

Sangwon Kim

Assistant Professor
School Psychology Program
Graduate School of Education
Fordham University

113 W. 60th Street, Suite 1008
New York, NY 10023

Email: asakim@fordham.edu

Phone: (212) 636-6743

Fax: (212) 636-6416

Personal Research Agenda

The overarching goal of my research agenda is to enhance social emotional competence of culturally and linguistically diverse children and adolescents. Traditionally, the field of psychology has focused on understanding and treating negative behaviors while neglecting the importance of identifying children's positive assets that foster healthy development. With the emergence of positive psychology in recent years, researchers and educators alike have come to embrace the concept that success in school and life is dependent upon the individual child's personal strengths in addition to other widely recognized factors such as socioeconomic status, cognitive abilities, and home environment. With this in mind, I am interested in identifying factors that promote psychological well-being and protective factors that buffer against poor adjustment of children. I am also interested in investigating the processes through which these factors impact social-emotional outcomes in children.

Within the realm of child and adolescent social-emotional research, a potentially meaningful factor to examine is spirituality, given that the majority of American adolescents report believing in God and that religion is important in their life (Smith & Denton, 2005). In addition, the significance of spirituality in everyday life has been supported by empirical studies in the past decade. A growing body of research suggests that spirituality is related to various outcomes, including physical health, mental health, and psychological well-being. (e.g., Johnson, Li, Larson, & McCullough, 2000; Kelley & Miller, 2007; Wallace & Forman, 1998). However, the majority of research has been conducted with adult populations while few studies have focused on children and adolescents, especially from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Also, the literature suggests the effect of spirituality can vary by ethnicity and is of particular importance to socially marginalized groups (Harker, 2001).

Given the critical gap in the literature and the importance of the topic, I have developed a program of research which investigates the influence of multiple dimensions of

spirituality on psychological well-being and adjustment of culturally and linguistically diverse children and adolescents. As a first phase of my research agenda, I have designed a research project which aims to address how numerous dimensions of spirituality affect life satisfaction, depressive symptoms, and aggressive behaviors among Korean American adolescents. This project is funded by a Fordham Faculty Research Grant, and our research team is in the process of recruiting participants with data collection to begin in the spring of 2009. Upon completion of the initial phase, I plan to expand the scope of the current investigation in the coming years by including multi-ethnic groups of adolescents in both religiously affiliated and secular public school settings. Obtaining data on multi-ethnic groups will enable us to study possible interactions between spirituality and ethnic identity.

My research agenda has implications for the practice of psychology in the schools, especially in the area of the development of social-emotional competence among children of diverse ethnic backgrounds. The findings of the current investigation as well as the planned research projects can forward our understanding of the role spirituality plays in shaping psychological well-being and adjustment across ethnic groups. Moreover, identifying and understanding spirituality-related factors and processes can be used in the development of interventions and preventative programs designed to foster social-emotional competence in children. For example, treatment incorporating the component of forgiveness has been found to be effective for treating various psychological problems in adult populations (Enright, 2001). Should forgiveness be predictive of child problem behaviors such as aggression, school psychologists may consider educating students about the concept of forgiveness and teaching them how to forgive in order for them to effectively deal with their problems.

In sum, I believe my research agenda centering on the influence of spirituality on psychological well-being and adjustment among ethnically diverse adolescents can be of critical importance to both the research and the practice of school psychology.

References

- Enright, R. D. (2001). *Forgiveness is a choice: A step-by-step process for resolving anger and restoring hope*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Harker, K. (2001). Immigrant generation, assimilation and adolescent psychological well-being. *Social Forces*, 79, 969-1004.
- Johnson, B. R., Li, S. D., Larson, D. B., & McCullough, M. (2000). A systematic review of the religiosity and delinquency literature. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 16, 32-52.
- Kelley, B. S., & Miller, L. (2007). Life satisfaction and spirituality in adolescents. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 18, 233-261.
- Smith, C., & Denton, M. L. (2005). *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Wallace, J. M., & Forman, T. A. (1998). Religion's role in promoting health and reducing risk among American youth. *Health Education Behavior*, 25, 721-741.

Abstract of the Multi-Site Research Proposal

Although religion is an important area of children's daily life, mainstream research in school psychology has rarely addressed its influence. Given the paucity of research addressing spirituality in children, this proposed collaborative multi-site research aims to explore the role the multidimensional facets of spirituality may play in social-emotional outcomes of adolescents, including life satisfaction, depression, and aggression. The present proposal is also intended to include multiple ethnic groups in order to examine whether the function of spirituality varies by ethnicity. A minimum of 200 adolescents per ethnic group is desirable. Participants can be recruited through various means including religiously affiliated schools, secular public schools, professional networks, faith communities, and online recruitment and survey. It is hoped that this research collaboration will generate an interest in child and adolescent spirituality research in the field and further our understanding of the impact spirituality has upon psychological well-being and adjustment of children across ethnic groups. Given the multicultural nature of our society and school populations, this objective appears to be particularly relevant and warrants greater attention.

Multi-Site Research Proposal

I believe the multi-site research opportunity provided by the 2009 School Psychology Research Collaboration Conference (SPRCC) is an exciting one, which will help to advance my research agenda through collaboration with other researchers who share similar interests. Approaching my research from a positive psychology perspective, I would like to explore the role spirituality may play in psychological well-being and mental health among children of from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Although spirituality has been shown to be important aspects of children's daily life, mainstream school psychology research has rarely addressed its influence. This lack of empirical studies reflects the very limited understanding we currently have regarding the relationship between spirituality and psychological adjustment among children.

Among the many questions that remain unanswered, the present research proposal seeks to understand how multiple dimensions of spirituality affect subjective well-being, externalizing problems, and internalizing problems in adolescents and how these relationships vary by ethnicity. I am currently conducting research which examines the influence of spirituality on those social emotional outcomes, using Korean American adolescents. This investigation is based on a focused interest in a specific ethnic group (i.e., Korean American). In the future, it will be important to study whether spirituality functions in a similar way across ethnic groups. In this regard, multi-site research collaboration will allow the investigators to overcome issues related to small, homogeneous samples and possibly address the issue of generalization.

Given that ethnic minority children have been underrepresented in the research literature, it will be important to oversample minority groups including African American, Hispanic, and Asian in multi-site research. This enables one to study similarities and differences in spirituality and its influence on social emotional outcomes among different

ethnic groups of adolescents. For example, it is plausible to hypothesize that higher levels of daily spiritual experiences, which refers to one's personal relationship with God or a higher power, is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction regardless of ethnicity. Similarly, it could be posited that congregational positive support is more powerful for minority adolescents than for their mainstream counterparts in reducing depressive symptoms based on the assumption that institutional religion can be a major source of social support for socially marginalized groups.

The proposed research project requires a minimum of 200 adolescents per ethnic group. Participants can be recruited through various means including using professional networks, faith communities, private and public schools, and online recruitment and survey. An estimated budget for this proposal is \$30,000 which covers stipends for research assistants, compensations for participants, mailing fees, travel costs, etc.

Because research in this area is still in its inception, school psychology researchers are presented with both a promising and challenging opportunity. The proposed collaborative multi-site research has several advantages. First, knowledge of spirituality in diverse ethnic groups of adolescents may help school psychologists better understand these students' social-emotional needs and be used to develop culturally sensitive prevention programs and interventions that enhance resilience. Second, having bigger, heterogeneous samples across sites will increase generalization of research findings. Finally, collaborative research activities will lead to an increased awareness of the significance and importance of spirituality in children's lives among researchers and practitioners alike. With regard to challenges of the proposed collaborative research, the topic itself may be challenging because the construct of spirituality is relatively unknown in the school psychology literature. Also, researchers may face resistance in approaching public schools for recruitment partly because of the traditional perception that religion should not be discussed in a public secular school context.

In summary, the collaborative multi-site research is proposed to explore the influence of spirituality on psychological well-being and adjustment across diverse ethnic groups of adolescents. It is hoped that this research collaboration will generate an interest in the study of spirituality in the field of school psychology, increase our understanding of its impact upon social-emotional outcomes for children, and finally, forward our knowledgebase within the specific context of multiculturalism.