



Examination of the Adlerian constructs of activity and social interest with depression among recent Korean retirees: Meaning in life as a mediator



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether (a) the Adlerian construct of activity and social interest would be related to decreased depression and (b) meaning in life would mediate these relationships among Korean retirees. A total of 219 Korean retirees who had retired within the last three years completed the survey. The survey included the Activity Scale, Social Interest Scale, The Meaning in Life Questionnaire, and Center for Epidemiology Depression Scale. Structural equation modeling was conducted to analyze data. The results indicated that activity was directly associated with depression ($\beta = -.453, p < .001$) and indirectly related to depression through meaning in life (indirect path: $\beta = -.279, p < .05, 95\% \text{ CI} = -.483, \sim -.145$). Similarly, social interest was found to be directly related to depression ($\beta = -.710, p < .001$) and indirectly related to depression through meaning in life (indirect path: $\beta = -.227, p < .05, 95\% \text{ CI} = -.427, \sim -.086$). These findings suggest that meaning in life is an important avenue through which activity and social interest are linked to a lower level of depression among Korean retirees.

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1. Introduction

Retirement is an important life transition and predictor of mental health in late adulthood (Kim & Moen, 2002; Wang, 2007). Some people successfully adjust to retirement and use it as an opportunity to travel, spend time with family, go back to school, and focus on relationships. For others, the adjustment to retirement is challenging and might ultimately contribute to psychological problems, including depression (Lee, Lee, Lim, Hwang, & Park, 2004). The sociocultural context of retirement has been less well studied but could affect the retirement process. Therefore, scholars have called for additional studies of retirement outside of Western nations (Luborsky & LeBlanc, 2003).

As one of the most rapidly aging countries, South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea) faces multiple issues related to retirement (Howe, Jackson, & Nakashima, 2007). In particular, after the Korean economic crisis in 1997, forced early retirement (often in the mid-50s) affected many Korean middle-aged people (Lee &

Rhee, 2002). For example, more than 96% of regular employees at medium and large corporate firms had retired before the age of 55 (Howe et al., 2007). This is in contrast to current estimates that place the average age of retirement in the U.S. at 62 years old (Gallup, 2014). As a result, the average age of retirement in Korea is on the decline. This trend, coupled with the rising life expectancy, has expanded the length of time Korean adults spend in retirement.

Although research on how retirement affects mental health is still limited, some empirical studies revealed that the rate of depression among Korean retirees has increased over the past decade. Compared to retirees in the U.S., Korean retirees reported lower levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of depression (Kim, Choe, & Chae, 2009; Rhee & Lee, 2005). These findings are congruent with estimates that put the suicide rate among Korea's senior citizens at five to six times higher than that of the U.S. (OECD, 2012).

It is important to note that it is not retirement, per se, which causes depression or suicidality (Wang, 2007). Rather, we conceptualized depression among retirees as resulting from a combination of several factors including individual characteristics, situational factors, and resources available to retirees. For example, researchers have identified work characteristics and job satisfaction before retirement, marital status, socioeconomic status,

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financial security, cognitive ability, social support, leisure pursuits, and physical health as factors that influence the relation between retirement status and depression (Gallo, Bradley, Siegel, & Kasl, 2000; Wang, Henkens, & Solinge, 2011).

Despite increasing attention to mental-health related variables among retirees, only recently have scholars begun to understand how personality variables affect mental health upon retirement. This is an important area of study because personality has been found to be an important internal resource that influences many types of adjustment (e.g., adjustment to new environment, adjustment to life changes; Wang et al., 2011).

2. The influence of activity and social interest on depression

Among personality variables that influence postretirement affect, the focus of the present study was the Adlerian construct of activity and social interest. According to Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology (hereafter Adlerian theory), activity and social interest are two essential personality dimensions that are closely related to mental health (Mosak & Maniacci, 2008). From this theoretical perspective, activity refers to one's energy and passion and is characterized by extraversion, activeness, and openness to experience (Adler, 1989). The activity construct is broader than the simple frequency of engagement in certain activities because it encompasses the degree of passion and energy the person has for dealing with primary life tasks (i.e., love, work, and friendship). Social interest refers to one's concern for the well-being of others and includes dimensions of friendliness, empathy, cooperation, and feelings of belongingness (Leak, Millard, Perry, & Williams, 1985). Adler noted that activity and social interest are independent, but related. Activity can be expressed constructively only in the presence of social interest, while social interest requires a certain level of activity (Jeong & No, 2002).

Activity and social interest are related to the Big 5 personality constructs (Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeable, and Neuroticism). Stasio and Capron (1998) noted that activity encompasses Extraversion and Openness. Social interest is similar to Agreeableness but some of the traits of Agreeableness that imply a passivity nature (e.g., acquiescent and trusting) are not congruent with Adlerian goal-oriented construct of social interest. Further, while Conscientiousness appears to be similar to social interest, Stasio and Capron (1998) highlighted that some traits of Conscientiousness (e.g., achieving and ambitious) are more related to activity. The last construct of the Big Five, Neuroticism, consists of traits that are the opposite of social interest.

Previous research has shown that activity and social interest are associated with greater life satisfaction and fewer symptoms of neuroticism, such as depression, anxiety, and aggression (Adler, 1989). For example, two indices of activity, including extraversion and openness to experience were found to predict psychological well-being (e.g., Jeong & No, 2006; Schimmack, Oishi, Furr, & Funder, 2004). In addition, extraversion and openness to experience predicted greater levels of physical, leisure, and volunteer activities, which was, in turn, associated with decreased mental health problems among older adults and retirees (Brunes, Augestad, & Gudmundsdottir, 2013; Jeong & No, 2002; Park & Kim, 2012).

Social interest has also emerged as a predictor of life satisfaction (Gilman, 2001), psychological well-being (Jeong, Lee, & No, 2006), happiness (Bass, Cullette, Kern, & McWilliams, 2002), energy level (Zarski, Bubbenzer, & West, 1986), and empathic concerns (Watkins & Blazina, 1994). In contrast, social interest has been negatively related to perceived life stress (Kim, Noh, & Oh, 2007), depression, anxiety, hostility (Crandall, 1975; Newbauer & Stone, 2010), somatic symptoms (Zarski et al., 1986) and substance abuse (Keene &

Wheeler, 1994). Further, social interest is expected to enable individuals to empathize with others, cooperate, and behave in a manner that benefits their community (Daugherty, Murphy, & Paugh, 2001). As such, individuals with high social interest tend to establish positive social connections and experience a high level of social bonding (Giordano, 2012), which is a key predictor for retirement adjustment (Kim, Ko, Jung, Lee, & Lim, 2009).

Although the personality traits of activity and social interest are expected to be important for mental health across varying groups including older adults, evidence specifically linking these traits to the context of retirement is missing. To address this gap in the literature, the first purpose of this study was to examine how activity and social interest would relate to depression among Korean retirees. Measuring the two variables would allow a better understanding of general traits that predict motivation to and actual behaviors of engaging in activities and establishing social connections in this population.

3. The mediating role of meaning in life

Researchers have found positive effects of meaning in life on mental health outcomes across age groups, including retirees. For example, meaning in life was positively linked to indicators of psychological well-being such as life satisfaction, adaptive coping, and self-esteem (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). In contrast, meaning in life has been negatively associated with mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation (Reker & Fry, 2003). Meaning in life also served as a mediator and moderator for the link between stress and mental health outcomes (Mascaro & Rosen, 2006). For example, excessive or uncontrollable level of stress could increase a sense of meaninglessness, which, in turn, would lead to mental health problems. Meaning in life could also buffer the negative effects of stress on psychological well-being (Steger et al., 2006).

The meaning of life has also been emphasized by Adlerian scholars. Adler, who is known as an existential thinker, emphasized responsibility and life meaning as a critical factor for psychological well-being (Hjertaas, 2004). He believed that based on levels of activity and social interest, an individual develops different types of life style, and such lifestyle contributes to how one deals with major life tasks, including finding meaning in life. Afterwards, Adlerian scholars have long considered an expansion of individual psychology to include a fourth existential life task—how well clients find meaning in life (Mosak & Maniacci, 2008).

Empirical research has recently begun to examine the mediating roles of meaning in life in the relation between personality traits and mental health outcomes. For example, related to the Adlerian construct of activity presented previously, optimism and openness to experience foster a cognitive process that facilitates the search and discovery of meaning in life (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). This process then leads to increased psychological well-being (Ju, Shin, Kim, Hyun, & Park, 2013). In addition, extraversion is associated with meaning in life. Schnell and Becker (2006) reported that extraversion allowed individuals to have a positive outlook and to view their lives as meaningful, and in turn those individuals were more likely to actively engage in life goals. Greenfield and Marks (2004) also found that older adults who actively engaged in volunteer work and played important social roles demonstrated greater sense of purpose and meaning in life.

Social interest could also contribute to a deeper sense of meaning in life. Social interest promotes concerns for others, and it is known as a motivating force to derive meaning in life through engaging in prosocial behaviors (Schneider, 1991, as cited on Bass et al., 2002). In addition, those with high social interest tend to have significant others, and such significant others could facilitate the reflection of life and search for meaning process by identifying

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