Living with appending a scarlet letter: The lifelong suffering of children of alcoholics in South Korea

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ABSTRACT
Children of alcoholics (COAs) are those who have grown up with parental alcoholism. The purpose of this study was to understand the lives of Korean COAs within a Korean cultural context, influenced by Confucianism. Prior literature has extensively reported about the adverse life experiences of COAs related to their alcohol dependent parents. Indeed, most of these studies assume the U.S.- or Western-centric perspective. However, in order to provide culture-specific care, health professionals who provide care for diverse ethnic families have to understand the cultural influences on the families which have an ill family member. Data were collected from 20 Korean adult children through semi-structured interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Thematic analysis was used for the data analysis. The lives of Korean COAs were described with four themes, namely: “Losing family,” “Life with holding a bomb,” “My life ruined,” and “Being bound.” Conclusion: In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrated how cultural components could shape individual’s life experiences in a family having an alcohol dependent family member. This study would be helpful for health professionals to deeply understand the alcoholic family members within a specific cultural background as well as to build a cultural-specific care-plans for them.

KEYWORDS
Children of alcoholics; alcohol dependent parents; alcoholic family; Korean culture; thematic analysis

Introduction
Children of alcoholics (COAs) are children who have grown up in families in which one or both parents are alcohol dependent. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health conducted from 2005 to 2010, about 7.5 million U.S. children lived with a parent who had an alcohol use disorder (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2012), and it appeared that almost 1 out of 5 people had grown up in an alcoholic family in the United States.

Many previous studies have reported the adverse life experiences of COAs related to their alcohol dependent parents. For example, the children tend to grow up with a lack of parental care and love, which are essential for
children's development (Kroll, 2004). Furthermore, they often feel unsure and unsafe since the parenting they receive is inconsistent and unpredictable most of the time—like the characteristic of alcoholism, as it often depends on parents' moods and drinking status rather than predefined rules and discipline (Murray, 1998; Vaught & Wittman, 2011). In addition, COAs are frequently exposed to domestic violence, including physical, emotional, and verbal abuse of their parents (Kim, 2003a; Velleman, Templeton, Klein, & Moesgan, 2008). Some COAs suffer from direct physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and threats from their alcoholic parent (Velleman et al., 2008). The children have a strong fear not only of being abused, but also of being abandoned by non-alcoholic parents who are exhausted by their alcoholic spouses (Ju, 2008). Moreover, COAs are often described as “parental children” (Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerney, Rosman, & Schumer, 1967) as they frequently have to take on parental roles and responsibilities for their ill parents. This phenomenon is also called the parent–child role reversal or parentification (Kelley et al., 2007); an alcoholic parent depends on his or her children and asks them to take care of the family. Therefore, these children often do house chores, look after young siblings and the drunken parent(s), and even protect other family members when the alcoholic parents become abusive and intoxicated (Kelley et al., 2007; Kroll, 2004; Murray, 1998).

Similar COA life experiences have been well documented; however, most of these studies assume the U.S.- or Western-centric perspective or are conducted and written in the Western cultural background. To minimize misunderstanding and provide culture-specific care, health professionals who provide care for diverse ethnic families have to understand the cultural influences on the families that have an ill family member (Kim & Hong, 2007). In particular, with regard to the problems of children of alcoholics, what is crucial is the understanding of the parent–child relationship. This relationship cannot be fully comprehended without an appropriate consideration of cultural influences on children and their parents. Therefore, it is important to understand the lives of COAs in view of the specific culture they belong to. Indeed, different ethnicities tend to have unique parent–child relationships that derive from their own cultural influences, and South Korea is one of these ethnicities (Park & Schepp, 2015).

South Korea has been under the great influence of Confucianism (Lee, 2007). Confucianism, which originated from China and was adopted by Korea and several other Asian countries, consists of a set of values and thoughts that people are expected to follow (Gao et al., 2012). Confucianism emphasizes the roles and duties in accordance with one's position (D. H. Lee, 2009; Y. C. Lee, 2007). The values of Confucianism have deeply influenced family and the relationships between family members in South Korea. Two values in particular—familism and filial piety—have greatly affected Korean families (Ryu, 2007). Familism is a philosophy that considers family more important
than an individual family member, and *filial piety* is the virtue and duty for children to respect, obey, and care for their parents.

Indeed, Korean children are expected by family and society to fulfill their filial piety obligation to their parents. Specifically, children are expected to obey their parents, respect them, and support them physically, emotionally, and even financially until their parents die. In addition, due to the influence of familism, children are expected to honor and glorify their family by entering a good university and achieving social success (Chung, 1984). On the other hand, Korean parents are more likely to think that children are in their full possession, and so are their children’s achievements (Ryu, 2007). To summarize, by the influence of Confucianism, the parent–child relationship in South Korea is a much more prolonged, attached, and interdependent type of relationship relative to comparable constructs that exist in other cultures (Park, 2005).

In addition, in terms of alcohol use, South Korea has a high rate of alcohol consumption. According to Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2007), about 40.3% of men and 12.8% of women (total 28.5% of the population) reported engaging in binge drinking (five drinks or more in one day) one or more times per week. When comparing with U.S. data, which reported 23.0% of adults in the United States engaged in binge drinking at least once in the past year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010), it seems that a large proportion of Koreans engage in excessive alcohol use.

In this specific cultural background, we can assume that the Korean COAs might undergo unique experiences as compared to COAs from other cultural backgrounds. In addition, the percentage of Korean COAs is not small according to the data. Approximately 18.4% to 36% were identified as COAs or adult COAs (i.e., adults who have grown up with parental alcoholism in their youth) in South Korea (H. K. Kim & Lee, 2011; H. R. Kim, Jeon, & Kim, 2004; Yang, 2007). However, to the best of our knowledge, no previous research has examined their lives and situations within their own cultural background. The exception is our own previous study in which we investigated the characteristics of the Korean alcoholic family from the perspective of Confucian culture by reviewing all qualitative studies on the Korean alcoholic families with alcoholic fathers (Park & Schepp, 2015). However, since we used the method of systematic review, it was difficult to understand their lives deeply enough.

Therefore, we conducted a phenomenological study by using thematic analysis to explore the lives of the Korean children of alcoholics. The main purpose of this study was to understand the lives of children of alcoholics who had grown up in Korean alcoholic families under the influences of the Korean traditional culture. Our particular focus was on those Korean children whose fathers had had excessive alcohol-drinking problems since we thought that the life experiences of these children could be different from the experiences of other COAs whose mothers were alcoholics. The fact that the majority of alcoholics in South Korea are male was also considered (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2011).
Method

This study is a part of a larger study, a doctoral dissertation, exploring the adaptation process in adult children of alcoholic fathers in South Korea (Park, 2015). All study procedures and materials, including informed consents and flyers, were reviewed and approved by University of Washington Human Subject Review Committee prior to the recruitment of the participants.

Sample

To minimize memory bias, only the COAs aged between 19 and 30 years were recruited. Three approaches were used to recruit the study participants. First, flyers were posted on the campuses of two universities and one college in South Korea. Second, a flyer was uploaded on the online self-help group website—the online AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) group to support alcohol dependents and their families, which opened in 2003 and has about 11,600 members participating. Finally, we used the snowball sampling method. At the end of interview, we asked the participants to introduce any COAs they knew, including their siblings.

A total of 23 Korean participants were recruited. However, since three participants dropped out, the data from only 20 participants were used in the final analyses. The mean age of the study participants was 24.55 years (SD = 1.2); 65% of the participants were female (N = 13), and 35% were male (N = 7). Half of the participants (N = 10) were the first children; 30% were middle children (N = 6); and 15% were the last children (N = 3). One participant was the only child. Seventy-five percent of the participants (N = 15) recognized their father had a problem with alcoholism before the child became a teenager (5–12 years old); 15% recognized it when 13–19 years of age (N = 3); 10% recognized it when aged 20 or older (N = 2). The characteristics of the interview participants are listed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>N (%) or Mean</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age 19–24</td>
<td>12 (60%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age 25–30</td>
<td>8 (40%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Male</td>
<td>7 (35%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Female</td>
<td>13 (65%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birth order First</td>
<td>10 (50%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birth order Middle</td>
<td>6 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth order Last</td>
<td>3 (15%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birth order Only child</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age to recognize (exposed) 5–12</td>
<td>15 (75%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age to recognize (exposed) 13–19</td>
<td>3 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age to recognize (exposed) 20 or older</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
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<td>CAST score</td>
<td>21.3</td>
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**Procedure**

An online screening test was conducted with the potential participants who contacted the researcher in order to screen the participants to see that they met the criteria that they be children of alcoholics. The online screening test consisted of (a) the Korean version of Children of Alcoholic Screening Test (CAST-K; M. R. Kim, Chang, & Kim, 1995) and (b) the demographic questionnaire. Those who received a score of 6 or above on the CAST scale were allowed to participate in the study; the scores ranged from 6 to 29, and the mean score was 21.3. Semistructured interviews were then conducted twice with each of the participants. The reason to interview twice was that there was a need to build a rapport between the researcher and the study participants because they had to talk about a highly sensitive topic. In addition, by giving the participants time to pause between the two interviews, they could have some time to recall their childhood memories. The first author interviewed the participants and encouraged them to talk about their life experiences related to their alcohol-dependent fathers with the help of guided questions. Several additional questions were asked to specify and clarify the obtained information. The guided questions are listed in Table 2, but in this article, we did not present the analysis from question 4. The first interview took between 50 minutes and 1 hour; the second interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted in either face-to-face or telephone formats, according to each participant’s preference. After finishing the interviews, an incentive of a gift card ($40) was provided to the participants. All interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed afterward.

**Data analysis**

A thematic analysis was used to explore the main ideas within the interview data. The transcripts were thoroughly read several times and coded. All the codes were compared and encapsulated into broader concepts (categories). Furthermore, those categories were again encapsulated into yet broader themes to describe the life experiences of the Korean children of alcoholic fathers. To check the consistency and to prevent information duplicity, all

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 2. Guided questions for interview.</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Please introduce yourself and your family.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Could you tell me about your childhood experiences related to paternal alcohol drinking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Please tell me about your current life in terms of what it has been like having a parent with alcohol problems.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. What are the conditions or factors that affect this process of living with your parent?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. How do you perceive your father?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How do you perceive your mother?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How do you anticipate your future life in terms of the relationship with your parents?</td>
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</table>
the codes, categories, and themes were constantly reviewed and compared. A total of four global themes were identified in the data.

**Results**

Above all, I will keep trying to escape from this suffer … (However,) I’m just guessing that I am not being able to live a successful life because of him [father] (laugh). He negatively has affected my life, you know. He occupies 100%, 200% of my life as a burden. Like I said yesterday, I am not sure I can really marry in the future. (Participant A123).

Assuming my individual life as 100, I think my dad reaches 50. On the surface, his life is marked as a scarlet letter, which cannot be erased somehow. I want to erase it, but I can’t … (Participant A117).

According to the interviews, the interview participants (Korean children of alcoholic fathers: KCOAs) were more likely to suffer from tremendous distress, shame, and various difficulties related to their fathers’ problematic alcohol drinking, and such difficulties tended to persist throughout their lives. The main themes describing the lives of KCOAs were (a) losing family; (a) life with holding a bomb; (c) my life ruined; and (d) being bound. The themes and the subthemes are listed in Table 3.

**Theme one: Losing family**

Due to their father’s problematic alcohol drinking, KCOA participants tended to experience physical and emotional family dissolution. In their broken

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<th>Table 3. The lifelong suffering of children of alcoholics in South Korea: A summary of themes and subthemes.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Theme one: Losing family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Living in chaotic home environment</td>
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<td>Experiencing family’s breaking up</td>
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<td>I don’t have a father</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling mental barrier</td>
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<td>Theme two: Life with holding a bomb</td>
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<td>Getting stressed by dad’s behavior after drinking</td>
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<td>Feeling shame</td>
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<td>Being put to shame due to dad’s drinking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hiding my shameful secret</td>
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<td>Being extra cautious not to irritate him</td>
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<td>Theme three: My life ruined</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making such a mess of my life</td>
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<td>Giving up the life that I had desired</td>
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<td>Having an obstacle in my life</td>
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<td>Theme four: Being bound</td>
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<td>Being bound to him</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be bound to family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being a troubleshooter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worrying about my family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling responsibility toward my pitiful mother</td>
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family, they could not feel safe and comfortable, felt that their families were somewhat incomplete and impaired, and felt a lack of intimacy in the family.

**Living in chaotic home environment**
By having an alcoholic father, the family’s condition was often unstable, chaotic, and disorganized; conditions of comfort and relaxation at home were not provided for many KCOA participants. During the interviews, their home environments were often described as messy, noisy, dark, and unstable. Many participants reported that they could easily see the bottles of alcohol scattered all over the floor as well as their drunken father being unable to keep himself steady. Moreover, because of the father’s economical incapability, some participants experienced extreme poverty. In such home environments, KCOA participants often felt depressed and insecure.

I was nervous when I was home. Originally, home should provide a comfortable environment. (But) once my dad came home with a glass of liquor in his hand, all my family including me trembled with fear. Since my youth, I felt uncomfortable of staying at home.

At that time I was in elementary school. What I can remember is that my dad was always lied down without washing himself. He just lied down and the bottles, you know … the empty soju [Korean liquor] bottles were always placed at his bedside.

**Experiencing family’s breaking up**
In addition, the father’s severe alcoholism or excessive alcohol drinking often resulted in physical and emotional break-up of the family. Many participants described how their fathers’ problematic alcohol drinking affected the relationships between family members. The majority of the conflicts occurred between the parents. The father’s excessive alcohol drinking often ended with physical or verbal aggression and violence between them. In addition, it negatively influenced relationships between family members. The conflicts usually occurred due to the shifting or sharing of the responsibilities in taking care of the alcoholic father between the family members or feelings of extreme emotional stress or exasperation with the father’s extensive drinking. The father’s alcoholism often led to the physical breakup of the family. While there were many reasons for this, mainly it was triggered by parents’ divorce or separation or the mother’s departure.

Because we were alcoholic family and my dad drank excessively, my family broke up when I was about 11 years old. Since then, my dad has lived by himself with still drinking, my mom has lived with my younger brother in Seoul … and I had grown up in the orphanage since I was 11.

My family lives separately and I often feel that I was raised under the broken family. Of course, I would frequently contact my sisters and brothers, but it was just 2 years that I could live with all my family members including my mom and my all siblings.
All six people are living separately now. I wish that all my family members could gather and have a very wonderful time especially during special festivals and events [Crying]. I always dream of such an amiable family atmosphere.

**I don’t have “a father”**

KCOA participants cited a number of reasons for their fathers being absent, such as treatment for alcoholism or the parents’ divorce. In some cases, even though they could physically stay with their fathers, the fathers’ incapability of fulfilling his role as a head of household made KCOA participants feel that they did not have a father like others around them (e.g., friends). Consequently, they suffered from social stigma and shame because of the father’s absence or his incapability. They even felt ashamed of their mothers, who often had to take on their fathers’ roles. They constantly compared their situations with other families and felt envious.

I remember that I envied any son or daughter having a responsible and delicate dad who managed his family. I wished that I would have such kind of dad.

When I was a middle school student, one of my classmates said to me “your mom is a widow.” She must be kidding, but I was shocked at that time. I was ashamed she worked (instead of my dad) and she worked for me.

I imagined that emotionally speaking I was feeling a sense of emptiness for the absence of my dad at home. I feared that my family without an elder man might become a main target for attack and might be disregarded. I supposed that we might be robbed. Right! We can be really robbed. Can you imagine it? … When my dad was absent (due to his hospitalization), I felt peaceful and happy because there was nobody who was drunk and scolded and battered me. When my dad was away from home, we were OK in that aspect. But as I said yesterday, our family did not go smoothly so I couldn’t feel anything but a sense of futility. As for it, I cannot say more clearly and specifically. My mom had terrible struggles taking over my dad’s responsibility. She made keen efforts to fulfill both roles as my dad and mom. However, I could not stop feeling a sense of emptiness, because there was the role that only fathers could do.

**Feeling a mental barrier**

Even when their fathers were not drunk, KCOA participants felt uncomfortable being with them and wanted to escape such situations. Many participants reported that they did not know what to say to or what to do with their father when with him. They felt that it was difficult to approach their fathers or communicate with them.

So I could try to have some conversations with him, but his image that I had seen since I was young was somehow scary. I have difficulties to approach him. Whenever I try to say something to him, I start to shake.
Still, I feel uncomfortable to be with him. Well, I don’t want to be with him alone. I can go somewhere with him only if other family members are present. But I don’t want to be with him alone.

**Theme two: Life with holding a bomb**

According to KCOA participants, living with an alcoholic father was like living life while holding a bomb.

**Getting stressed due to dad’s behaviors after drinking**

The fathers’ drunken behaviors themselves were a bomb to the KCOA participants. Throughout their lives, KCOA participants experienced severe stress from their drunken fathers’ behaviors or verbal attacks, which usually made them angry or nervous.

Once my dad was drunk, he ordered me to come to him, and began to talk, even when I was very busy. I was appalled at the wasted hours I had spent doing so. These repeating situations made me nervous. As a new school semester began, I had to get into my room and do a lot of schoolwork, but when my drunken dad ordered me to come to him, I had to get out of my room and sit beside him again. I wished that he would have not done so. I really want him to just go to his bed without tormenting me, after he is drunk. If he could do that ... I would be really happy.

Intoxicated fathers were often described as coming home late at night, awakening the family, and wanting to have pointless conversations. Fathers, while intoxicated, started to pick on other family members for no reason.

**Feeling shame**

KCOA participants unexpectedly encountered shameful situations related to their drunken fathers. Even though they put a lot of effort into hiding their secret about their fathers, they were always afraid of their secret being disclosed.

*Being Put to Shame Due to Dad’s Drinking.* KCOA participants experienced numerous shameful incidents and considerable embarrassment due to their fathers’ excessive drinking. Consequently, they felt inferior to their peers and suffered from social stigma and frustration.

At the age of 5, I was very ashamed of asking for free liquor. Even though I was able to buy the liquor with the money, it still was an awkward situation when you think of a young kid buying liquor. But just imagine a 5-year-old kid coming to the shop every day and saying, “my dad asked us to buy liquor on tab”? It was too much burden to say this for me. Nonetheless, it was impossible not to go buy liquor because my dad was too much for me to bear.
I remember that one day I was walking on my way home with my friends at about 11:00 p.m., after finishing an evening study hall session at my high school, and I found a familiar face was going to the same apartment as I passed. The man was my dad. He was totally drunk and walked staggeringly. At that moment I was very ashamed of my dad and went on walking without calling out to him. I was terribly ashamed once I saw him in this drunken condition especially when I was present with my friends.

**Hiding My Shameful Secret.** Their shame led them to hide their family’s secrets from the public. Many KCOA participants reported making an effort to hide their personal stories of their fathers and family from other people, including colleagues, friends, and spouses.

As someone talks about family, I often keep the story of it hidden for fear that any listener might be thinking of my family and me in a negative way. At the moment when I don’t need to talk about my family, I don’t mention it at all.

When my friends talked about their family, in my youth, I did not like talking about it and often left the seat to avoid talking. Here is the story I experienced during my middle school days. By time when summer and winter vacation ended, my friends used to talk about where they had been with their families. But for me, there was nothing to say about my family. My dad reminded me of a man who came back home late at night totally drunk. That was all that I can talk about my family. Whenever my friends talked about their families, I responded to it, saying just two words, “Oh, really?” without mentioning my family, and then left the seat. Seeing that, a few best friends of mine asked me, “How come you don’t talk about your dad?” I replied, “He is just busy.” The moment I said like that, I felt bad.

**Being extra cautious not to irritate him**
In addition, KCOAs knew that any words, behaviors, or interactions could stimulate their fathers, and it this could be turned into fathers’ abusive behaviors and verbal attacks followed by another drinking episode. As a result, KCOA participants became apprehensive about having any interaction with their fathers that could potentially trigger further drinking as well as lead to conflict, and they were extremely cautious to not irritate or provoke their fathers.

I could not say anything to him because I was sure he would be furious again. If I said anything to him, such as compliant or objection, it always had come back with his drinking and his verbal attack… So I was afraid.

I did not want to make any argument with him. I always said “you are right, you are right.” So I just avoided any conversation with him. If the situation seemed to go little bit rough way, I just avoided that place.

**Theme three: My life ruined**
As they grew up, KCOA participants recognized the negative influence of their alcoholic fathers on them. In other words, they were more likely to
believe that their lives had been negatively influenced by their fathers, and believed that the presence of their alcoholic fathers would not be helpful in their futures.

Making such a mess of my life
KCOA participants believed that their whole lives, including their own personalities, social relationships, and academic achievements, were heavily influenced by their fathers in a negative way. Many participants reported that their personalities became passive and timid due to their alcoholic fathers’ influences. In addition, they reported diverse and persistent negative effects, such as nervousness, chronic anxiety, feelings of inferiority, poor self-confidence, and so on. In the interview excerpt below, a participant describes how her violent personality was influenced by her violent father:

In the old days, I was raised with my being battered too much from my dad. Thus I thought that it does not matter at all whether I battered someone. As an example, while I was arguing with my older sister, I struck her a blow if I judged that I would be beaten in arguments with her. As a person who works in the education area, I did use physical punishment on the students, and I did not think of it seriously. As I look back over my life history such as this, I feel very sorry for the students.

Giving up the life that I had desired
Some KCOA participants reported that their lives were negatively influenced in terms of having to abandon personal goals since they had to prioritize family issues over their own lives. They had to give up their desired career path; instead, they had to get a meaningless job in order to support their alcoholic fathers and families financially.

I have now majored in the science of nursing. But I would like to say honestly that I was more interested in writing, and I meant to choose the academic study related to it. But strictly speaking, a career as a writer would not provide regular incomes. Thus I gave up what I might have been, an unstable writer, and made up my mind to choose a career as a nurse that would secure a more stable life. And I thought that I ought to get a job as a nurse with my old mom dependent upon me for bread and butter in the upcoming years. But I want to become a writer, someday.

Having an obstacle in my life
Not only did they think that they were negatively influenced in the past, but also many KCOA participants anticipated that their alcoholic fathers would be unhelpful—and even a major obstacle—in their future lives. Even at the time of the interview, several KCOA participants felt pressured to settle their father’s debt or pay his living expenses. Moreover, they worried that this burden would continue in their future lives. In addition, some
participants worried about their future marriages, fearing that their alcoholic fathers would be an obstacle to their marriage or be drunk at their wedding ceremony.

At the age of 23 after I finished my military service, I started to think of what I will do in the future. The greater I made a plan for my future, the more I made up my mind to live my life hard. But my dad kept disturbing me in carrying out such decision. The more I thought that he put the brakes on my bright future, the more I disliked him.

If I don’t break off the blood ties with my dad, I have to keep this contact and feel a bond with him. At least I have to show politeness to an elder, I know. The Korean sentiments require juniors to be polite to elders, whether they like it or not! It is polite that I should invite my dad to attend my wedding ceremony, when I get married. But I don’t like to do so because I fear that he might be making a scene in the wedding hall. If I don’t invite him, I am worried that the guests in the wedding hall would think that the bride did not have her dad. Actually, I tend to care about too much what other people say to me. Also I don’t want my future husband to notice my awful family stories. To be shameful to say, my family background is one of the most obstacles and a cross to my life.

**Theme four: Being bound**

The hardest part for the KCOA participants was that they expected these sufferings, distresses, and responsibilities would be lifelong. They were realizing that they were too bound to their fathers and families, and they expected that they could not ever be freed from this tie.

**Being bound to him**

KCOA participants suffered from the recognition that they were socially and emotionally bound to their fathers, and severing these bonds completely was not as easy as they had imagined. Socially, they felt it was impossible to cut blood ties with their fathers or suppress the feeling of filial obligation toward them. Indeed, one participant actually complained about Korean society, which expects adult children to support their aged parents. On an emotional level, they recognized that they were unconsciously concerned about their father even though they did not want to think or care about him. This is understandable when considering that many KCOA participants had lived as one of his caregivers. For this reason, it seemed that it might be hard for them to abandon their accustomed responsibilities.

I was aware that I needed to get out from under his emotional influences. I realized that I was bothered with matters related to my dad too much. I was always nervous and disheartened due to my dad, whatever I did and wherever I went. It becomes a part of my life that I continuously cared about my dad.
The Korean society requires adult children to support their old parents. But I have always undergone physical and mental violence too much from my dad, so I don’t want to look after him. But every adult child who earns a living is obliged to support their parents. This moral standard is deeply rooted in this Korean society. Considering all this situation, since my dad has adult children and sons-in-law, we have no choice but support him.

**Being bound to family**

KCOA participants also suffered from being bound to family problems related to their alcoholic fathers. They were expected to become a troubleshooter to solve or mediate family problems caused by the father or by other family members. In addition, they felt it impossible to free themselves from these endless concerns and responsibilities related to the family problems.

*Being a Troubleshooter.* KCOA participants were immersed in the problems caused by their alcoholic fathers, including attempts to reconcile conflicts between the parents. They felt that it had always been their duty to maintain balance within the family, and they often took charge of solving the problems caused by their alcoholic fathers.

I have been always the one who stop their [parents’] quarrels. I am the troubleshooter for them till now.

I did not want to see neighbors complain about those noisy noises that my drunken dad and mom made while quarreling with each other. Whenever my parents did so, I used to apologize sincerely to local people coming to my place to complain, saying that my dad was drunk and we had some family problems … then those neighbors just went back without saying anything, shortly after I said sorry to them. I remember that I did it so many times in my elementary school days.

*Worrying About My Family.* KCOA participants constantly worried about their family being somewhat disorganized and unstable due to their father’s alcohol problems. In particular, they worried about other family members’ (mothers’ and siblings’) well-being. Thus, many KCOA participants had devoted their time and effort to easing or solving family members’ suffering, protecting the family from the father, and educating younger siblings about the father’s drinking problem and coping strategies for them to use themselves.

I have always desired that my family could provide much comfort and reassurance to me in someday [crying]. I have not spent my hours without worrying about my family … I got married, but I am still very concerned about my parents, my brothers and sisters.

I thought that I would rather leave this home than stay, in order to avoid all the mess. If I only think about myself, leaving my home is much more carefree for me. But it still bothers me somehow, especially when my mom calls me. I was glad
but at the same time I was worried that something related to my dad would happen to my family.

**Feeling Responsibility Toward My Pitiful Mother.** Many KCOA participants, since they were young, had witnessed their alcoholic fathers abusing their mothers. While growing up, they were concerned about their mothers, and some of them actually put considerable effort into protecting their mothers. For this reason, most of the interviewees still felt a great sense of responsibility toward their mothers, who had been direct victims of their fathers’ alcoholism. Even after becoming independent, they could not stop worrying about their mothers.

As he tormented her, she sometimes ran away from home for a while until he calmed down. While my mom was away, my dad asked us where she went, and looked around to find her. At that time, I was too young to handle it. I thought that only way to protect my mom was not to tell my dad where she was.

Nowadays, I am more eager to protect my mom, who is weak and feeble. If I don’t need to take care of her, I want to leave this place and live alone. I am driven by this strong desire to run away from this place and live alone. But only one thing has just struck in my head … my mom. My mom will have even tougher times if I do not stay with her. I can say that my mom finds her pleasure only in me … like going somewhere with me.

**Discussion**

As one of the interview participants said, having an alcoholic father is similar to having a scarlet letter. It is indelible and persistently affects their lives. Another interviewee described his or her life as carrying a cross. Such a life is always full of fears, adversities, and endless burden.

The present study investigated the lives of the Korean children whose fathers had alcohol misuse problems; the data analysis amounted to the identification of four main themes: losing family, life with holding a bomb, my life ruined, and being bound. According to the findings of this study, several experiences reported by KCOA participants were somehow usual—those experiences were also reported in previous studies conducted in other countries. Other experiences seemed to be unique.

Above all, the theme of losing family has been consistently reported in many previous studies. Consistent with previous findings, almost all of the KCOA participants in the present study talked about how their father’s alcoholism negatively affected their families; for example, how it contributed to the conflicts between family members, family poverty, and family breakdown. First, similar to past research (Rounsaville, O’Farrell, Andreas, Murphy, & Murphy, 2014; Waldron, Bucholz, Lynskey, Madden, & Heath, 2013), the KCOA participants also reported that the father’s alcohol drinking often caused battles or
violence between the parents. It sometimes caused parents’ separation or divorce, which naturally led to the family’s break-up. Second, both previous studies and our study converge in reporting that a father’s alcohol-drinking habits caused a tremendous emotional distress in family members. This extreme stress and the severe responsibilities frequently caused the conflict between family members, and it even forced some family members to leave their home. The third congruent finding is that the father’s alcoholism is often related to the family’s poverty (Hall, 2008; Kost & Smyth, 2002). Indeed, the majority of KCOA participants reported that they had experienced poverty since they were young. Nonalcoholic mothers were more likely to take care of the financial responsibilities for their families instead of incapable fathers. However, a mother’s earnings were usually insufficient in terms of covering their father’s addiction treatment and the family’s living expenses. This family poverty sometimes imposed the financial responsibilities on young adult children. Our previous study also highlighted the KCOA’s financial responsibilities and obligation to their parents, which caused a huge stress and a feeling of burden among the Korean children (Park & Schepp, 2015).

In addition, it is an established fact that COAs tend to grow up losing many things that a typical child should have in childhood (Kroll, 2004), and so did KCOAs according to the results of this study. Unlike their peers, our KCOA participants had to grow up with being asked to look after and worry about others instead of receiving stable parental care and love in a comfortable family nest. They had to give up the lives they wanted to have; they had to give up their dreams, a happy family life, and comfort. Kroll (2004) and Murray (1998) also described COAs’ losses — such as loss of parenting, loss of being protected and nurtured, loss of a sense of belonging and connectedness, and loss of childhood. Furthermore, we found that our KCOA participants had lost the chance to lead a normal family life and learn normal behaviors from an appropriate role model. Indeed, several participants reported that they did not even know what “normal” was in a family. They did not know a normal response or method to solve the problem when they had trouble with someone, or they did not know how to express their feelings without aggression. One of the previous studies made a similar observation: Specifically, several interviewees in Kim’s (2003b) study reported that, since they did not know how to express affective feelings toward others, they rather tortured their friends when they liked them. Furthermore, some interviewees reported that, due to their past experiences, they would hit their children when they themselves became parents (M. A. Kim, 2003b).

On the other hand, several unique experiences and feelings were reported by our KCOA participants that were not observed in previous studies conducted in other cultures. As expected, these unique experiences and feelings seemed to be related to the Korean sociocultural influences—coming from Confucian thoughts and values. First, many KCOA participants tended to
show a strong disappointment about their fathers not fulfilling Confucian roles and duties that a father should have as a head of a household. In Confucianism, a father—the head of the household—should have an authority such that all other family members can respect and follow his orders (Y. C. Lee, 2007). In that regard, the majority of our KCOA participants did not show the respect toward their fathers, who could neither fulfill their paternal roles nor support their families. At the same time, they felt desperate about their fathers’ being treated like that by them as well as by the people around them (i.e., siblings, mother, and neighbors). In addition, they felt shame about their fathers who were negatively different from their peers’ fathers. Consequently, they hid their family stories from their acquaintances and peers, and they considered their fathers as an obstacle in their current and future lives. Some KCOA participants felt ashamed of their mothers for assuming their father’s role—for example, earning money instead of their fathers. These results are congruent with previous reports that indicated that the Korean alcoholic fathers were more likely to experience emotional distress caused by the loss of respect; they were ignored by other family members and were considered as troublesome and useless persons (Park & Schepp, 2015).

Moreover, many KCOA participants took over family responsibilities, and consequently felt a burden. Actually, taking over responsibility and feeling a burden in COAs were also described in Murray’s (1998) study; the interview participants whose parents were alcoholics stated that they had to carry on the responsibilities related to their families and alcoholic parents since there would have been no one else to take on the responsibility. However, in terms of taking over responsibility and feeling a burden in our KCOA participants, it seemed to be more lifelong and related to Confucian obligations. Despite being an independent adult—for example, after gaining financial independence, getting married, and having their own families—the majority of our participants felt or were aware of these responsibilities. Some of them actually spent a lot of their energy and money supporting their family—an alcoholic father, a feeble mother, and siblings. Even the societal expectation made them feel this tremendous burden. The Korean society is more likely to expect adult children to take care of their old and financially incapable parents (Moreover, many KCOA participants took over family responsibilities, and consequently felt a burden). Some of our KCOA participants complained about these societal expectations, which shift the heavy responsibilities onto adult children. However, regardless of children’s willingness, they seemed to know that they could not be freed from this heavy obligation and burden. Thus, this prolonged parent–child relationship and sociocultural filial expectation made their feelings of burden yet stronger and more durable.

Finally, our results emphatically highlight the Confucian value of familism, which emphasizes the family over the individuals who belong to that family. Many Koreans tend to think that an unhealthy family will give a bad reputation
and negatively affect children’s future (Kang, 1995). Indeed, some of our KCOA participants reported that they were anticipating the disadvantages they would have in their future careers or in marriage due to their alcoholic fathers. Several respondents were concerned about their fathers visiting their workplaces when being intoxicated and asking for financial help, which could negatively influence their reputation in career trajectories. Therefore, many of them did not disclose their places of work or their salaries to the fathers. In addition, in Korea, marriage is not just between individuals, but rather between families. For this reason, many of our respondents worried about their future marriage in terms of being rejected by their future spouse’s family.

All studies have limitations, and ours is not an exception. Specifically, since the interview participants in the present study were all volunteers, there might be more unexplored stories experienced by other KCOAs who did not want to participate in this study. In addition, several participants majored in nursing or psychology. Their academic backgrounds might have influenced their interview responses.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, our results convincingly demonstrate that cultural values and thoughts play an important role in shaping familial values and parent–child relationships. South Korea has a unique culture and values from the influence of Confucianism, and this unique cultural background affects every family and individual, including the Korean children of alcoholic parents. This study sought to examine the life experiences of the Korean children of alcoholic fathers. A total of four themes were observed in the responses: (a) losing family; (b) life with holding a bomb; (c) my life ruined; and (d) being bound. As expected, the Korean adult COAs undergo lifelong sufferings and distress, which originate not only from the problems related to COAs’ alcoholic fathers, but also from the Confucian obligation to support one’s parents as adult children and the culturally motivated prolonged and interdependent relationships between parents and children. It could be described as “a life with appending a scarlet letter,” as formulated by one of our interview participants. This study would be helpful to health professionals who have to meet and provide care for the families that have diverse cultural backgrounds. Further research is needed on the experiences of other groups of Korean children whose mothers were alcoholics. Finally, future studies should also explore the life experiences of COAs from other ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds.

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