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Korean institutionalized adolescents' attributions of success and failure in interpersonal relations and perceived loneliness

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Abstract

Since the end of 1990's, Korea has faced significant family break-ups and institutionalization of children due to nationwide economical crisis and dramatic increase of divorce. The long-term effects of institutionalization to adolescents' psychological trait have become important theme in developmental studies. This study examines loneliness and attributional styles in interpersonal relations of the two groups: 97 institutionalized adolescents who live in welfare facilities and 105 of their age-mates from middle class backgrounds. Our results demonstrate that the institutionalized adolescents tend to show higher levels of loneliness than the home-reared group. In addition, the former group displays a non-self-serving cognitive style of attributing failures in social situations to more stable and global causes than the latter. Non-self-serving attributions about interpersonal relations are more closely related with higher levels of loneliness. Among the three dimensions of attribution (that is, 'internal/external', 'stable/unstable', and 'global/specific'), the 'internal/external' attribution is the least related to loneliness. A regression analysis shows that the institutionalized adolescents' attribution of failure to global reasons and the home-reared adolescents' attribution of success to unstable reasons can predict loneliness. The implications of these findings on the development of attribution-retraining program for institutionalized adolescents are discussed below.

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1. Introduction

The Korean financial crisis which broke out at the end of 1997 and was exemplified by the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s bailout, caused serious economic and emotional distress for all Koreans. Many of them suffered the pervasive mass unemployment and large number of bankruptcies. Especially, many of the middle class Koreans suddenly found themselves losing their houses, and in some instances even their families. In most cases, the break-up of families has not been intentional but rather come about as a means of survival. These break-ups have come in the form of divorces, a parent leaving the home, the abandonment of infants, and the institutionalization of children. The growing number of children who have experienced a family break-up since the implementation of the IMF management system became an important social issue for Korean society. According to data collected by the Ministry of Health and Welfare right after the financial crisis, the number of institutionalized children increased by 38% from 1997 to 1998.

Korean psychologists engaged in developmental studies (Choi, Yoo, & Han, 2002; Sung, Yi, & Yi, 2001; Yoo, Han, & Choi, 2001, 2002; Yoo & Min, 2000, 2001) have paid special attention to the institutionalized children and adolescents, because they have been deprived of familial experiences and thus they represent an important resource for the study of psychosocial adaptation. We can find a similar case in the children adopted from Romanian orphanages since the fall of the Ceausescu regime in 1989 have also received a great deal of attention from researchers (Chisholm, 1998; Dickens & Watts, 1996; Kadlec & Cermak, 2002; Morison & Ellwood, 2000). These two similar cases represent a distinctive segment of the population due to their early experience with deprivation. However, the sound development of the Korean institutionalized adolescents is further threatened by the possibility of a prolonged stay in welfare facilities.

The institutionalized adolescents, who lost an important source of social support in the form of their parents, may turn to peer groups as an alternative social network which can provide them with emotional stability and of alleviating the negative effects of parental absence (Yoo et al., 2002). Nevertheless, the adolescents who have spent many years in institutions tend to exhibit sociability problems (Warger & Kleman, 1986), have difficulty with self-exposure to peers (Choi et al., 2002; Park, 1994), and often show problematic relations with their peers (Hutchinson, Tess, Gleckman, & Spence, 1992). Moreover, they perceive less social support from adults and peers (Yoo et al., 2002) than home-reared adolescents.

The formation of social relations may constitute a barometer of psychosocial adaptation in early adolescence because children's social worlds expand quantitatively and deepen qualitatively during adolescence. Especially in early adolescence, friendship is based on intimacy and loyalty (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Youniss & Smollar, 1985), and self-disclosure also plays a considerable part in terms of peer relations (Parker & Gottman, 1989). This increased importance of peer relationships during early adolescence and the lack of intimate relations and self-disclosure between friends, may leave adolescents feeling lonely (Brennan, 1982; Shaver & Rubinstein, 1980). Loneliness can be defined as sadness or depressed mood caused by a perceived deficiency in social networks or by the absence of a sense of belonging (Asher, Parkhursts, Hymel, & Williams, 1990; Cassidy & Asher, 1992; Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Hence, given the collapse of their family networks

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