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Original Article

Korea's Drinking Culture: When an Organizational Socialization Tool Threatens Workplace Well-being

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Abstract

According to recent studies, Koreans consume the most amount of alcohol in the world. Alcohol consumption is not only a matter of taste but also a part of the socialization process in Korean culture. Moreover, this aspect of the culture affects organizations, and drinking plays an important role in workplace socialization. Hoesik or dining together is one of the most important forms of socialization in Korean organizations. During drinking sessions, employees encourage each other to consume alcohol as they share ideas and build social networks. However, frequent hoesik sessions and a “bottoms-up” drinking culture indicate that Koreans often consume hazardous amounts of alcohol. Excessive alcohol consumption threatens not only the well-being of employees but also the sustainability of organizations. This study discusses organizational socialization in Korea, the role of hoesik as an important organizational socialization activity, and the effects of excessive alcohol consumption on employees. There is a growing need to improve the well-being of Korean employees, and stopping heavy alcohol consumption is an important step toward achieving this need.

Keywords

Organizational socialization • Hoesik • Drinking culture in Korea • Employee well-being • Work–life balance

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The question “How much alcohol can you handle?” is often part of a job interview in Korea. [Kwon \(2014\)](#) reports that a typical job application form will ask applicants to reveal if they drink alcohol and if they do, then how much do they usually consume. The next step in a recruitment process is the so-called “alcohol interview.” During this interview, applicants are plied with several shots of alcohol and sometimes asked to dance or sing. The purpose is to determine how much alcohol an applicant can hold as Koreans tend to see someone who can hold his/her alcohol well as someone who will work well.

[Kiersz \(2014\)](#) reports that Koreans drink the most amount of hard liquor in the world, at 11.2 shots per week, which is twice as much as the Russians, who occupy the second spot. [F. Cha \(2014\)](#) finds that drinking is among the 10 things that Koreans do better than others. A lot of drinking happens during after work, office-related dining. [J. H. Oh \(2002\)](#) reports that 47.1% of respondents who drink answered that they drink for socializing with co-workers and colleagues. With regard to the frequency and amount of drinking on such occasions, [S. H. Choi, Kim, and Kim \(2001\)](#) report that 87% of employees drink at least once a week. [Kweon \(2005\)](#) reports that more than 80% of employees indulged in binge drinking, defined as imbibing more than five shots in one go, in 12 months and 23% binge drink at least once a week.

Chang Ki-hwun, a senior researcher at the Korean Alcohol Research Foundation, examined reasons for workplace alcohol consumption among Koreans ([Nakano, 2012](#)). He reports that rapid economic growth meant that Koreans had to work hard and drinking became an outlet for work-related stress. [J. H. Lee \(2010\)](#) reports that more than 50% of those who drink responded that they drank to release their stress. Company-wide drinking is very common in Korea and this is referred to as *hoesik*, which means “staff dining” or “company dining.” [C. Cha \(2012\)](#) refers to it as “eating/drinking feasts involving multiple rounds at multiple venues.”

In Korea, drinking does not just occur at night. [Y. C. Cho \(2013\)](#) reports that almost 60% of Korean workers drink in the daytime; among them, 43% said that they drink with a supervisor, 28.5% said that they drink with external workers such as contractors, and 28.5% said that they drink with colleagues. Moreover, 55% of respondents reported that they were obliged to drink in the daytime because of work and that they could not help it. More than 60% of respondents drank one or one-and-a-half shots in the daylight, and 65.4% of them went back to work after drinking. This is associated with daytime drunken driving. Recently, many drunken drivers have been caught during daytime checks ([M. C. Park, 2015](#)).

Why do Korean workers drink so much? The amount of alcohol that they consume is the highest in the world. They have a drinking culture that is rooted in “one shot” or “bottoms-up” and *poktanju* or “bomb,” which refers to mixing drinks (typically beer and whiskey or beer and *Soju*, the Korean alcohol). This causes Koreans to

not only consume more alcohol but also get drunk fast. Recently, as Nakano (2012) reports, the Korean Government has begun a campaign to decrease heavy drinking. People are urged not to mix their drinks, not to go bar-hopping, and to return to their homes by 9 pm. Corporations have initiated a new policy on *hoesik*. For example, the “119 campaign” refers to “one type of alcohol, in one place, and only until 9 pm,” the “829 campaign” alludes to “finishing *hoesik* between 8 and 9 pm, and no second venue,” and the “222 campaign” is about “not mixing two kinds of alcohol, not recommending more than two shots to others, and not going to a second venue.”

Although these efforts began in 2007, they were taken up actively by organizations only a few years ago. Although more companies and organizations are becoming aggressive about implementing these policies especially when *hoesik* peaks at year-end, the fact that mass media carries reminders about the need to put these policies in place shows that these efforts have thus far fallen short. Attempts to come up with variations on the 119, 829, and 222 themes are further evidence of a continuing battle that organizations are facing with reining in the drinking culture.

On the positive side, it is claimed that *hoesik* fosters organizational cohesion by building a closer relationship among employees. However, *hoesik* has serious consequences on employee health, work efficiency, and productivity. According to a survey by the Ministry of Gender Equality (2001), 45% of 1,000 respondents said that *hoesik* was not helpful in increasing productivity. Moreover, 30% said that vulgar talks or sexual harassment were frequent at drinking sessions. Y. J. Han (2012) reports that 34% of respondents considered the drinking culture as a “necessary evil” and 40% said that they felt constrained to participate in drinking sessions to maintain their social relationships. O. Kim and Jeon (2012) report that office workers drink together to strengthen their organizational networks. Y. Kim and Hong’s (2012) study also supports the socialization purpose of alcohol; more than half of Korean male employees drink with coworkers. Many Koreans see alcohol as a “social lubricant,” as something that helps break the ice among people (W. Kim, 2009; Yang & Kim, 2012). H. S. Park and Lee (2011) also report that participating in drinking occasions was seen as a way to acquire useful information about a workplace and get close with coworkers. Thus, although *hoesik* is not favored by most employees, the drinking culture remains in place as a tool of workplace socialization.

Although *hoesik* is an inherent part of organizational socialization, most literature on organizational socialization is centered on formal processes such as orientation and workshops for new employees. In this study, organizational socialization is taken as a continuous process that happens throughout one’s career, and *hoesik* is discussed as one of the main organizational socialization processes in Korea. We will review the literature on organizational socialization and examine it in Korea by discussing

hoesik's role in this process, its cultural roots, and its consequences. We will closely examine the negative impact of *hoesik* on employee welfare, productivity, and work environment. By examining the *hoesik* culture and its effects, we will attempt to show the complexity of workplace socialization tools. *Hoesik* and its accompanying drinking culture is an interesting example of a socialization tool that endangers the well-being of employees, workplace, and society.

To understand the roots of the *hoesik* culture, we need to first identify the organizational socialization process and unique position of drinking in it.

Organizational Socialization and *Hoesik*

Organizational socialization is a “process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role” (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 3), and it occurs when “people acquire the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume a particular job in an organization” (Van Maanen, 1978, p. 19).

Most studies on organizational socialization focus on the socialization of new employees (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Griffin, Colella, & Goparaju, 2001; Jones, 1983; Louis, Posner, & Powell, 1983; Morrison, 1993; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992). However, organizational socialization is a learning process, and this learning does not begin and end at any particular point. Thus, organizational socialization should be understood as a continuous learning process that occurs throughout an employee's career (Schein, 1971; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, and Gardner (1994) have also criticized the fact that most studies focus on only the socialization of new employees although basic organizational socialization theory suggests that organizational socialization should be viewed as a continuous learning process throughout an employee's career. Therefore, in this study, we assume that the concept of organizational socialization includes any socialization program or activity that is aimed at not only new employees but also tenured employees during their entire time in an organization.

Traditionally, organizational socialization research is concerned with either socialization in organizational behavior or employee training in human resources (Woo, 2006). The focus was on the process of organizational socialization primarily emanating from an organization itself. However, in more recent studies, these two themes have been integrated such that socialization is perceived as learning. Therefore, the content of learning programs and proactive learners are integral to organizational socialization. Saks and Ashforth (1997) report on six recent research topics: socialization tactics, socialization training, proactive socialization, socialization learning and content, group socialization, and individual differences. Conversation and social exchange among employees at drinking sessions assume importance when *hoesik* is examined in the context of new research trends. At these

sessions, learning, network building, and information sharing occur and employees learn how to interact with other employees and how to comply with their supervisors' endless encouragement to drink yet remain sober and thus survive in the organization.

Saks and Ashforth (1997) summarized the following four theoretical perspectives after a review of trends in organizational socialization studies over the past five years:

1) Model of Socialization Tactics: Van Maanen and Schein (1979) proposed six bipolar tactics: collective vs. individual, formal vs. informal, sequential vs. random, fixed vs. variable, serial vs. disjunctive, and investiture vs. divestiture. *Hoesik* can be described as collective given that a group of employees come together; informal because employees are left free to indulge in somewhat “laissezfaire” socialization; random, non-sequential, and disjunctive because no previous task is required and it corresponds to a varying schedule; and divestiture because group norms shared in these sessions are likely to mold employee behaviors in ways that organizations desire.

2) Uncertainty Reduction Theory: Newcomers have high anxiety when they enter an organization, and they attempt to reduce uncertainty through the socialization process. As H. Oh, Chung, and Labianca (2004) report, for Koreans, workplace relationships are not sufficient; building personal relationships outside workplace is more important for a successful business life. *Hoesik* is a tool for employees to get to know each other personally; it gives them a sense of belongingness, which helps decrease the uncertainty and anxiety of employees.

3) Social Cognitive Theory: People acquire information through interaction with others, and the behavioral relationship is reciprocal. This theory is based on Bandunra's studies (1986; 1997). The active interaction among employees during a drinking session accelerates information sharing and knowledge flow among them. However, usually, the information flow is top-down, and the social exchange is such that it makes employees follow the majority line without question.

4) Cognitive and Sense-Making Theory: Louis (1980) molded the adjustment process of newcomers to an organization. Newcomers attempt to make sense of their new environment through interactions with other members of an organization. They learn to interpret cues that provide insight into the values of an organization. The main purpose of *hoesik* is to build the “we spirit” and strengthen group norms. Depending on the state of an organization, sometimes the focus of the gathering is on welcoming new employees, motivating employees who may have received negative feedbacks on their performance, to counsel subordinates facing workplace difficulties, or bid farewell to an employee who will be transferred or may be laid off. However, occasionally, *hoesik* can become an avenue for evaluating employees. If a subordinate rebuffs a supervisor's constant encouragement to drink, then he may face workplace difficulties.

We also need to consider the notion of a “social model of behavior” as proposed by Pfeffer (1997). This model’s basic assumption is that human are social animals. An individual’s perception of the work environment and tasks at hand is affected by what others in an organization say. One’s involvement in a job and attitude toward it as well as organizational commitment and turnover are influenced by social interactions within an organization. At after-work gatherings, employees share their experiences at work, and seniors take the opportunity to provide advice to their juniors. Work-related conflict is also likely to get resolved at *hoesik*. As De Mente (2014) states, paternalistic managers of Korean organizations tend to provide harsh feedbacks to employees at meetings but attempt to soften the blow with pep talks and consolations during drinking sessions. Hence, if an employee cannot drink or does not enjoy drinking, then he may end up having an even more difficult time in *hoesik*.

Studies on organizational socialization examine it from many angles. Ostroff and Kozlowski (1992) describe the four dimensions of organizational socialization in their research as job-related tasks, work roles, group processes, and organizational attributes. Chao et al. (1994) review organizational socialization literature and illustrate six dimensions of organizational socialization dimensions—performance proficiency, organizational goals and values, people, politics such as power structure and information flow, language such as technical terms and jargon, and history, such as an organization’s traditions, myths, and rituals. To examine the effectiveness of organizational socialization, Anakwe and Greenhaus (1999) adapt task mastery, functioning within the work group, knowledge and acceptance of organization’s culture, personal learning, and role clarity. Bauer, Bonder, Erdogan, Truxillo, and Tucker (2007), following three domains suggested by Feldman (1981), examine newcomers’ organizational socialization under dimensions such as role clarification/ resolution of role demands, self-efficacy/task mastery, and social acceptance/ adjustment to the group. From these angles, it can be said that the outcomes of organizational socialization are associated with group members learning required job competency as well as organizational culture and values. *Hoesik* comprises these dimensions. By drinking together with co-workers or at a department level, different identities are often mixed; friendships and group identities are formed by offering alcohols to each other, work-related advice and tips are shared, and expected behaviors in the workplace are learned. The goal of *hoesik* is to bridge individual differences, enable the sharing of group norms and rules, and instill (some may argue by brainwashing) organizational values.

According to Van Maanen (1978), the formality of socialization depends on the extent to which the setting for the socialization is work-related and how explicitly the role of the employee is presented. In an informal setting, the learning usually happens through experience. In this sense, *hoesik* is an informal socialization process;

employees acquire information in a non-work related setting, such as a dining place, by interacting with different members of the organization.

Saks and Ashforth (1997) suggest an event-centered research approach to study organizational socialization. Building relationships with coworkers and learning organizational values do not only occur at formal training or orientation sessions. In real life, different events or an “ongoing series of episodes” such as an invitation to lunch or completing a project can facilitate employees’ learning of the required skills for the job and of the organizational culture. Characteristics of *hoesik* such as sharing work-related information, learning about the kinds of attitudes the organization values, building personal relationships, and strengthening group norms and spirit, make it an important “event” for employees. Therefore, by focusing on the mechanics and outcome of *hoesik*, this study adopts the event-centered research approach.

Organizational Socialization in the Korean Context

Studies of organizational socialization in Korea focus mainly on the socialization of new employees. Given Korea’s changing business environment, Woo (2006) assumes that the majority of new employees has previous work experience. Thus, he identifies the following four research focus areas: content of organizational socialization and its links to (1) the duration of an employee’s previous work experience; (2) perceived differences between the old and new job by experienced employees; and (3) selected demographics of new employees, such as gender, age, tenure, education level, organizational status, and type of job. By defining the five domains of organizational socialization (individual, group, organization, relationship, and work task), his study found that tenure, work experience, and perceived differences between the old and new job had a statistically significant relationship with job proficiency.

J. E. Lee (2013) studies the problem of a high turnover rate among new employees in Korea and examines the mediating effect of empowerment on organizational socialization tactics, organizational commitment, and the intention to leave. The study reported that the more aware employees were of organizational tactics, the more committed and empowered they were and the weaker the intention to leave. It also confirmed that empowerment acted as a mediator for three variables. The study implied that organizations should provide more opportunities for employees to learn about the organization’s goals and achieve self-actualization to increase their commitment and weaken their intention to leave.

Chang, Chang, and Jacobs (2009) examine the relationship between new employees’ activity in CoP (communities of practice) and organizational socialization in the Korean IT sector. They categorized organizational socialization as learning (task mastery, successful work relationship, and role clarity) on the one hand and

adjustment (job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intention to remain) on the other. The study reported that the intensity of participation in CoP was positively associated with organizational socialization.

In examining the high turnover rate of nurses, [Son et al. \(2008\)](#) attempt to develop an organizational socialization scale to measure the socialization of newly recruited nurses in Korea. They group organizational socialization factors as individual characteristics, group characteristics, and job identity. For the outcome of organizational socialization, they considered job competence, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and exhaustion. The study found that five factors—skills and knowledge of the job competence dimension, self-efficacy of the individual characteristics dimension, mutual trust of the group dimension, emotional exhaustion of the exhaustion dimension, and professionalism of the job identity dimension—explained the most about nurses' organizational socialization.

Many academics believe organizational socialization is encouraged by a mentoring system. [H. O. Kim and Lee \(1993\)](#) conducted an empirical study of the effectiveness of a mentoring program on organizational socialization. They found that employees with a mentor showed higher job satisfaction and a weaker intention to leave. [B. S. Kim \(1999\)](#) also reports the positive influence of a mentoring system on organizational socialization for the following reasons: more realistic training, resolution of regionalism problems, better adaption to organizational change, and contribution to creating a new organizational culture in administrative organizations. [Suh and Huo \(2009\)](#) researched mentoring systems in the airlines sector and found that a mentoring program encouraged organizational socialization, especially in terms of career development, and was statistically significant in decreasing role conflict and role ambiguity of employees.

Hoesik's Unique Characteristics as a Socialization Tool

Including *hoesik* as part of organizational socialization calls for a discussion of the unique character of *hoesik*; it is neither completely formal nor completely informal. According to the formality definition used by [Van Maanen and Schein \(1979\)](#) and [Van Maanen \(1978\)](#), the drinking session falls into the category of an informal socialization process. However, in reality, it also has a formal character; most of the time *hoesik* expenses are paid from the organization's finances. Business account list *hoesik* as a separate entry under "employees' welfare expenses" or "fringe benefits," and every occasion is reported to upper-level management for approval. Thus, *hoesik* occupies the middle ground of formal and informal in Korean organizations.

As discussed above, most of the studies on organizational socialization in Korea ignore its drinking culture. However, there is evidence to show that *hoesik*

represents a process of socialization as it is aimed at fostering socialization with other organizational members, improving team spirit, establishing a group identity, and learning organizational values and required competences. Employees participate in drinking sessions to maintain relationships with fellow employees and share information through interactions with them. They strongly believe that their participation on these occasions influences their career. H. J. Lee's (2009) study supports this idea; 80% of respondents see drinking sessions as a tool to maintain workplace relationships. However, few studies discuss both organizational socialization and drinking sessions on the same grounds. Even though D. W. Lee, Park, Lee, Kim, and Kim's (2007) study perceived working adults' drinking sessions from a social aspect, the drinking sessions were seen as merely a form of informal communication. In addition, the main purpose of the study was to compare and contrast the drinking habits of working adults and undergraduate students. Different from D. W. Lee et al.'s research, this study solely emphasizes the drinking culture in Korean workplaces as an organizational socialization process.

Examining the issue from the literature on drinking, the hazardous levels of alcohol consumption in the workplace is perceived as a serious problem by many academics. Research interests have recently been drawn toward the increase in female employees' drinking and health promotion in the workplace.

As more women participate in the workforce, the number of female employees who consume alcohol is rapidly increasing; thus, the number of studies on the drinking habits of female employees is increasing as well (Y. H. Cha, 2012; Ha, 2009; H. J. Jeon & Jung, 2008). H. J. Jeon and Jung found that when it comes to drinking, women are vulnerable to environmental factors; women who are in the workplace where the atmosphere about drinking is permissive and encouraging tend to consume more amounts of alcohol than women who are in the workplace where drinking is avoided. However, Y. H. Cha's study (2012) reports different findings. Factors that influence female employees' drinking are personal; that is, if an employee's own ideas and attitudes toward drinking are positive, then she is likely to drink more. The study also reports that female employees feel more obliged to drink than male employees do when colleagues and supervisors encourage them to drink. Since existing studies of workplace drinking culture are mostly focused on male employees, it is expected that the number of drinking studies on female employee will increase.

Due to the serious threat that excessive alcohol consumption poses for organizational health, E. S. Choi, Jung, Kim, and Park (2010) point out that high levels of alcohol consumption may cause work-related depression and anxiety to employees. Yang and Kim (2012) also emphasize that not only employees in urban areas who have been the main object of drinking studies until now, but employees in suburban areas are

also exposed to alcohol-related risks. Employees in suburban areas even show higher drinking rates than employees in urban areas and education programs and policies regarding drinking are not effectively implemented in suburban areas. In seeking ways to promote the health of organization members, [K. S. Lee \(2011\)](#) discusses various health programs implemented in some organizations. Alcohol reduction was found to be one of the most important goals for workplace health promotion. Health promotion activities included campaigns named “Love Liver Day,” “No Drinking Day,” and “Liver Holiday.” [M. J. Lee and Yoo \(2014\)](#) also attempt to decrease alcohol consumption of employees by having educational sessions, lectures, and meetings in organizations. After six months of these special activities, the number of problematic drinkers and alcohol abusers decreased. [M. J. Lee and Yoo](#) emphasize that not only these employee-level activities are important, but cooperation from upper-management level is also a must to improve the drinking culture in organizations.

As seen above, existing studies on workplace drinking have inclined toward current issues, outcomes, and alternatives to a drinking culture. *Hoesik* is seen as a prevalent and problematic phenomenon. Nevertheless, this drinking culture is not seen as an organizational socialization process in academia. Therefore, there are few studies that even see *hoesik* as a socialization process, let alone subjecting it to a measurement scale. [Kweon \(2005\)](#) used the Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test (AUDIT) developed by the World Health Organization and extracted five parameters from the Your Workplace scale used by [Beattie, Longabaugh, and Fava \(1992\)](#). The study found that 54.8% of the participants drank with colleagues and had 1.83 rounds of drink on average, and 76.9% of the participants drank consecutively at different places in one night. However, [Seong et al. \(2009\)](#) pointed that AUDIT scale has as many as 10 items which is time-consuming and not efficient for emergency patients. Thus, [Seong et al.](#) tested the validity of AUDIT-C (AUDIT Alcohol Consumption Questions) which has fewer items than AUDIT and the third question in AUDIT-K (Korean translated version of AUDIT) and concluded that AUDIT-C is a valid and practical tool to measure alcohol disorder. [M. J. Lee and Yoo \(2014\)](#) used the AUDIT-K to measure the effectiveness of organizational programs to curb drinking. Although the AUDIT scale is used to measure the alcohol-related behaviors of employees, the scale lacks the socialization aspect.

[I. Park and Kim \(2010\)](#) attempt to develop a scale that measures the sobriety behavior of male workers. They also point out the lack of a complete scale for measuring the drinking behavior of Korean employees. Therefore, based on the Theory of Planned Behavior, they constructed a scale to measure the relationship between the teetotal attitude of employees and their perception of the influence of sobriety on their careers. The final scale included 41 parameters with 10 factors. This study is significant in that it is one of the few studies to examine the relationship

between drinking and one's career path in Korea. However, the study focused on the sobriety of male employees and not on participation in drinking parties and on organizational socialization.

It is obvious that the scales used in previous studies do not reflect Korea's unique cultural aspects, such as Confucianism, rigid hierarchies, collectivism, and paternalism.

Cultural Aspects of *Hoesik* in the Korean Workplace

De Mente (2014) traced the Korean drinking culture to the religious rituals of early times. Alcohol was perceived as a mediator between God and humans. With the emergency of Confucianism as a rule of governance in 1392, many constraints began to be imposed on the female population. One of the taboos for women was drinking. Women were expected only to take care of their children and be loyal to their husbands. They were not allowed to participate in social life. However, men were free to drink, especially at dinner time after a hard day's work. S. G. Lee (2004) also explains that traditionally, women were not considered as labor population and their labor at home was not acknowledged as valuable work. Thus, women were not allowed to participate in drinking. Drinking was an exclusive privilege only for men. However, the role of alcohol as a tool of socialization today is far removed from even these cultural roots. M. Kim (2014) reports that alcohol consumption among women has also increased. According to a survey conducted by the Korean Health Ministry from 2005 to 2012, "the ratio of highly dangerous alcohol consumption" (drinking an average of five shots of Soju at one time) for women under 40, had increased from 11.1% to 22.2%.

S. Kim (2003) finds that the homogeneity of Korean society emphasizes bonding and drinking as tools for strengthening ties among people. In this sense, in an organization with strong employee bonds, drinking together is perceived as a way of strengthening these ties. According to H. Kim (2014), by drinking together, Koreans open up and share their problems with one another. This can promote team spirit. J. H. Oh (2002) also state that drinking together can be viewed as a ritual that builds a sense of community and indicates that the reason for Koreans' heavy alcohol consumption is rapid economic growth. Korea's rapid economic development did not leave workers with much leisure time. The short amount of time they got after a hard day's work was best suited to drinking. Furthermore, he indicated that the ambience of the drinking venues reflected workplace hierarchies. Male supervisors would force their subordinates to drink and subordinates would fill the glass of their supervisors out of courtesy and respect. De Mente (2014) also says that at a *hoesik*, a senior member of the group refills the glasses of others, according to their rank. In addition, refusing a drink from one's supervisor is considered improper etiquette.

C. Cha (2012) pointed out the importance of an organization's drinking culture to let off steam generated by its hierarchical structure. At a *hoesik*, Koreans are likely to bring up issues or problems that they cannot talk about while sober during work hours. When someone offers a drink, it is that person's way of expressing his willingness to listen and talk to you. However, C. Cha also states that "respect and hierarchy" was expected to be maintained at a drinking session. D. W. Lee, Park, Lee, Kim, and Kim (2006) report that there were invisible forces at work during drinking parties. In their study, working adults showed very low self-efficacy as they had very little leeway when it came to refusing an invitation to drink or expressing opinions about drinking parties. H. S. Park and Lee (2011) studied the part played by collectivism and hierarchy in employee participation in alcohol-fueled, after work dining. They surmise that *hoesik* is not just about spending time together while drinking, but more about forcing collectivism on individuals.

Korean managers are paternalistic. They are strict and authoritative on one hand while benevolent and generous on the other (Cheng et al., 2014). Paternalistic leaders not only give importance to discipline and strict rules in the workplace, but they also value individual relationships with employees (Aycan, 2006). As De Mente (2014) states, paternalistic Korean managers have a tendency to give an employee harsh feedback in the workplace but will try to console the employee during the drinking session by giving advice and pep talks. If the employee cannot drink or does not enjoy drinking, then the manager perceives the attitude as an offense because he thinks that the employee does not value his care and trust. From the employee's point of view, however, he or she suffers both in workplace from harsh feedback and in drinking session from drinking in order not to disappoint the manager.

Therefore, it is possible that drinking sessions are not always enjoyed by employees. Rather, since these sessions begin soon after work and go on till very late at night (or sometimes until the next morning), they tire employees, stand in the way of a work-life balance, and brainwash them into deferring to an organizational hierarchy even after work hours.

Negative Effects of the Drinking Culture

The literature on the drinking culture in Korean organizations covers many aspects. Regarding motives for participating in *hoesik*, social purposes such as resolving conflicts, sharing group norms, and fostering closeness with fellow employees appear to be the strongest factors (O. Kim & Jeon, 2012; Sharpe, Abdel-Ghany, Kim, & Hong, 2001; J. H. Oh, 2002). Avoiding *hoesik* can cause problems for an employee. I. Park and Kim (2010) discuss the perceived disadvantages of not participating in *hoesik* and identify such issues as difficulties in maintaining friendships within organizations, being excluded from information sharing, and being overlooked for promotions. H.

S. Park and Lee (2011) suggest that the decision to participate in or avoid a drinking session is often dictated by societal or organizational pressure. The reference group for this decision making often comprises a supervisor, coworker, and family members. Yun and Lee (2014) also report that supervisors encourage employee participation to understand what their subordinates actually think about an organization.

Some studies also provide insight into the relationship between stress and drinking. Kweon (2005) found work-related stress to be strongly associated with drinking; this was especially true for male employees in sales and marketing. Yun and Lee (2014) report that workplace stress led police officers to indulge in heavy alcohol consumption. Yun, Kim, Jung, and Borhanian (2013) report that police officers found it difficult to maintain work-life balance due to their workloads and frequent night shifts. Stress from family conflicts also led to frequent drinking sprees. Gender issues have also been studied. The Ministry of Employment and Labor (2011) issued a policy report on gender discrimination and suggested ways of eliminating gender discrimination in the workplace. The report examined gender discrimination in *hoesik*, such as when a supervisor (who is usually a man in Korean organizations) order a subordinate to dance or behaves in such a way to make subordinates feel sexually humiliated. J. J. Han (2002), who studies sexual harassment issues, found that 76% of female respondents said it was very common to expect female employees to sit next to their male counterparts or male supervisors and fill their drinks at a *hoesik*. According to a study by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (2012), 87% of employees answered that sexual harassment was common at a *hoesik*. The problem was also found to be rampant in military organizations to such an extent that the Korean navy instituted a *hoesik jikimi* system, whereby an inspector is present during *hoesik* to deter sexual abuse. The inspector is not allowed to drink and is tasked with ensuring that there is no sexual harassment during the session and that female soldiers get back home safely (Y. S. Lee, 2014).

Without doubt, there is more evidence to show a *hoesik*'s negative than positive side. Further, the problems are not merely psychological, but also physical. According to Statistics Korea (2014), cancer was the leading cause of death in Korea in 2013. Of those afflicted, more than 20% died from liver cancer. Most of the victims were in their 40s and 50s. Alcohol is seen as the primary reason for the fatalities from liver cancer. This indicates that workplace drinking has serious consequences for the health of an economically active segment of the population. Both liver cancer and liver diseases are among the top 10 causes of death in Korea. Hong (2014) reports that an increasing number of Koreans are being diagnosed with osteonecrosis for which excessive alcohol consumption is the leading cause.

Alcohol consumption at night also brings drunken driving problems. Twenty-two percent of disciplinary cases brought against civil servants from 2009 to 2013 were

because of drunken driving (S. H. Kim, 2014). Moreover, someone with a hangover who drives the next morning is also guilty of drunk driving. Therefore, the danger extends beyond one night.

Frequent binge drinking means people come late to work, suffer from hangovers, or stay away from work, all of which lead to low productivity. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2013a, 2013b), Korea has the second longest average working hours per person, and the country ranks the fourth lowest in the work–life balance index. When these long working hours are added to the time spent at after–work drinking sessions, the serious risk to employee well-being becomes all too clear. Chae (2015) reports that only 27.5% of male employees can leave the office at the regular time and 55% of employees work overnight at least once a week. In Chae’s report, 67% of respondents said they could not spend time with their families because of fatigue and lack of time. Kocken (2015) points out that Korean conglomerates run programs such as “Smart Day” and “Family Day” when employees work regular hours. The irony, he says, is that even though leaving work at 5 pm or 6 pm should be the norm, this is made out to be a reward by organizations.

Last but not the least, drinking sessions help reinforce hierarchical structures and collectivism. The organizational hierarchy and top–down communication pattern continues after work in a *hoesik*. *Hoesik* may be good for emphasizing team spirit, but on the other hand, a forced team spirit means refusal to accommodate individual differences and the isolation of members outside the group. S. G. Lee (2004) points out in drinking sessions, the individual’s own self is expected to be dissolved into group identity. People who do not want to drink or do not enjoy the drinking session are usually tagged as “inhumane,” “cold-blooded,” or “calculating,” and they are excluded from the majority.

Chun (2012) explains that Koreans’ drinking behaviors is highly socially dependent. Korean society puts group norms and values ahead of individual values. Since drinking is seen as a medium for socializing and communicating with others, such details as the amount to be consumed as well as the frequency of drinking are decided by social norms. Further, these norms are typically dictated by people with an enormous capacity for alcohol. Drinking to one’s limit is often encouraged by playing drinking games. The main purpose of a drinking session is to get drunk as a group, almost as if drinking is work. When B. D. Oh (2014) asked Korean employees to list what they saw as the most serious problems in Korean drinking culture, 51% replied it was forced drinking beyond one’s tolerance, 24.6% of participants said drinking until the person blacked out, and 17.6% of participants said equating drinking capacity with work competence.

Employees who are good at adapting to collective norms of drinking and conforming to the majority are praised by the organization, whereas outside members are ignored and

excluded. This situation is directly related to an important cultural issue called the Gap–Eul relation. This term comes from the legal world; in Korean the first party to a contract is referred to as Gap and the second party is referred as Eul. Therefore, Gap represents the dominant, powerful party while Eul is the one under Gap's control. Gap can order Eul to do anything, and Eul is supposed to follow without murmur. Typical Gap–Eul relationships are boss/employee, contracting entity/contracted entity, and man/woman.

The following example provides a classic explanation of how the Gap–Eul dynamics plays out. The Vice President of Korean Air, who was the daughter of the CEO of Korean Air, was dissatisfied with the nuts served to her and thus, she physically and verbally abused the steward and made the chief steward deplane (J. Park, 2014). In an organization, a subordinate has to listen to what a supervisor says, and this relationship extends to a *hoesik*. Exploiting their Gap position, supervisors can force subordinate employees to drink and the Eul employee complies whether he or she likes it. In J. Cho's (2011) report, an employee who declined alcohol from a supervisor was told that she would someday be sorry for doing so. J. Cho also reports that the invisible force to drink at a *hoesik* is a very common yet serious problem. The Seoul High Court fined a supervisor \$32,000 for violating the dignity of an employee he forced to drink.

In extreme cases, people have died after attending a *hoesik*; there are records of people blacking out and being hit by a train (B. G. Jeon, 2013), falling off stairs in a drunken state (G. S. Kim, 2013), being hit by a manager while seeking feedbacks on workplace competence (Shin, 2015), and suffering from vomiting and breathing difficulties (D. C. Kim, 2014). All these cases ended up in death from the consumption of excessive alcohol. A court usually considers these cases as industrial accidents because *hoesik* is seen as a continuation of work.

Conclusion

Koreans are increasingly becoming aware of the hazards of drinking and are reluctant to participate in drinking sessions. In recognition of this, organizations are attempting to focus more on socializing events that do not involve alcohol. According to Epatko (2011), Koreans are becoming more health conscious and are making more informed food choices.

Organizations are looking at socializing activities that strengthen team spirit, such as sports activities, going for picnics, going to musical performances, and watching movies together. However, despite this shift in trend, the majority of Korean businesses continue their *hoesik* activities. However, some changes have crept in, such as limiting such sessions to two hours after work so that drinking is limited and drinking at multiple venues is avoided; dining at family restaurants where only beer, wine, and non-alcoholic beverages are served; or having *hoesik* at lunch hour both for maintaining group spirit and ensuring that employees have time for their personal lives.

The Korean government is also encouraging changes to traditional *hoesik*. The Ministry of Food and Drug Safety (2014) has started a website called *sullae jabgi* which provides information on Koreans' drinking habits, a guide to healthy drinking, and posters on how to enjoy alcohol without threatening one's well-being. The website also runs a video contest for promoting healthy *hoesik*. Anyone can participate by recording 1 minute video of showing healthy drinking culture such as not mixing alcohols, not forcing others to drink, and finishing the gathering in one venue.

The government should also reconsider the current taxation system with regard to *hoesik*. Such expenses are currently categorized as "fringe benefits" or "employee welfare expenses" in account books and are tax exempt according to Korean tax law. This acts as an incentive to companies to encourage *hoesik*. Therefore, to discourage company-wide drinking sessions, revisions to the current tax law should be considered.

There is also a need to change the mindset. Questions on alcohol tolerance should be avoided in job interviews because they emphasize the importance of alcohol even before one enters an organization. It is clear that drinking capacity has nothing to do with one's work competence. Drinking that results in torturing employees, taking away their time to refresh and recoup, and ruining their well-being transforms this socialization occasion into an opportunity for bullying episodes. Organizational socialization without alcohol means those who do not drink will also have a chance to socialize and organizations will benefit from better social exchanges among employees. Because employees will stay sober from the beginning to end of a session, the sharing of useful information and learning of organizational values can occur more effectively. Productivity will improve as employees will have better morale, and absenteeism will drop.

Today's successful Korean businesses owe a lot to personal sacrifices made by pioneers. Koreans believe that those who spend most of their time in an office are good role models for others in an organization. However, time has changed. Keeping employees in an organization for as long as possible is no guarantee of their loyalty or productivity. Ever since the end of the Korean War in 1953, Koreans have been focusing only on economic growth. The economy has now stabilized, many multinational corporations have made a name for themselves on the world stage, and small and medium enterprises are growing. It is time to relax the hyperfocus on growth. Instead, there is an increasing need to focus on employee well-being and sustainable growth. Alcohol's socialization role should be put aside to maintain healthy organizations. A new generation of Korean workers desires to spend time on themselves, their families, and their friends. It should not be forgotten that healthy and happy workers also mean more creative and productive workers and better health of an entire organization.

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