The Sewol Ferry Disaster: Application of the Contextual Model of Family Stress (CMFS) in South Korean Contexts

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to apply the Contextual Model of Family Stress (CMFS) to describing family stress caused by the Sewol ferry disaster and aftermath across various families in the context of South Korea. The study focused on four categories of families: families of the deceased, families of the missing, families of survivors, and general families. The external context surrounding these families continuously changed after the occurrence of the ferry disaster, and the study attempted to advance the CMFS for understanding family stress management after a catastrophic event with an emphasis on time.

Key words: civic movement, contextual Model of Family Stress, family stress, human-made disaster
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Introduction

The Sewol ferry carrying 443 passengers sank en route from Incheon to Jeju island in South Korea in April 2014. Due to the sinking of the Sewol ferry, more than 300 people—most of them were high school juniors—were killed, which devastated families of the passengers and people witnessing the scene through a live broadcasting. The disaster itself was tragic enough to traumatize the whole nation (M. Kim, 2015), but the aftermath of the ferry disaster continuously revealed numerous underlying sociopolitical problems (4.16 Network, 2015). Because the majority of the victims were young students, many adults felt responsible for not having solved the underlying problems actively and framed the dysfunctional social systems as a family matter in social discourse (H. J., Kim, 2015). A civic movement started from demanding the truth about the ferry disaster and led to the impeachment of Park Gunhye, a former president of South Korea.

Experiencing a series of those cumulative stressor events has not only put the immediate families of the victims (i.e., the deceased, the missing, and survivors) in a stressful situation lasted for years but also caused stress for general Korean families directly and indirectly. The aim of this study was to apply the Contextual Model of Family Stress (CMFS; Boss, 2002; Boss, Bryant, & Mancini, 2016) to explaining family stress caused by the Sewol ferry disaster and aftermath. To be specific, using the CMFS as a theoretical framework, the current study focused on (a) how the stressor influenced various categories of Korean families (i.e., families of the deceased, families of the missing, families of survivors, and general families) and (b) how the
stress experienced by these families constructed the external context in which they and other families were embedded with an emphasis on time.

**Overview of the Sewol Ferry Tragedy**

The disaster of the Sewol ferry occurred on 16 April 2014 in Jindo, South Korea. The Sewol ferry was carrying 443 passengers including 325 high school juniors on a four-day field trip. While the Sewol ferry was capsizing, the crew failed to provide any guidelines for the evacuation and, instead, the announcements of “passengers to stay put” kept broadcasting on the ship until the water began flooding in the passenger’s compartments. Most of the student passengers followed the order as they had been disciplined to respect authority, whereas crew members evacuated the ferry.

At the beginning of the accident, the breaking news gave an incorrect report that all passengers had been rescued and parents of the students even received the text messages that all the passengers had been successfully rescued. In fact, however, 304 passengers died, and nine people were missing for over three years. Over a half of the 172 survivors were rescued by fishing boats and other commercial vessels due to the delayed arrival of official rescue teams, leading to suspicions of government incompetence and even cover-up combined with the false report of the rescue.

The Sewol ferry disaster resulted in the widespread of fury and despair for the overall Korean society because potential causes and aftermath of the disaster exposed the vulnerability of social systems which stemmed from accumulated social corruptions. Candlelight rallies by numerous ordinary citizens were held to commemorate the victims of the ferry disaster, to disapprove the incompetent and irresponsible crew, and to criticize a lack of accountability in the media and the government. Over the three years since the ferry sinking, numerous facts related to
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the ferry disaster such as potential causes of the sinking, the absence of government regulations and negligence, and the corruption of former president Park and her cabinet members had been revealed, which transformed the ferry disaster into a sociopolitical situation (M. Park, 2015).

Hundreds of thousands of citizens actively engaged in making meanings of the traumatic ferry disaster and spread them with a symbol of yellow ribbon and a slogan of ‘I am sorry and will remember (you and the tragedy)!’. These large-scale candlelight rallies meant special to the Korean society because unlike other rallies in Korea they did not single out a specific interest group or a generation. Most of the victims were young students, and thus, many people reacted to the tragedy as a family matter that would threaten the future of children and the well-being of family (G. Park, 2015): Family members from babies in strollers and young children brought by their parents to grandparents participated in rallies together. This civic movement continued for almost three years, and later, it was expanded to the protest for impeaching the former President Park in March 2017. Two weeks after President Park was impeached, the ferry was raised from the water. The remains of four missing people were recovered three years after sinking.

Contextual Model of Family Stress (CMFS)

The Contextual Model of Family Stress, a heuristic theory that draws from Hill’s ABC-X model (Hill, 1958), provides a framework for conceptualizing family stress management process from a contextual perspective. The core components of the ABC-X model are stressor event/situation (A), resources (B), perception (C), and the degree of stress (X). Building upon the core components of the ABC-X model, the CMFS posits that the stress management process is not linear, rather the components interact with one another in a recursive feedback loop (Boss, 2002, see Figure 1). The recursive feedback loop is embedded in internal and external contexts that surrounding families, which influences how particular families respond to a stressor. The
internal context consists of a family’s structure, its psychological appraisal of a stressor event or situation, and its philosophical values and beliefs, the elements the family can change and control (Boss, 2002). The external context, on the other hand, is made up of elements that the family has little or no control: culture, history, economics, development, and heredity (Boss, 2002), and how families perceive what they experience is influenced by the external context (Boss et al., 2016).

A stressor event or situation (A) that disrupts a family’s equilibrium causes a varying degree of stress (X) the family experiences depending on the type of the event or situation. All families those lost their family member in the ferry disaster suffer from the loss, but depending on whether the loss is ambiguous or not, the degree of stress could differ. For example, many families of the deceased reported that they were relieved when they found their member’s body and felt desperate by thinking what if they would be the last one who could not retrieve the body (Kim, 2016). Also, they felt sorry for the families of the missing family member and could not imagine the ambiguous loss they were coping with (Kim, 2016).

In response to the stressor event, the family may utilize economic, physical, or psychological resources (B) that can be drawn from their internal or external contexts, leading to managing the degree of stress. In the current study, we focused on resources drawn from the external context, especially those provided by the Korean government after the ferry disaster occurred: Some external resources could increase the degree of stress and jeopardize the family’s social relationships. More detail will be discussed later in later sections.

In the CMFS, the utmost important factor determining the degree of stress is how the family perceives the stressor event and makes sense out of the event collectively (C; Boss et al.,
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2016). The CMFS proposes that the A, B, C, X, factors and their interactions are mediated by the internal and external contexts. For example, whether a family utilizes its coping resource depends on the family’s perception of the stressor event (Boss et al., 2016). Many families of the deceased victims refused to receive a compensation because they believed that revealing the truth of the disaster was the most important thing they could achieve for memorizing their family member and accepting the compensation would impede the efforts (4.16 Sewolhochamsa teukbyeoljosawiwonhoe [Sewol ferry investigation committee], 2016).

Families do not live in a vacuum (Boss et al., 2016). Individual families are influenced by their external context, but at the same time, they are a part of another family’s external context. Cultural, historical, and economic contexts are shaped by how each family acts, perceives, and constructs their social reality. A premise of the CMFS is that the family experiencing stress has little or no control over the external context and it is very hard to change the external context for reducing stress, especially in the short term (Boss et al., 2016). In the case of the Sewol ferry disaster, however, we could observe how Korean families as multiple groups reshaped shifted their external context by collectively and constantly responding to the stressor situation over an extended period of time.

We categorized Korean families into four groups: families of the deceased, families of the missing, families of survivors, and general families. The former three groups affected by the ferry disaster directly, and the last group was influenced indirectly by the disaster. Still, due to the social impact of the Sewol ferry disaster as a core stressor event, these family groups intentionally and unintentionally influenced each other as social forces in coping with their stress. Because we were not able to identify and measure the actual perceptions of each family, our view might not fully reflect what was happening to individual families as Boss (1992)
indicated. However, exploring the dynamics of various family groups that shift the external context over a continuum of time will contribute to advancing an understanding of family stress management process after a catastrophic disaster.

**Situating Contextual Model of Family Stress in Continuum of Time**

The CMFS involves multiple concepts related to time. For example, Boss (2002) classified stressor events and situations based on source, type, duration, and density. Type distinguishes normative or predictable stressors from unforeseen stressors. The distinctions between chronic and acute stressors classified by duration and between cumulative and isolated stressors by density reflect that time is a critical element defining family stressors. Time is also an important concept in the external context. Historical and cultural contexts are socially constructed over time, and developmental context portraits the timing of lives which defines social meanings of age and social roles (Elder, 1994). The importance of time in family stress was clearly reflected in the Sewol ferry disaster and aftermath due to the developmental nuances of the deaths of adolescents vs. the deaths of adults, the occurrence of subsequent stressor events affecting the whole Korean society for years, and the accumulation of similar human-made disasters over the decades.

Figure 2 visualizes how various family groups had lived through the changing external contexts after the ferry disaster. The time continuum in Figure 2 starts from the sinking of the Sewol ferry and illustrated the dynamics of the four family groups in changing external contexts over time. Each family group composed of many families in a similar situation caused by the ferry sinking is represented as circles of different colors (vessels from now on since it moved through changing external contexts carrying individual families). Blue ovals containing various vessels represent the external context at each time point (Phase 1 to Phase n), and phases present
differ but significant stressors related to the ferry disaster. Because the stressors overwhelmed
the whole society, not particular family groups, such as the cover-up of passive or absent rescue
operations and the corruption of Park government that contributed to the disaster, all of the
vessels had to go through several modified external contexts over time under more or less stress.

Although individual families could hardly affect their external context, each vessel of the
individual families with common or similar A, B, C, and X could generate a social force with a
stronger voice when they collectively responded to the stressor at each phase. The size, location,
and impetus of a vessel differed across the family groups. The size of a vessel represents the
number of individual families in the group as well as the degree of stress presumed by the
cultural context. For example, the biggest vessel in Figure 2 is the families of the deceased
because the number of them was greater than that of the missing. Although the number of
families of survivor was also quite big, the cultural context defined that the stress they were
suffering should not be as severe as families of the deceased because their family member was
alive (Boss et al., 2016), and thus, the size of their vessel is smaller than the families of the
deceased. General families, on the other hand, were the biggest group regarding the number of
families in the vessel, but the degree of their stress was also presumed milder because they were
not directly influenced by the disaster.

The location of each vessel represents the importance of their voice in social discourse at
each phase. Thus, if a vessel is located close to the center of the oval (external context), it means
that their issues are considered more important and likely to become a core of the social
construction of meanings in the external context at a certain phase. For example, all of the three
vessels of victim families were located around the center of the external context at Phase 1, just
after the ferry sinking. Compared to the vessel of the families of the deceased which had
remained at the center across the external contexts, the vessels of families of the missing and
survivor were pushed from the center over time because their forces became weaker over time
due to the size or being alive. In fact, these families tended to become marginalized or excluded
from the social discourse regarding the Sewol ferry disaster as time went on although they were
under constant stress (4.16 Network, 2015). The vessel of general families, on the other hand,
was getting closer to the center as the subsequent events became sociopolitical issues.

The impetus of a vessel is illustrated in Figure 3. The impetus is closely linked to its size
and location combined with the type of stress. The vessel of families of the deceased had a strong
impetus. Due to their size and location, the vessel actively influenced and was influenced by its
external context, enabling the vessel to act as a driving force of the social discourse about the
ferry disaster and aftermath. The vessel of families of the missing seemed like immobilized due
to their ambiguous loss. As more families retrieved bodies of the deceased, the size of their
vessel became smaller from hundreds to four as their voice. The vessel of families of survivors
had a difficulty to maintain its impetus because the survivors were often not considered as the
victims of the disaster (4.16 Network, 2015). The vessel of general families could acquire a
stronger impetus as the politicization of the ferry related stressor events.

[Figure 3 about here]

The following section states how the CMFS could be applied for each family groups:
families of the deceased, families of the missing, families of survivors, and general families.
Although we acknowledged the importance of diversity regarding individual families’ internal
context and ABC-X, the application tried to address more shared and common experiences of
each family group. Thus, the boundary of the internal context of individual families in Figure 3 is invisible.

**Families of the deceased**

The loss of family member due to the ferry sinking was unforeseen. Among 295 passengers whose body was retrieved in a relatively short period of time, 205 were high school juniors of Danwon High School, 11 were their teachers, and the rest 43 were “other (meaning non-Danwon High School)” passengers. Because the search for bodies continued for about seven months, most of the families of the deceased experienced the ambiguity of their loss. Because they could retrieve the body of their family member, the stress experienced by the families of the deceased was distinguished from the stress of families of the missing passengers by themselves and by the external context. Although the loss of the two family groups was caused by the same stressor event, this distinction created a psychological boundary between them and made it hard for them to respond together to subsequent stressor events or cope with the stress together (Kim et al., 2016).

Temporary financial supports from the government and the compensation were offered to the families, but many of the families reported that the resources were not helping them much to cope with the stress (4.16 Network, 2015; 4.16 Sewolhochamsa teukbyeoljosawiwonhoe [Sewol ferry investigation committee], 2016). In fact, the amount of the financial resource provided to them was often exaggerated by mass media (4.16 Network, 2015), which negatively influenced social relationships with their kin and social networks (4.16 Sewolhochamsa teukbyeoljosawiwonhoe [Sewol ferry investigation committee], 2016; H. Lee, 2016).

A lack of access to accurate information was one of the biggest struggles the families experienced (4.16 Sewolhochamsa teukbyeoljosawiwonhoe [Sewol ferry investigation investigation
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committee], 2016). Although the confirmation of their family member’s death resolved the ambiguity of the fate of the family member, the ambiguity of why the stressor event occurred was not resolved, making them hard to move forward (416 Sewolhochamsa Jakgagiokdan, 2015, 2016). Instead of delivering reliable information to the families, mass media sensationalized the ferry disaster, spread false information, and politicized the families’ demand for answers to the causes of the disaster (4.16 Network, 2015; Lee & Lee, 2015). Also, the conservative media distorted the demand as an obstacle to advancing the society (Lee & Lee, 2015). Consequently, families of the deceased were not able to possess information resource to cope with the stress and experienced additional severe stress caused by mass media (Kim et al., 2016).

The social construction of meanings of the Sewol ferry disaster was represented as yellow ribbons, candlelight vigils, the classroom of memories, and social media platforms, which were symbols of public acknowledgment and promises to remember the disaster. Those public commemorations played a role as a psychological resource for the families because the families were worried that the public attention to the disaster and the meanings of the deaths would be quickly eroded (E. Kim, 2016). On the contrary, constructing memorials initiated and led by the government was not accomplished and caused conflicts between families of the victims and community neighbors due to the failure of reaching a consensus (Joongang Daily, 2017).

The CMFS distinguishes a family’s values and beliefs (philosophical dimension of the internal context) from those of the external context (culture dimension). In Korean families, however, the boundary dividing the family’s internal and external contexts tends to be weak and permeable due to a social expectation of conformity and harmony (Yang & Rosenblatt, 2001), which gives little room for Korean families to maintain their value systems unique from or
contradictory to the values of the external context. Rather, family members tend to be conscious of the external reactions or changes and constantly adjust their beliefs to achieve the conformity (Jiang, Bong, & Kim, 2015). Thus, changes occurred in the external context can affect the family’s internal context promptly. Many statements from families of the ferry disaster victims including families of the deceased, the missing, and survivors revealed that the ongoing changes in social perceptions of the ferry disaster and responses toward the families, whether positive or negative, were crucial for their perception, the meaning-making process of the loss of their family member or the experience of trauma (M. H. Kim, 2015).

At the same time, the experiences and struggles of the families of the deceased (stress management process in the internal context) also affected how general families perceived and responded to the ferry disaster, and the sociopolitical problems revealed by the tragedy urged them to promote changes in the external context as a collective response to tragedy (Saul, 2013). As discussed in a later section, witnessing the sinking ferry through live broadcasting and the death of hundreds of adolescents, “our children,” made many Koreans felt a personal engagement with the disaster (Boss & Ishii, 2015; H. J. Kim, 2015).

Families of the missing

Nine families (four families in August 2017) had experienced an ambiguous loss of their family member for more than three years. The external context concluded that the missing passengers definitely died, only their bodies were not retrieved. The exact name given to these families by the cultural context is “families of misuseupja (dead passengers whose bodies have not been retrieved yet)” not “families of the missing passengers.” It is unclear whether the families agree with their stressor situation, but the fact of unavailability of confirming the dead body is considered as a special type of stressor situations that distinguished from confirmed...
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deads or missing in Korea (J. J. Park, 2015). Similar to physical ambiguous loss, Korean families experiencing this type of loss tended to suffer from a frozen grief (4.16 Network, 2015), but the cultural context valuing a rapid recovery from adversity often blamed the families being a burden on the society.

Due to the high cost and risk of searching bodies in the water, the families of the missing agreed to stop the search seven months after the ferry sinking. The only possible way of body retrieval was salvaging the Sewol ferry, which could not be managed by the families themselves due to the cost and the complexity (4.16 Network, 2015). The families of the missing had maintained their voice demanding the salvage, but it was not powerful enough to make it happen for three years. Nonetheless, a few civic organizations have provided psychological and physical support to them and Paengmok port, a place where families of the passengers waited for the whereabouts of their family member, has been a place to commemorate the deceased and missing passengers. Paengmok port has had numerous visitors and been decorated with yellow ribbons, a slogan “I will wait for you,” and the photos and names of the missing passengers, which represented that the nine missing passengers have not been forgotten in the society and supported the families as a psychological resource.

The stressor situation surrounding the families of the missing drastically changed by the impeachment of Park. The Park government kept stating that the efforts of salvaging the ship had hindered by complex technical problems after investing a huge amount of money but did not produce any result out of the efforts. Two days after the impeachment, the Sewol ferry was salvaged from the water and remains of five missing passengers were found since then.

Families of survivors
Survivors of the ferry disaster are overlooked as victims because they escaped or were rescued alive from the sinking ferry (4.16 Network, 2015). They were often excluded from social discourse about the ferry disaster and studies focusing on them are also rare. However, the survivors and their families have experienced and managed severe stress caused by the incident and aftermath (Kim et al., 2016). The experiences of the survivors and their families regarding social reactions to them are different from what the families of the deceased and missing passengers have experienced.

The ferry capsizing is the original stressor event to the survivors and their families. Many survivors stated that they escaped from the sinking ferry, not being rescued by the responsible authorities (e.g., the Coast Guard, the Central Disaster Countermeasure Head Quarters, and the crew), which undermined their trust in the Korean government and influenced their perception about the ferry incident and resources provided by the government. Survivor guilt was strengthened by negative reactions to the survivors from the public and families of the deceased and missing passengers, and especially, adult passengers and members of the crew were criticized for not saving young students first (4.16 Network, 2015). This difference in the life stages of survivors, equivalent to the developmental context of the CMFS, not only shaped different social perceptions and reaction to the survivors but also affected social resources provided to them.

Resources the families of survivor possessed or provided at the time of and after the disaster were not always beneficial or welcomed by the families. Many of them reported that resources provided by the Korean government after the disaster such as monetary and medical supports were insufficient or inefficient (4.16 Network, 2015; Kim et al., 2016). Further, some government supports were considered either unwanted or additional sources of stress to families.
of the survivors rather than supporting them to manage the stress from the ferry incident (416 Sewolhochamsa Jakgagirokdan, 2016). Some media delivered false information or exaggerated the benefits of government supports such as compensation of survivors, which triggered harsh social reactions to them, weakened social support, or brought about unwanted attentions (4.16 Sewolhochamsa teukbyeoljosawiwonhoe [Sewol ferry investigation committee], 2016).

Therefore, the external context constructed following to the newly initiated resources hindered their stress coping and increased the level of stress to deal with.

The resources the student survivors were provided by the government were distinctive from what the adult survivors were given. Although providing the additional resources intended to consider unique challenges of the adolescence, it contributed to making the external context of student survivors more complex. For example, the government launched intervention programs mandatory for student survivors just after the incident, but the content and quality of the involuntary programs were perceived poor and insensitive, which exacerbated their stress (4.16 Network, 2015; 416 Sewolhochamsa Jakgagirokdan, 2016). Preparing a college entrance exam is a normative but powerful stressor to most of the Korean adolescents and their families, and to reduce the survivor students’ academic and psychological burden of preparing the college entrance exam, a special act for college acceptance of survivor students was passed. However, the act brought about social resentment arguing the unfairness of the special treatment in college acceptance, which intensified the vulnerability of survivor students in addition to the stress accompanied by the normative transition (Boss et al., 2016).

The student survivors found that peer support built while going through the common experience of the disaster was the most helpful resource to cope with the stress (4.16 Sewolhochamsa teukbyeoljosawiwonhoe [Sewol ferry investigation committee], 2016).
However, adult survivors had difficulties to form peer support groups because unlike the students who attended the same school, they were strangers to each other. Some adult survivors reported that it was hard for them to reach to other adult survivors with no contact information and a lack of formal support to connect them (4.16 Network, 2015).

Despite suffering from survivor guilt, the survivors tried to find meanings of their experience and survivor. For example, many student survivors wanted to contribute to preventing future human-made disasters (416 Sewolhochamsa Jakgagirokdan, 2016). In fact, during the demonstration toward the Park government, student survivors who were freshmen of college students at that time stood up and voiced their concerns about dysfunctional social systems reflecting the traumatic experience. This civic participation as a meaning-making process stimulated social forces of changing external context and strengthening social resources for future incidents. Some survivors and their families, on the other hand, did not want to involve in any further events due to the overwhelming public attentions to them and wished to live a “normal” life (416 Sewolhochamsa Jakgagirokdan, 2016).

**General Korean Families**

The Sewol ferry disaster was not the first catastrophic human-made disaster in Korea. In fact, there have occurred numerous human-made disasters involving hundreds of victims since the Korean war (J, Kim, 2014). Still, the capsize of Sewol ferry has led to unprecedented social attention and civic movement, which has lasted for more than three years.

Most of the Korean people observed the sinking of Sewol ferry through live broadcasting. This terrifying images of the tragedy traumatized Korean society (H. Lee, 2016), especially because the majority of the victims were high school students on a field trip. Going on a field trip in the high school junior year, especially to Jeju Island, was a shared memory among most of
Korean adults, which enabled them to deeply empathize with the ferry victims. Also, the developmental nuance of the deaths of 16-year olds (Yi-pal-cheung-choon, the flower of youth) provoked the public sorrow and outrage. Therefore, the disaster itself was the stressor event of losing “our children” that generated social suffering in Korea (H. J. Lee, 2015). Also, witnessing the tragedy also affected values of many families with children. The priority of families with children in Korea is investing in children’s educational achievement at any expense including financial resources and family relationships, but the disaster provided an opportunity for general families to rethink about the worth of the priority.

Although general Korean families’ initial reaction to the ferry disaster involved with sorrow of losing children, it was revealed that there was a fatal lack of the Korean government’s rescue efforts combined with deregulation allowing illegal modifications to the ferry, a main cause of the capsize. The revelations—manifested as a catchphrase, “the Sewol ferry disaster was not a ferry sinking accident but a case that the state did not rescue its people (M. K. Park, 2014)”—not only fueled the wrath but also made Korean families realize an absence of formal resources in the external context that can be tapped for assistance in case of future disasters (J. Park, 2015), which became a part of how Korean families perceived the ferry disaster.

Hobfoll (2001) argued that stress occurs when there is a threat of resource loss or failure of resource gain following resource investment. The absence of governmental resources and the vulnerability of social resources recognized by observing the aftermath of the Sewol ferry disaster could intensify the stress Korean families experienced depending on how acutely they felt the threat of resource loss or the failure of resource gain after paying taxes and obeying the law. Accumulated experiences of observing countless human-made disasters in recent decades (historical context) contributed to an appraisal of the probability of being involved in similar
catastrophic events contributed to the level of stress Korean families experienced (M. Park, 2015).

Mass media also often delivered inaccurate or politicized information related to the ferry disaster such as the causes, rescue operations, and supports for families of the victims, which caused a lack of information resource and hindered social discourse among general Korean families (H. Lee, 2016). Still, striking facts about governmental corruption and cover-ups and the falsifications of monetary supports and compensation had been revealed continuously for three years through social media, which made Korean families go through a series of stressful events originated from the Sewol ferry disaster (Bang, 2017), and consequently, constructed an ongoing stressful situation.

Families strive to regain and maintain their resources proactively rather than waiting for stressful events occur if impending resource loss is evident (Hobfoll, 2001). Since the capsize of the ferry, general Korean families, especially families with children, actively engaged in discourse online and offline about investigating fundamental causes of the ferry capsize and promoting changes in social systems for protecting children and building concrete foundations for them. The empathy for families of the ferry victims, a cumulated exposure to social risks, and a threat of or actual loss of social resources led to a collective response to the ferry disaster.

Popular slogans of the collective response such as “I am sorry and will remember you,” “(the government orders us to) Stay put,” “The truth shall not sink with Sewol,” and “The nation is not functioning” represented Korean families’ perceptions of the ferry tragedy and aftermath (H. J. Kim, 2015). Hundreds of thousands of families involving young children, high school students, parents and grandparents participated in multi-year candlelight rallies, resulting in the impeaching of formal president Park. This civic movement played a role as a resource for
families of the victims and constructed the external context for themselves and the families of the victims.

**Conclusion**

The current study attempted to describe how various Korean families were affected by the same stressor event (the Sewol ferry sinking) and aftermath by applying the CMFS with an emphasis of time. The study would contribute to an understanding of family stress management after a catastrophic event, especially an event linked to social systems and political situations (e.g., human-made disasters, terror, and war). Nevertheless, the study simplified the family stress management process in each family group and did not consider the diversity of family stress coping and the internal context within the family groups, which requires future studies. In fact, there were variations among individual families in each family group regarding their actions and perceptions. Also, the social discourse and civic movement regarding the Sewol ferry disaster have not ended yet in Korea. In fact, we started this study in the mid-2016 but have had difficulties to build a conceptual model to describe a big picture of how Korean families have experienced the stress caused by the disaster due to ever-changing external contexts. A similar problem could exist in many other stressor events and situations requiring a constant observation of changing external contexts.


416 Sewolhochamsa Jakgagirokdan. (2016). *Geumyoiren doraoryeom* [Come back on Friday]. Pajoo, South Korea: Changbi Publisher.


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Figure 1. The Contextual Model of Family Stress

Source: Adapted from Boss (2002).
Figure 2. Contextual Model of Family Stress in Continuum of Time

- Phase 1: Families of the deceased
- Phase 2: Families of survivors
- Phase 3: Families of the missing
- Phase n: General families

External Context at Phase n

Sewol Ferry capsized

Time
Figure 3. Family Groups in the External Context

-- Families of the deceased  -- Families of the missing
-- Families of survivors  -- General families