culture and/or introject negative stereotypes about their inability to use EI; both factors which could weaken the relationship between EI and relationship satisfaction. In addition, as a minority, economic success and worries may be contributing more to relationship satisfaction and eroding some of the impact of EI. The significantly stronger relationship found in Native Koreans between EI and relationship satisfaction should help recast Western notions of the fabric of successful intimate relationships among Asians.

Surprisingly, in Mixed-Culture couples, an inverse relationship was found between EI and relationship satisfaction. Although the sample size was small, the relationship was very strong. When the relationship between EI and relationship satisfaction was compared between Mixed-Culture couples and the other groups, higher EI was a predictor of lower relationship satisfaction in Mixed-Culture couples; but it predicted higher relationship satisfaction in the other groups. The most likely reason for this initially surprising finding is that individuals from different ethnic backgrounds inevitably experience cultural conflicts and difficulties with disparate communication styles. The higher their EI, the more likely these conflicts and differences are to appear on one’s radar screen and prove to be an irritant. Perhaps lack of emotional insight is protective in such situations and serves to reduce conflict. It may be a case where ignorance truly is bliss.

Only a few studies have examined Mixed-Culture couples and the findings are inconsistent. Some findings suggest they may be at more risk of relational dysfunction. Killian (2001) interviewed 20 participants to examine the experience of individuals in interracial relationships. The couples examined were African American–European American. The results indicated that African American partners experienced more emotional sensitivity to the reactions of others regarding their relationship. Presumably, this insight was more a burden than a blessing to the relationship—again showing that EI may be of mixed value to a relationship, depending on the most frequent emotional cues in the environment.

Furthermore, these findings suggest that Mixed-Culture couples are more at risk of relational dysfunction. Indeed, research indicates that 66% of interracial marriages end up divorced (Gaines & Brennan, 2001), which is higher than the national average.

Another difference found in the present study concerns the couples’ values orientation toward marriage. Analyses of each group revealed that having a covenantal view toward marriage was predictive of relationship satisfaction in Korean–Korean couples, irrespective of their country of residence. The relationship between marital values orientation and relationship satisfaction was not found among Mixed-Culture couples. The most parsimonious explanation for this is that among Korean–Korean couples, the more culturally consistent, traditional views toward marriage are linked to an individual’s cultural/racial identity. Mixed couples, with a more diverse ethnic identity have a harder time linking philosophical assumptions about marriage with their own relationship satisfaction.

Unlike EI, results indicated that the impact of alexithymia on relationship satisfaction was pretty consistent across Native Koreans and Korean Americans. This pattern was not replicated in the Mixed-Culture couples. Native Korean couples were found to be more alexithymic than Mixed-Culture couples but no differences were found among Korean–Korean couples living in the United States and in Korea. This finding is consistent with previous research (Dion, 1996; Le et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 1997) and suggests that Asians, in this case Koreans, regardless of their country of residence, have a higher level of alexithymia as measured by the current assessment.

Another surprising finding is that, in their orientation toward marriage, Korean Americans tend to have more covenantal views about marriage than Koreans living in Korea. Possibly, identification with the stereotypes of marriage from their country of origin is a protective mechanism for those living in a country as a minority.
In summary, Koreans living in their country of origin confirm some Western stereotypes (e.g., alexithymia) and defy other stereotypes (e.g., underappreciating the strong Korean connection between relationship satisfaction and EI) compared with Korean Americans. Thus, a recently immigrated couple from Korea may be less traditional than a Korean American couple. If clinicians do not take such factors into consideration, they may make an inaccurate conceptualization and risk damaging the therapeutic alliance.

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