Individualism and Collectivism: Implications for Women

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Abstract This essay examines the nature and dynamics of individualism and collectivism as social and interpersonal phenomena. It considers the importance of affirming the true self as a key feature of individualism as conceived by Donald Capps. By means of cultural and gender analysis, the essay explores aspects of self-affirmation among women, especially Korean American women in both individualist and collectivist societies. It ultimately proposes a "self-affirming collectivism" that promotes the authentic individual self as *imago Dei* whose unique identity is expressed within community.

Keywords Individualism · Collectivism · *Imago Dei* · *Perichoresis* · Korean American women · Self-affirming collectivism · Donald Capps

Introduction

At a recent faculty lunch, I found myself taking a neighboring colleague's plate to the dirty dish bin along with mine. Later, when I saw him bringing his dessert and coffee, I reflexively cleared space on the table to make room for them. My action was so natural on my part that I did it without thinking. As we headed back to our offices, I apologized to him for removing his plate without asking. He assured me that he was very thankful and said he wished his young daughter would be equally helpful and considerate.

Two things were going through my mind. First, I wondered whether I had intruded on him in any way. Although it was obvious that he had finished his meal, perhaps for some reason he may have wanted to keep his empty plate a little longer. Second, I considered whether I had seemed patronizing or mothering to him. This incident served as another opportunity to remind myself of my gender and my religious and cultural identities as a Korean American Christian woman.

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As a woman who tends to thrive on connection and relationality, my actions could be regarded as a form of caregiving or generosity. Perhaps it was because he regarded my action as "womanly" or "woman-like" that my colleague felt it would be desirable for his daughter to cultivate such an attitude. Or perhaps my actions could be explained by my Reformed Christian background, one that strongly promotes love and care for others. Or perhaps my actions could be considered from a sociological and cultural perspective by means of contrasting individualism and collectivism. Simply put, had my Korean collectivism overcome my American individualism when I cleared my colleague's dishes without even asking his permission? After all, since my colleague is part of my "group," reflexively removing his empty plate seemed as natural to me as clearing my own.

To set the stage for a response to these questions, I begin this essay with a brief history of individualism and collectivism that includes both definitions and highlights academic discussions concerning the tensions between them. I then explore how individualism has been "reconsidered" by Capps and Fenn (1992) by examining the importance of coming to one's true voice for the betterment of both the self and the group to which one belongs. Next, I delve into a cultural and gender analysis of individualism and collectivism, focusing on processes of self-affirmation among women in both individualist and collectivist societies. I am concerned here especially with self-affirmation among Korean American women who live in the tensions of individualist and collectivist orientations. After proceeding to investigate biblical and theological views on individualism and collectivism that appear to be more fluid than dichotomous, I offer some implications for pastoral care and counseling with Korean American women. Finally, I close by proposing a new paradigm of "self-affirming collectivism" as a respectful way to conceive of genuine selfhood and community in an eclectic, multicultural, and intercultural world.

Individualism and collectivism

American scholars such as Bellah et al. (1985) point to the nineteenth-century French social philosopher Alexis De Tocqueville as the originator of the term "individualism." de Tocqueville coined the term following his government-sponsored nine-month visit to survey the American prison system (Triandis 1995, p. 20). Bellah et al. (1985), in fact, use de Tocqueville's analysis of American individualism as the basis of their concern about a growing individualism in America that they believe leads to "cancerous" and "dangerous" effects on particular communities and the nation as a whole. Individualism, the authors suggest, leads Americans to withdraw and isolate themselves from others, a trend that weakens the entire society.

The origins of the concept of collectivism are often attributed to the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE), the most influential social ethicist in the East whose teachings undergird many Asian cultures. Confucius is considered to be the prime contributor to the pervasive spread of collectivism in the East, evident in an orientation toward family, communalism, and group thinking.

Less well known, however, is that the original writings of Confucius contain many elements reflecting individualism's emphasis on inner processes and internal human attributes over external or contextual surroundings. Confucius postulated that "the superior man can find himself in no position in which he is not himself. In a high situation he does not treat with contempt his inferiors; in a low situation he does not court the favour of his superiors" (Doctrine of the Mean, Confucius 1915, pp. 105–106, quoted in Triandis 1995, p. 22). Confucius' own positions were often more encompassing, balanced, and intricate

than his followers usually acknowledge. It is noteworthy that Confucius, the originator of collectivism, did not limit himself to a collectivist ethos but ventured into the wider world of individualism.

Western religion has played a vital role in individualism as well. Michel Chevalier (1806–1879), a French engineer, economist, and contemporary of de Tocqueville, had a much more positive outlook on American individualism. Chevalier was particularly interested in individualism in relation to the revolt against authority in religion, politics, and society (Arieli 1964). He therefore considered the flourishing American individualism to be a creative and liberating product of the Protestant revolution.

In the twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr considered Christianity to be the catalyst for individuality because the free human spirit is tied solely to the will of God. For Niebuhr (1964), "the heightened sense of individuality in Protestantism is expressed theologically in the Reformation principle of 'the priesthood of all believers'" (p. 60). He traced the core of American individualism to both Protestantism and the Renaissance.

Individuals and cultures are diverse, complex, and changeable, so it is never easy to categorize them. Such phenomena as globalization, multiculturalism, and interculturalism make the process of codifying people and cultures even more challenging and laborious, if not impossible. Nevertheless, over the years a number of scholars from different disciplines have generated typologies for societies and cultures as a way of comparing and contrasting peoples, groups of peoples, and nations from various regions of the world.

The individualism/collectivism dichotomy is among the most commonly used ways of differentiating and categorizing social patterns and forms of interpersonal relationships. However, it is critical to keep in mind that every individual and society possesses the proclivity toward both individualism and collectivism (Triandis 1995), although to varying degrees.

Some scholars support the coexistence model of both individualist and collectivist orientations within the same culture at the same time. For instance, Durganand Sinha and Rama Charan Tripathi (1994) and Ramesh C. Mishra (1994) suggest the coexistence of opposites in the Indian psyche and culture. The possibility of a coexistence model in Polish society is explored by Januez Reykowski (1994). In addition, an empirical study by David Yau-Fai Ho and Chi-Yue Chiu (1994) indicates that although China is basically a collectivist society, the Chinese exhibit both individualist and collectivist traits.

About 70 percent of the world's population is considered to be primarily collectivist in orientation (Triandis 1995). In one sense, all people start off being collectivists, for children are born into families. For their physical and emotional survival, the presence and support of family and community are essential. Similarly, Geert Hofstede (1991) argues that "the vast majority of people in our world live in societies in which the interest of the group prevails over the interest of the individual" (p. 51). He suggests the following delineation of individualism and collectivism:

> Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout peoples' lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. (p. 51)

One important aspect of collectivism often overlooked by scholars is that the collectivist society demands sacrifice of some of its members. Those sacrificed are mostly likely weak, powerless, and marginalized politically, culturally, economically, socially, and by gender. Especially young unmarried women who come from a lower-class background with little

education may fall victim to the embedded injustice of collectivism that tends to favor men, especially those with power. However, if a woman is married and thus "belongs" to a husband and/or to sons who possess power, her status is upgraded; through them, she gains additional stature in the collectivist society. Thus, a woman's powerless condition can be offset by the status of men connected to her primarily by marriage. The kind of power or standing she receives in this case is "vicarious" or "second-hand."

A much smaller group of the world's population lives in individualist societies in which individuals' interests appear to override those of the group. But the question arises, Can everyone and anyone claim his or her "I" in individualist societies? Or is it more likely the case that asserting one's "I" requires some sort of social "power"? In order for persons to find and affirm their own voices and preferences, certain conditions may first need to be in place. Individualist societies, not unlike collectivist ones, operate under a patriarchal ethos. Independence and autonomy, the two driving forces for individualists, coincide with some of the major attributes culturally coded as "male."

Although individualism and collectivism have been studied by scholars for some time, the floodgates of research opened in the 1980s, a period that Cigdem Kagitcibasi (1994) calls "the decade of individualism and collectivism in cross-cultural psychology" (p. 52). Two important components of this critical period deserve our attention.

First, an extensive study done by Hofstede (1980, 1983, 1991) with well over 110,000 IBM employees in more than 50 countries generated a great deal of empirical data concerning individualist/collectivist constructs. Hofstede's research explored dimensions of collectivism versus individualism, femininity versus masculinity, and uncertainty and avoidance. His individualism index (IDV) indicated that Western countries such as the United States, Australia, Great Britain, and Canada scored high on individualism, whereas many Eastern and Latin American countries such as Guatemala, Equador, Panama, Indonesia, Pakitstan, Taiwan, and South Korea exhibited low scores on individualism (Hofstede 1991, p. 53). As expected, the importance of personal time, freedom, and personal challenge were among the marks of individualism he highlighted. Moreover, he demonstrated that individualist countries tend to be wealthy, whereas collectivist countries tend to be poor.

The second critical component of this era of burgeoning interest in individualism and collectivism emerged from the Korean Psychological Association's sponsorship of the "First International Conference on Individualism and Collectivism: Psychocultural Perspectives from East and West," which took place July 9–13, 1990 in Seoul, South Korea. From that conference came the book *Individualism and Collectivism: Theory, Method, and Applications* (Kim et al. 1994), which contains theological, conceptual, empirical, and social analyses of phenomena of individualism and collectivism. The conference attracted nearly 300 participants, including scholars from former Eastern Bloc nations such as Estonia, Poland, Yugoslavia, and the former Soviet Union, who considered 70 academic papers.

In this section I have discussed aspects of the origins, the nature, and the limited cultural and gender analysis of current conversations around individualism and collectivism. In the following section, I focus more exclusively on individualism, particularly on misunderstandings of individualism, and consider its religious ramifications and its impact on both individuals and societies.

Individualism reconsidered

For various reasons, individualism has fared more poorly among academics than has collectivism. It is often viewed as a threat to the common good of humanity. In this

section I explore how individualism in the West has been misunderstood by people from both the Western and the non-Western worlds and reflect on some specific ways that individualism can contribute to the overall betterment of both individuals and communities.

Donald Capps is among the rare scholarly voices that speak in defense of the value of individualism. In a chapter entitled "Expressive Individualism as Scapegoat" in his book *The Depleted Self: Sin in a Narcissistic Age*, Capps (1993) delineates how expressive individualism in particular has been mischaracterized by Bellah and others.[1] Capps asserts that American society is using individualism as a convenient scapegoat. Individualism has become an easy explanation for the many problems America is facing today.

In *Individualism Reconsidered: Readings Bearing on the Endangered Self in Modern Society* (Capps and Fenn 1992), a book he co-edited with Richard K. Fenn, Capps counters Bellah et al. (1985) with essay after essay promoting positive views of individualism. Drawing primarily on Emerson's essays, the contributors to this volume find religious values at the core of individualism.

For Emerson, the most critical discovery of all is that God resides in every person (Arieli 1964). As the house of God, the individual self already possesses what is necessary to reach the highest aim in life. Only by regaining and recapturing selfhood can a person become who he or she sets out to be. Likewise, individualism is the key to liberating persons and ushering them into perfection. While some have challenged Emerson's views as neglecting the sufferings and pain of the world (Arieli 1964), Capps asserts, with Emerson (1979), that the self is subject to a much loftier and higher calling than social conformity. When individuals lose their true selves, a "false self" characterized by loneliness emerges instead. For Emerson, individualism is not the cause of an individual's loneliness or isolation but the beginning of its amelioration. Coleman (1982) and Sennett (1980) support this understanding, arguing that modern social organizations such as corporations, not an unchecked individualism, drive individuals into isolation. Faceless modern bureaucracies push individuals into becoming "corporate actors" who are mere extensions of their companies and must suppress their true selves and characters.

But beyond social organizations and corporations, Capps argues, communities of memory such as churches can also become enemies of individuals, for such communities may contribute to stifling their true selves and thus their freedom to be all that God has created them to be (Emerson 1838/1992; in Capps 1993). It is ironic that while the churches set out to promote *imago Dei*, they instead tend to suppress it by insisting that individuals fall in line with teachings and creeds considered orthodox among Christian institutions.

Emerson (1979) insists that the strengthening of each individual's true self will bring about more satisfying human associations. For him, claiming one's true self as an individual is the key to healthy communities and societies.

Like corporations and bureaucracies, family systems theory and therapy also have been viewed as elevating the group at the expense of the individual (Nichols 1987).[2] Current

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[1] There are two types of individualism — utilitarian and expressive. Utilitarian individualism, which can be traced to Benjamin Franklin, focuses primarily on individual self-improvement through material resources. Expressive individualism, represented by Emerson, Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, is seen by Bellah et al. (1985) as the more destructive type, i.e., as a form of self-expression that promotes celebrating the self above all things and therefore poses a threat to American society.

[2] Though family systems theory tends to focus more on systems, it does not entirely ignore individual persons in the system. Moreover, the trend in family systems theory is toward a more intentional reclaiming of individuals within the system.

therapeutic approaches that focus on the collective whole, i.e., on the family and other systems and groups, tend to overlook the individual selves that constitute those collective entities. In the theory and practice of psychology today, individuals are sometimes pushed aside by the larger group or institution.

Individualism is also often attacked for its seeming narcissism, but Capps (1993) promotes and defends individualism by dissociating the two. He defends this view by drawing on works of Lasch (1979), who contends that narcissism in America is not the result of individualism but the lack of it; of Kohut (Kohut and Wolf 1978), who suggests that the key characteristic and symptom of narcissism is a defective and weakened condition of the self; and of Miller (1981), who characterizes "healthy narcissism" as full access to the true self.

My focus in this section has been on misconstruals of individualism and on its potentially positive and beneficial aspects for persons and for the larger society. Individuals as *imago Dei* have tremendous theological and sociological worth, such that a lack of self-assertion and self-expression factors heavily in social ills we face today. Churches and industry, as well as family systems theory and widespread pathological narcissism, interfere with individuals' pursuits of richer expressions of their true selves.

Individualism and collectivism reconsidered: cultural and gender analysis

Capps and Fenn's (1992) work functions as a potent challenge to detractors of individualism. As a Korean American woman exposed to and ensconced in both individualistic and collectivistic worlds, I turn now to engage both a cultural and gender analysis of individualism and collectivism. Returning to consider the earlier story of my clearing the dishes of a male colleague during a faculty luncheon, it is easy to imagine that my actions would have been interpreted in a very different light had I been a Caucasian male instead of an Asian American woman. In fact, my ethnicity and gender, along with my Christian religious identity, factor prominently in most everything I do.

It is unlikely that a white male professor would reflexively clear the dishes of another male colleague or later return to apologize for having offered this gesture. This would likely also be the case for a white female faculty colleague. In the event that a white man or woman cleared a colleague's table, it would be even more difficult to conceive of him or her worrying about whether this generous act was intrusive or patronizing. Nor would the lucky colleague have responded by saying that he hoped his young daughter (or son?) would grow up to emulate such actions. Gender and cultural location make a great deal of difference in a moment such as this.

Considering how important is self-affirmation to the biblical concept of *imago Dei* and to a Trinitarian model of God's self-sustaining yet communal disposition, it is worth investigating how women in both individualistic and collectivistic societies come to affirm themselves. Traditionally, women tend to experience far more difficulties in coming to their own voice and claiming their presence and identity in a patriarchal world. The question is, How does self-affirmation come about for women in both types of society, and are there any differences between them?

Self-affirmation of women in individualist societies

Although women in individualist societies may appear to have better chances at claiming their true selves than those in collectivistic societies, they may still struggle to affirm their

selfhood. A power imbalance exists between men and women in almost all societies, although this imbalance tends to be less pronounced in individualistic than in collectivistic cultures. Women seek independence and autonomy along with men, but fully realizing their true selves even in individualistic societies may well prove for them a false hope. Since it takes a degree of social power for people to begin to assert their true selves, women, who typically possess less power than men, may still remain disadvantaged. This may be the case for women in individualistic as much as in collectivistic societies.

Self-affirmation of women in collectivist societies

Women in collectivist societies may find themselves even more disadvantaged than those in individualistic societies in realizing their authentic selves, due to a more pronounced gender and power imbalance and the sacrifice that has been demanded of them for the sake of the group. In collectivist societies both men and women appear to be at a disadvantage in becoming the individual they wish to be. Collectivism in general prioritizes the interest and advantage of the group, especially those of the "we" group over those of individual members of the group.

However, for the "we" group to thrive and succeed, it often requires or even mandates sacrifices of certain members within the group—usually the weak and the marginalized. Many collectivist societies are highly patriarchal and overtly sexist, so it is often women who are expected to sacrifice for their husbands, children, families, and the "we" group. In that sense, it is especially difficult for women in collectivist societies to rise above social and cultural expectations in order to assert their individual identities.

Jae-Ho Cha (1994) postulates that one of the features of collectivism in traditional Korean culture includes the sacrifice of women; widows, for example, are forbidden to remarry, and the society demands that wives work for their husbands. Thus, the sacrificial role imposed on women and their victimization by patriarchy and sexism frustrates the search for their true selves for women in collectivistic societies.

Self-affirmation of Korean American women

What happens to Korean American women who are likely to move back and forth between the seemingly opposing orientations of individualism and collectivism? Depending on the culture, Korean or American, with which a Korean American woman most identifies, the contours and dynamics of her self-affirmation process will be differently determined. However, I will focus here on Korean American women who consider themselves to be fully bicultural and bilingual. It is likely that women in this group would be native Koreans who lived enough years there to obtain and adopt key cultural indicators, including Korean language skills.

Self-affirmation in a collectivist society

Since Korea is considered to be more collectivist than individualist, Korean American women typically encounter difficulties asserting their true selves because of the continuing influence of the pervasive Confucian ethos and of the patriarchy and sexism of their childhood culture. In the collectivistic Korean society, capable women are often discouraged and suppressed from fully developing and living up to their full potential and at times excelling over men.

While Korea has begun to change in terms of laws and philosophy that favor men over women, in actual practice significant residues of its patriarchal and Confucian views remain.

Self-affirmation "in-between"

In moving to the United States, Korean American women initially may find themselves enjoying a more egalitarian and woman-friendly environment than when they were in Korea. They experience greater freedom to express their true selves in a more liberated and unrestrained way. This newfound freedom to express their authentic selves, however, may bring about some internal as well as external conflicts. Unused to insisting on their true identity in the collectivist Korean culture, Korean American women in the United States may experience some confusion between the two conflicting ideologies (Lee 1995). Likewise, on one hand, they welcome and gravitate toward this new way of expressing themselves. On the other hand, they may feel somewhat awkward and inexperienced in doing so.

There also remains for them external pressure from mostly Korean men in their lives, including fathers, husbands, brothers, friends, and colleagues. With these men, Korean American women continue to remain somewhat invisible and less self-assertive. While the status of Korean men is usually much higher than that of Korean women in the collectivist Korean society, the status of Korean women in the individualist American society is often similar to and may even exceed that of Korean men. This role- or status-reversal can often bring about confusion and dissonance in relationships between Korean American men and women, especially in married couples.

Self-affirmation in individualist society

Korean American women's process of coming to affirm themselves in an individualistic American society can be more complicated than that of other American women. As noted, while initially enjoying the cultural affirmation of self-expression, sooner or later they realize, like many other women in individualist societies, that fuller self-expression requires more power than the culture actually affords them.

Facing racial stereotyping in the new culture, Korean American women learn that here, too, they are expected to be docile, polite, compliant, modest, and passive; they are to refrain from declaring their selfhood even here. In fact, people may have difficulties interacting and dealing with Korean American women who strive to express their own voices and to claim their personhood. This kind of stereotyping can stifle Korean American women and keep them from demanding their rightful place in American society.

Second, this external stereotyping can lead Korean American women to reclaim an internalized passivity developed in their original cultural setting. How other people perceive them will effect their inner psyches, which will eventually take a toll on the ways they think of and carry themselves. As Korean American women repeatedly take in external messages that tell them to remain low-keyed and reserved, it is likely that they will be reluctant to affirm their identities and thus make a strong imprint on American society.

The self-affirmation process of Korean American women may prove challenging. Individual differences surely will come into play. However, the overall consensus is that many Korean American women do end up succeeding in claiming their selves and articulating their individual voices in America. The flexible and vibrant nature of Korean American women, developed over 5,000 years of Korean history, serves them well in adjusting to and thriving in their new land.

Biblical understandings of individualism and collectivism

The concepts of individualism and collectivism in both the Old and the New Testaments are interwoven to such a degree that little conflict between them appears to exist. The Bible depicts God's own Self as exhibiting attributes of both individualism and collectivism. Christian tradition acknowledges the one God of monotheism, but likewise depicts a collective and communal side of God in a theology of the Trinity and the economy of salvation.

Theologians such as LaCugna (1992), Barth (1957), and Moltmann (1993) explore the relational and communal disposition in God in discussions on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The concept of *perichoresis,* which denotes cyclical movement, recurrence, reciprocity, and interpenetration, is important in attempting to understand the Trinity. It suggests the notion of inclusiveness, community, and freedom (Wilson-Kastner 1983), as well as of "being-in-one-another" and of "permeation without confusion" (LaCugna 1991, p. 271) in the Trinity. God not only communes within the Trinity but also seeks fellowship with us. God is "intimately present to every creature at every moment" (LaCugna 1992, p. 680).[3]

The constant movement between an individualist and collectivist frame of reference is exhibited in the Old Testament as well, which depicts God creating persons as distinct individuals, i.e., as Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:26–27; 2:7, 22); human beings are not "mass-produced," according to the book of Genesis. Although humans are created individually as unique beings, God made them as relational and communal beings who would interact and live in harmony with God, with each other, and with all of God's creation. Only after the "Fall" were relationships broken and marred, causing a rupture, as Tillich (1953) would say, between God ("the Ground of Being"), the individual, and others. Likewise, the Bible depicts God as calling the nation of Israel to be God's special people for particular purposes. As a collective group, God brought the Hebrew children out of Egypt. At the same time, God called out individuals as leaders such as Moses.

Jesus, God incarnate, exhibited both individual and communal/collective proclivities in his interpersonal relationships. Jesus often approached people on an individual basis, such as in the case of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10), the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1–42), and Mary Magdalene (John 20:1–18), to whom the resurrected Jesus first appeared. Jesus himself acted in very private ways. However much time he spent with his disciples, friends, and crowds, he would also retire from time-to-time to be alone to pray to his Father. Jesus' time alone with the Father is portrayed as prominently in the Gospels as are his time with his twelve disciples, other close friends such as Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (John 11:5), and the crowds.

In the New Testament, the church is described as a collective entity which is made up of different individuals. Believers are considered to be one body (1 Cor. 12:12). The communal and collective nature of the early church is vividly demonstrated in Acts 2:42–47. Those who were filled with the Holy Spirit gathered daily to praise God, pray, enjoy fellowship, break bread, and share their possessions and goods. But often the Christian church, and especially my own Reformed tradition, has put much emphasis on the individual while neglecting the collective nature of the church.

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[3] Tanner (2007) contends that it is not plausible to apply the concept of the Trinity to human relationships, for such reasons as limitations of human language in describing of the Trinity and the fundamental differences between the Triune God and humans. However, Tanner sees the possibility of bridging the gap between the Trinity and human relations by starting from Christology and then moving to the concept of the Trinity.

Individualism and collectivism are deeply intertwined throughout the Bible to the point that the two really cannot be separated. These frameworks are not dichotomous; rather, they are woven in and of the same pattern in biblical depictions of the nature of God, the creation of humans, and God's interactions and dealings with creation. In light of all this, I now turn to consider ways by which a pastoral counselor may seek to help Korean American women counselees who are likely to exhibit both individualist and collectivist tendencies in their interpersonal relationships. While conceptions of individualism and collectivism in theology and the Bible may not precisely mirror those previously discussed, one does get the impression from the biblical witness of a more fluid, less dichotomous, relationship between them.

Pastoral care and counseling implications for Korean American women

One of the major difficulties for women counselees lies in the fact that their stories are not taken seriously or believed (Bons-Storm 1996). In other words, women tend to be considered "incredible" or "not believable." The experiences and stories of women often go unnoticed or ignored because they are foreign or unfamiliar to many male and even some female counselors. The stories of women do not readily fit into the grand stories of men. The unique and rather aberrant stories of Korean American women may seem even more incredible or unbelievable to many counselors, especially American counselors. This becomes a considerable obstacle for successful counseling with Korean American women.

Korean American women experience greater difficulties than other women in articulating their own thoughts and concerns. Born into a collectivist culture, Korean women are used to keeping silent about personal experiences. Since Korean society thrives on a "we" group mentality that centers on the narratives of an in-group, it feels quite foreign to Korean women to express and share their inner stories.

Moreover, a Korean American woman would be reluctant even to seek counseling, for to do so carries a stigma that could eventually hurt her family name and the reputation of her in-groups. In a collectivist society, the ramifications of one's actions carry far more weight than in an individualist one. Thus, it takes a lot more on the part of a Korean American woman to receive counseling, for doing so may be viewed less as an individual act and more as one affecting those in her "we" groups.

Helping the self-affirmation process of Korean American women

Both narrative therapy and family systems therapy can be very helpful in counseling Korean American women. Narrative therapy is one of the most effective and widely used counseling strategies for women. Michael White and David Epston (1990), the originators of narrative therapy, assumed that people live according to internal storylines or narratives they have formed and which they then "thicken" throughout their lives. Narrative therapy can assist women, including Korean American women, to come to their true voices so that they can affirm their authentic selves. In this approach, a counselor would attempt to decode, with the help of the counselee, various cultural elements in the narrative so that the counselee would feel that she is understood.

Family systems therapy is another useful pastoral counseling method for Korean American women. Considering how collectivist societies such as Korea base their interpersonal relationships on both nuclear and extended families, examining the web of

family context is very critical in counseling Korean American women. It is not unusual for a Korean American woman to think of herself as a daughter of her parents, the wife of her husband, a mother to her children, and as a daughter-in-law. Her identity is so closely interwoven with her location within her family system that it would be almost impossible to assist her without seriously taking into consideration her family network.

Keeping in mind the importance of both narrative and family systems therapies, what are some specific steps that a pastoral counselor can take to usher a Korean American woman counselee into greater self-affirmation by giving voice to her stories? First, the pastoral counselor can remind a Korean American woman that she too is *imago Dei*. This will help her to place herself in a proper ontological, psychological, and spiritual position before God, the Creator. This is the foremost step for any type of true self-realization. It is likely that a Korean American woman would view herself as a less significant or even invisible person within the patriarchal and sexist social milieu of the collectivist Korean culture. Realizing her own true worth and potential that comes from being made in God's image, a Korean American woman will gain courage and self-esteem that will eventually help her begin the journey of finding her lost self.

Second, a pastoral counselor can aid the counselee to *remember* her lost voice through compassionate, interpathic,[4] and active listening. Such an attentive and non-judgmental attitude on the part of a pastoral counselor would provide the Korean woman counselee with a safe and "good-enough" space for her to freely articulate her hidden and repressed thoughts and feelings. *Remembering* is the first of five "Rs"[5] for helping women gain clarity, according to Neuger (2001). Especially for a Korean American woman who is used to not expressing her voice for the sake of the "we" group and the greater community, it would be critical for the pastoral counselor to be interpathic and to be able to enter into her oppressed world of Korean collectivism and the "we" group mentality.

Third, *reframing*, the second of Neuger's five Rs, can be employed in counseling a Korean American woman toward self-affirmation and greater mental health. This is to take her story as seriously and truthfully as possible and then to suggest different perspectives and ways of interpreting the story as a means of gaining new insight into the story. The pastoral counselor detects hidden pictures, gaps, and discrepancies in order to facilitate a new and more productive narrative. A Korean American woman whose voice was silenced for so long in her native country may not feel the freedom to truly claim her story even in this new land of America.

In fact, as a minority woman she may feel doubly marginalized for continuing to experience difficulties in articulating her true life story even in a culture where such expression is ostensibly encouraged. Thus, the narratives of Korean American women may contain more gaps, uncertainties, and missing pieces than those of many other American women. This calls for more rigorous and intensive investigation and work on the pastoral counselor's part in the reframing process of the Korean American woman client.

The fourth step is *restorying*, which involves extracting the silenced "unstories" and incorporating them into the core narrative. *Restorying* is a critical process that offers the opportunity to synthesize and bring back to life those personal stories that have been repeatedly silenced. The role of the pastoral counselor is pertinent as the Korean American

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[4] The term "interpathy" is a special skill of the intercultural counselor. It refers to "an intentional cognitive and affective envisioning of another's thoughts and feelings from another culture, worldview, and epistemology" (Augsburger 1986, p. 31).
[5] Neuger (2001) developed five Rs to help women gain clarity: *remembering, reframing, reversing, re-imagining, and restorying.*

woman counselee begins to rewrite her life narrative in such a way as to eventually alter her relationships with family members, friends, and others in her interpersonal and relational system. The process of restorying for a Korean American woman can become quite complicated, in that people in her system, who are likely to be Koreans familiar with her prior life narrative, may not be open to her altering existing relational or cultural narratives. This tension can cause much stress and discomfort for the Korean American woman counselee, as well as for those around her. For this reason, it takes a wise, patient, and culturally sensitive pastoral counselor to accompany her throughout this long and delicate process.

Fifth, the pastoral caregiver can help the Korean American woman counselee by encouraging and providing resources for her to join together with other women in a group setting, not only for her to continue her own self-affirmation process but also to impact others, both women and men, and the greater world. A woman cannot sustain being a rebel if she rallies entirely alone; her voice will be crushed and humiliated by the dominant voice of patriarchy (Bons-Storm 1996). She will be regarded as bad, mad, or not consenting to the greater power system of the society. Therefore, what is needed is "a notion of community as a legitimizing agent" and the support of "we women" opting for communal agency for this purpose (Braidotti 1991, p. 95, cited in Bons-Storm 1996, p. 84). For instance, Paula Buford (1996) discusses and highlights the importance of women's study groups as venues in which women can open up, support one another, provide a safe space for one another, comfort, and give advice to each other, and as places where women can self-reflect, come to their voices, and be empowered.

Bringing women together to strengthen their voices and positively impact others may in some ways seem easier or more feasible for Korean American women who come from a collectivist society. This is because women in collectivist societies are more apt to understand the "we group" and thus the "we women" concept. However, since collectivism demands sacrifices especially from women who have less power than men and may prevent women from doing what they individually desire to do, forming a women's group and staying active as "we women" may not be easy for Korean American women. In this sense, the role of the pastoral counselor can be crucial in encouraging and empowering the Korean American woman to continue with her mission of self-affirmation for herself and others.

Sixth and lastly, once the Korean American woman engages in a "we women" group going through similar processes of self-discovery, the pastoral caregiver now should help her to involve men, especially significant men in her life such as her husband, lover, or boyfriend, in her journey of coming to her true voice.[6] This may sound contradictory to some degree. But it has to do with allowing men to participate in the lives of their significant women, and drawing resources from men, the other half of the human race, in order to maximize the potential impact the group can have. It would work the other way around as well. If a group of men were working together to effect change in the lives of other men and women, it would be critical for the group to include able women to strengthen the men's group even more.

The counseling process of including the Korean American man in the life of the Korean American woman will encompass, first, educating him concerning the struggles and dynamics of her coming to voice. The woman would articulate and express her own feelings and thoughts to him about her journey of coming to her true self. She may share

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[6] It is expected that Korean American men may resist taking part in Korean American women's self-affirmation process, for this may result in the initial loss of power and thus the possibility of shame for the men.

the process in marital, familial, church, and social settings which will make her endeavors more real and concrete. The man then may be able to acknowledge and articulate his enhanced understandings of her shared experiences and the inner and outer dynamics of her journey. Eventually, the pastoral counselor can help the couple not only to continue their open communication regarding her journey of finding her true voice, but to find ways that they may help other women and men do the same. The process of opening up and sharing their true feelings to each other may seem awkward or difficult for both Korean men and women. As such, it requires a seasoned counselor who is both culturally and gender sensitive to work closely with them and give guidance in that process.

In sum, counseling approaches such as narrative therapy and family systems theory can be very useful for counseling Korean American women, for they foster rediscovering and articulating true voices of those whose lives are deeply imbedded in the web and the systems of collective social units such as family and in-groups. Regaining self worth and dignity by means of understanding herself in relation to *imago Dei*, the Korean American woman, aided by her counselor, can reclaim her lost voice through *remembering*. After remembering comes *reframing*, where the counselee detects the gaps and missing pieces of her story in such a way as to develop different interpretations of it. Then comes *restorying*, where the pastoral counselor helps the Korean American woman in bringing her silenced *unstories* into her core story. The last two counseling strategies entail providing the counselee opportunities to be part of a "we women" group for support and encouragement, and bringing significant men in the counselee's life into the counseling process to enrich her journey of self-affirmation.

Self-affirming collectivism

The concepts of individualism and collectivism, as useful and convenient as they may be, tend unnecessarily to dichotomize. The emphasis of individualism is critical to understanding persons in light of God's creation and God's salvation plan. At the same time, putting the needs of a group over the needs of an individual in collectivist societies corresponds with biblical and theological precepts concerning the Christian community as the body of Christ.

I propose a new concept of "self-affirming collectivism" for the global, eclectic, multicultural, and intercultural context of the twenty-first century. "Self-affirming collectivism" acknowledges and promotes the true value and worth of each person as *imago Dei*—that is, as possessing a unique and distinctive individual identity that finds expression within a community in which one is deeply embedded. In a self-affirming collectivist society, both the individual and the group would carry equal significance, and distinct persons could come together to form one community that functions as one organism or entity.

The beauty of "self-affirming collectivism" lies in its striving to enhance and foster the best of both the individual and the aggregate group to which individuals belong. The premise is that the happiness and the wellbeing of each person or member is positively correlated with those of her or his collective entity. The overall health of a person has a direct effect on the overall health of the group, and vice versa. Each individual member and its group are equally valued and appraised.

This "self-affirming collectivism" concept can take on even greater significance for Korean American women who have developed the abilities to move freely between the worlds of individualism and collectivism. As a Korean American woman, I daily swing between these two seemingly opposing spheres because my feet truly do walk in two

worlds. As important as my individual self and private world are to me, I also feel the need to be a part of and to honor my family, church community, and academic institution. The need to affirm both the self and the group is not unique to Korean American women. However, a Korean American woman's distinct ethnic, racial, gender, and cultural circumstances make this need more pronounced.

How can this concept of "self-affirming collectivism" be advanced in real-life situations for people from various ontological, gender, social, psychological, economic, and cultural backgrounds in different geographical locations? Pastoral caregivers and counselors can take two seemingly simple steps to assist individuals to begin the process of adopting a self-affirming collectivist mindset. The two processes come from the two great commandments which Jesus taught in Matthew 22:37–39.

First and foremost, people need to be reminded of the fact that we are made to love God more than anything (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37). The first command is to love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our might. Our love for God sets the proper foundation for our interpersonal relationships. God as the "Ground of Being" (Tillich 1953) is the core of our ontological existence and gives meaning to all other relationships. Loving God will enable us to move toward a self-affirming collectivism that fosters appreciation for both individuals and groups.

Second, loving our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:39) will allow us to value and respect the group of which we are a part, including our neighbors. In addition, "loving our neighbors as ourselves" presupposes loving ourselves. Likewise, if we are able to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves on the basis of our love for the God who first loved us (1 John 4:19), we will be more inclined to embrace a "self-affirming collectivism" that encourages respect for our autonomous selves and for groups comprised of other independent selves.

Conclusion

Though it is difficult to neatly categorize and dichotomize different cultures, conceptions of individualism and collectivism remain one of the most widely used heuristic means for understanding patterns of interpersonal relationships. Capps and Fenn (1992) challenge attacks on American individualism, emphasizing the importance of affirming oneself and coming to one's true voice. It is not excessive individualism but rather threats to authentic selfhood that plague contemporary persons and societies.

In this paper I have attempted to introduce into the perspectives of Capps and Fenn a cultural and gender analysis of individualism and collectivism. In doing so I have used the concept of self-affirmation as key. Even in a so-called individualist society, not everyone can realize one's selfhood. A woman who possesses less power in such a society still faces an uphill struggle in claiming her own voice.

The quest for self-affirmation among women in collectivist societies proves even more challenging. Since collectivist cultures require a sacrifice of individuals, especially those with less power, women in such societies face enormous difficulties in claiming their true selves. In those cultures, women instead tend to gain vicarious affirmation through association with their fathers, husbands, or sons.

For Korean American women the self-affirmation process is more complicated, for they face both external and internal pressures that come from racial, gender, and cultural stereotyping. But the prognosis is nonetheless a good one for Korean American women, who can draw on previously learned capacities for maneuvering in a rather harsh collectivist environment to affirm their own voices in the new individualist American context.

Finally, I proposed a "self-affirming collectivism" rooted in the double-love command-ments of Matthew 22:37–39, in which we strive to affirm both individual selves and the groups to which they belong. The same Jesus who mediates between God and persons can help us find affirmation as we navigate the delicate path of mediating between self and community.

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