

Experience of Stress and Coping Strategies among Pastors' Wives in China

CHAN, Kara K W; Wong, Miranda

Published in:

The journal of pastoral care & counseling : JPCC

DOI:

[10.1177/1542305018782518](https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305018782518)

Published: 01/09/2018

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

CHAN, K. K. W., & Wong, M. (2018). Experience of Stress and Coping Strategies among Pastors' Wives in China. *The journal of pastoral care & counseling : JPCC*, 72(3), 163-171.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305018782518>

General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent publication URLs

Experience of stress and coping strategies among pastors' wives in China

Professor Kara Chan*

Professor, Department of Communication Studies

Hong Kong Baptist University

karachan@hkbu.edu.hk

852 3411 7836

Dr. Miranda Wong

Graduate, Bethel Bible Seminary

Miranda.pt2013@gmail.com

Chan, K. and Wong, M. (2018) Experience of stress and coping strategies among pastors' wives in China, *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counselling*, 72(3), 163-171. DOI: 10.1177/1542305018782518

JPCC pastor wives final.docx

September 19, 2018

*corresponding author

Experience of stress and coping strategies among pastors' wives in China

Abstract

A qualitative study was conducted to examine the experience of stress and coping strategies among 15 pastors' wives from a city in mainland China. Results indicated that nearly all interviewees experienced financial stress and loneliness, a phenomenon consistent with that seen in literature in the West. However, stress arising from role expectations among the spouses' congregations was low. Most of the interviewees coped with stress through family and social support, as well as through praying.

Keywords: Clergy family stress; clergy family coping; Three-self Patriotic Movement churches; China; qualitative methods

Experience of stress and coping strategies among pastors' wives in China

Introduction

The clergy is in the front line of helping church members with their spiritual and emotional growth. Studies indicate that the clergy is a stressful profession (Frame, 1998). Pastors are often too busy, resulting in physical and emotional exhaustion (Pan, 2006). They may lack passion or be indifferent to serving people because of tiredness. Some church members expect their pastors to be competent in everything. Churches seldom support pastors in terms of time and resources for personal growth and development (Wu, 2014). As a result, they may experience spiritual dryness or even burnout. Feeling drained and unable to cope with job related stress are the main reasons for leaving the profession (Hoge & Wenger, 2005).

The psychological well-being of clergy and their spouses deserves our attention for the sake of their health. Understanding the stress experienced by clergy and clergy families helps to prepare new clergy in their profession, as well as guiding the design of pastoral support for them. Most of the studies on clergy and clergy family stress were conducted in Anglo-American societies. There is a need to explore the stresses and coping strategies of clergy families of different ethnic and racial backgrounds (Darling et al., 2004). A recent study among Filipino clergy families found that the stressors are similar to those affecting their Western counterparts. However, clergy wives rely heavily on the marital relationship for coping, with little social support outside marriage (Guzman & Teh, 2016). This study expands our understanding of stresses and coping strategies in the Chinese context.

Christianity in modern China

After 1949, the new communist leadership of China decided to control religious groups. In 1952, the government ordered all foreign missionaries to leave the country. Church pastors

were sent for political re-education and by 1958 most Christian churches were closed (Krahn, 1978).

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) banned all religious institutions, including both foreign and domestic. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping reversed Mao Zedong's policies and established the open door policy to pursue economic reforms. The government changed its attitude towards religion. Churches began to reopen. Church leaders were released from prisons. However, the government only recognized churches administered under the China Christian Council and the Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) Committee. Since that time, the "Three-Self" movement (self-administration, self-support and self-propagation) has managed Christianity to ensure that Chinese Christian churches are free from any outside interference or financial support. The Three-Self churches are non-denominational and perceived as endorsing pro-communist theologies.

Economic reform brought economic growth to China. Modernization brought ordinary Chinese people material liberation, leading to the pursuit of spiritual concerns and church growth (Xie, 2010). According to official statistics, in 2013 there were 16 million Christians and some 18,000 clergy in China. The number of churches and gathering places numbered 12,000 and 25,000 respectively (The United Front Work Department, 2013). Christianity in China exhibits a high level of diversity, with differentiations in urban-rural residency, socio-economic development, regional, and ethnic origins (Xie, 2010). The growth in the number of believers implies that there is a significant need for pastoral care. There are some 18,000 Protestant clergy in China (The United Front Work Department, 2013). However, there is no systematic study of the psychological health of the clergy and their families.

Challenges faced by pastors and pastors' wives

The psychological well-being of clergy and their spouses deserves our attention for the sake of their health, as well as the future growth of the church body. There is little empirical data on the lives of pastors and pastors' wives in China. Several articles published in *Tian Feng*, the official publication by TSPM headquarters in Shanghai, reported that pastors in China experience personal struggles and tremendous stress. Pastors in China are overloaded with church responsibilities, leaving no time to nurture their own spiritual growth or take good care of their families. Pastors have no holidays. Whenever there are needs, pastors are there. Congregations expect them to be "Almighty" and to solve all problems (Yang, 2013). On the other hand, the salaries of pastors are low. Some pastors decide to leave the ministry in order to be more able to meet their families' financial needs. Those pastors remaining in their positions often feel guilty and self-pity for the circumstances of their spouses and children (*Tian Feng*, 2011). Some congregations perceive that pastors are devoted to serving God and should live a "suffering" life. There are traditional beliefs that pastors' families must suffer. The poorer the pastor and family, the more likely it is that they will receive God's faithful provision. Furthermore, church members perceive pastors as representing the "ideal spiritual man," not believing or allowing them to be weak. As a result, pastors are afraid of sharing personal difficulties and suffer from loneliness (Chen, 2013). The high expectations from their Christian brothers and sisters cause stress to pastors, which endangers their physical, emotional, and spiritual health (Chen, 2013).

Literature review

Stress suffered by clergy and their spouses

The concept of family stress was introduced by Hill (1949). Stressful situations can be classified as normative, non-normative, or a pile-up of demands (Boss, 2002). Normative stressors occur when family members undergo a transition such as the birth of a baby, or the

death of a family member. Non-normative stressors occur when the family experiences unnatural events such as wars, natural disasters, or illnesses. Stress can also arise when the family is unable to meet its demands (Lavee & Olson, 1991). Stress occurs when the equilibrium of the family system is disrupted (Boss, 2002).

Clergy families are not exempt from stress. Past studies in the West found that the stressors among clergy families include intrusion upon family boundaries, role ambiguity, exceptionally high role expectations, relocating from one place to another, financial matters, feelings of loneliness, and an unfit congregation (Carroll et al., 2007; Frame, 1998; Hill et al., 2003; Hunt, 1990; Lee & Iverson-Gilbert, 2003; McMinn et al., 2005; Morris & Blanton 1994a,b). The following paragraphs describe the stressors in more detail.

The literature indicates that the clergy family suffers from intrusions upon the time and space of family life (Hill et al., 2003). Clergy are expected to be on call 24 hours a day, making them unable to fulfill the responsibilities of being a parent or a spouse (Warner & Carter, 1984). Clergy spouses may feel that they are living in a glass house with no privacy in their personal life (Lee & Balswick, 1989). Those who live on the church premises suffer from invasion of space when they do not set boundaries to protect themselves from unwanted intrusions (Hill et al., 2003).

Job descriptions and performance indicators for the clergy are often vague (Ngo et al., 2005). Role conflicts occur when they have to balance the expectations of different groups of people, such as church members and denominational leaders (Liang, 2009). When there is a poor fit between clergy and congregation, it creates stress and frustration (Hill et al., 2003). The clergy are expected to meet all the real and perceived needs of a congregation (King, 1988). Church members may expect unrealistic model behavior from the clergy as well as their

spouses and children (Lee & Balswick, 1989). Congregations expect their clergy to sacrifice their personal needs for the congregation.

Very often, decisions on clergy relocations are made without consulting them or considering their needs (Lee & Iverson-Gilbert, 2003). Transfer from one location to another creates stress for clergy and their families (Frame, 1998), resulting in loss of social support and disruption of personal development (Morris & Blanton, 1994b). The children of clergy need to adjust to new school environments, neighborhoods, and friends (Frame, 1998).

Studies found that insufficient financial compensation is a chronic stressor (Blanton & Morris, 1999). Clergy spouses are sometimes more affected by financial stress than the clergy themselves (Morris & Blanton, 1998). Clergy and their families feel lonely when they do not have close friends for social support (Walker, 1985), and clergy spouses report feelings of isolation (Friedman, 1985).

How do clergy and clergy spouses cope with stress? Studies indicate that clergy and their spouses rely on family support and intrapersonal strategies such as prayer, meditation, or positive thinking in coping with stress (McMinn et al., 2005; Meek et al., 2003), seldom seeking professional counseling as a coping measure (Frame & Shehan, 1994).

While pastors believe they are fulfilling their calling by God to serve, and thus feel contentment in the pulpit, pastors' wives, who are rarely seen on the stage, are required to support the family. Most pastors' wives in China need to work as well as manage household affairs. Their stress levels are similar to those of pastors, but they cannot share their vulnerability because it may affect the image of their husbands. With a lack of empirical evidence on the experience of stress among pastors' wives in China, this study was conducted to fill the gap.

Research objectives

The research objectives of this study are

1. to explore the experience of stress among pastors' wives in China;
2. to explore if pastors' wives in China experience stress from loneliness, stress from role expectations, and financial stress; and
3. to identify the coping strategies used by pastors' wives in China.

Methodology

As the objective of this study is to explore Chinese pastors' wives stress experiences in detail and their coping strategies, a qualitative interpretive approach was adopted to provide an in-depth analysis. To this end, in December 2014 in-depth interview methodology was applied to 15 pastors' wives in a city in China with a population of more than five million. To protect the identities of the interviewees, the name of the city was not disclosed.

Procedure

Ethical Committee approval was obtained at the second author's institute. The interviewing questions were prepared in English based on the existing literature and were pilot-tested about the clarify (see Appendix I). A local Chinese professional translator was recruited to translate the questions into Chinese. A pilot study was conducted by interviewing a pastor's wife in the city. Instead of asking her to answer the questions, she was asked to read the questions to see if she had difficulty in understanding their wording. She reported that she fully understood all the questions. She commented that it was good to have the interview questions; otherwise the focus of the interview would be lost. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher explained the purpose and procedure to the participants.

Interviewees were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and individual identities would not be revealed. Verbal consent was requested from all the participants for the interviews as well as the audio-recording of the interviews. All interviewees agreed to participate in the interview and eleven of them gave consent for audio-recording. These 11 interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Four interviewees expressed that they were not comfortable with audio-recording. Handwritten notes were used to record these interviews. The researcher gave two books to each of the interviewees as a token of appreciation.

The interviews were conducted in Putonghua by the second author. The interviewee asked the questions one by one. Follow-up questions were used when needed so that participants could elaborate on the specifics. The interviews took about 40 to 65 minutes.

The participants

A convenience sampling method was adopted. Altogether 15 participants from a city in China were recruited through personal networks of the second author. All of them have husbands currently serve as full-time paid reverends or ministers at the TSPM churches. The churches of the participants' husband were located in different geographic areas of the city. The average age of the participants was 39. Among the 15 interviewees, seven had been married for less than five years, three had been married for six to ten years, and the remaining five had been married for more than ten years. Two of them did not have children, six had young children, and six had school-aged children. The remaining four had adult children. Four were high school graduates. The remaining 11 had a university or college education. A majority of them had been Christian for more than ten years. On average, they had been Christian for 21 years. Seven of them were pastors of another church. It is not possible to tell whether this reflects a general pattern of ministers and their wives in China as such information are not

released publicly. There is no denominational difference as TSPM churches are non-denominational. Five of them were full-time homemakers, among which three were recent retirees who used to have full-time jobs. Two were unpaid volunteers in the church. Only one of them had a paid job outside church. With regard to the size of their husbands' congregations, eight of them were serving churches with fewer than 500 persons. The remaining seven served churches with more than 500 persons.

Data analysis

The researcher who conducted the interviews transcribed the audio records into Word documents in Chinese and went through the written notes. She familiarized herself with the transcripts by reading them several times. The constant comparative method was used to analyze the data and generate meaningful categories for systematic exploration and investigation (Strauss, 1987). Based on the answers to the research questions, topic codes were created. The coder stopped the coding when new codes stopped appearing (Charmaz, 2006). No software was used for coding. The first author went through the coding. Any discrepancies were reconciled through discussion between coder and first author. The process was meant to minimize subjectivity in research analysis (Weber, 2004). Typical quotes were selected and translated into English.

Findings

All except one participant reported that they experience stress in their role as a pastor's wife.

Experience of stressful situations

When asked about their experience of stress in their roles as pastors' wives, three interviewees declined to say anything. Perhaps the questions were too direct or there was insufficient trust established for sharing. Two interviewees reported that they could not think

of any stressful situations at that moment. The remaining nine interviewees reported financial stress, difficulties in finding a cheap place to rent, tension arising from the husband's work, dealing with household chores, managing different roles at the same time, and being unable to disclose one's identity as a pastor's wife. Financial stress was brought up most frequently, with assertions that the salaries their spouses made were insufficient to maintain a decent life. One interviewee reported that she was not able to tell others that her husband was a pastor because she was a civil servant. She explained that pastor was not considered a proper occupation. Since some of the stressors were asked about in detail in subsequent parts of the interview, the experience of stress will be analyzed in detail in the following sections.

Experience of loneliness and coping strategies

Seven interviewees reported that they did not feel lonely. Among them, three said that they were so busy and exhausted in fulfilling their responsibilities that they had no time to feel lonely. Three interviewees said they were not lonely because they were able to share their feelings in trusted relationships, including those with the husband, a sibling (sister), other pastors' wives, colleagues, and mature church members. One interviewee said that she was an introvert and did not feel the need for a social network. It was interesting that this interviewee repeated a few times that she wanted to have a mentor to guide her in spiritual growth. It appeared that she was lacking a relationship for personal development.

Eight interviewees admitted that they felt lonely some or all of the time. The two most frequently mentioned reasons for loneliness were the husband being too busy and an inability to share with others their personal struggles, disagreements in marriage, and adversities in life. Here are two typical quotes:

“My husband is so busy that I don't even have a chance to see him on Saturdays and Sundays. We don't have time to talk and update each other.”

“A pastor’s family is supposed to be blessed. When I shared with a church member my worry about my sick child, the member asked me to reflect on the sin I had committed that caused such hardship. As a result, I decided not to share my difficulties with others. Others do not understand that bad things happen to us too.”

Among those who reported that they were lonely, strategies employed for coping with loneliness were praying and reading the Bible, as well as finding someone to talk to. Often, they would share their loneliness with their husbands. Here are two illustrative quotes:

“My mother suggested I read the Psalms. I cope with loneliness by talking to God.”

“I had a good classmate, I could talk to her even though we hadn’t contacted each other for a long time. However, the one I most want to share with is my husband. We love to drink tea together and then we talk. The problems may not go away but it definitely assuages my loneliness.”

Experience of role expectations and coping strategies

Nine interviewees said that they did not experience any stress from role expectations. The two main reasons reported were, first, there were no clearly defined role expectations for pastors’ wives, and second, seven interviewees were pastors themselves and there was little interaction between them and the congregations of their husbands’ churches. Here are two illustrative quotes:

“In this city, nobody talks about the role of a pastor’s wife or is concerned about them. People at church only have expectations for pastors.”

“I seldom get in contact with my husband’s church and its members. People know me as a pastor of another church. I expect myself to be a good pastor here, preaching and shepherding well.”

Six interviewees reported stress from role expectations. The stress mainly came from church members, themselves, or their husbands. Church members expected the pastor to have a perfect wife. One interviewee even told us that her husband's friends thought she was not good enough for him. Two commented that their behavior would affect their husband's image. The husbands' role expectations for the interviewees were to take good care of the family or to fulfill the expectations of church members. Here are three illustrative quotes:

“My home needs to be very tidy and my child needs to behave well. Once my child said something they [church members] could not accept. They were looking for the perfect pastor family. I learnt to listen more than talk now.”

“I am cautious and don't want to influence his serving. I need to take care with my words and behaviors and I don't want to cause trouble.”

“My husband said I was cool and unsmiling when some old sisters visited us. He wanted me to improve and learn more. I know I have not done very well. I said I have no time because of my family responsibilities.”

Among those who reported stress from role expectations, coping strategies were mainly to discern whether the expectations were reasonable. Here is an illustrative quote:

“I will ascertain whether the expectations are reasonable. If they are too harsh, I will decline people's requests.”

Experience of financial stress and coping strategies

Seven interviewees already indicated that they had financial stress at the beginning of the interview when asked about their experience of stress. Perhaps with the building of trust during the interview, interviewees were more willing to disclose their financial stress.

Fourteen interviewees reported that they had financial stress. The remaining interviewee said she earned a good salary, and finance was not an issue for her family.

According to the interviewees, financial stress arose mainly from pastors' basic salaries being low, and the employment package not covering benefits such as education allowance and medical assistance for family members. A majority of the interviewees were not from the city. As a result, they needed to rent accommodation. They reported that housing costs in the city were expensive. Many interviewees also reported that they were supporting their parents, parents-in-law, or siblings financially. Medical costs and children's education expenses were considered the most draining. Those who were not official citizens of the city were not eligible to enjoy medical insurance for hospitalization or to study at public schools. One interviewee mentioned that the monthly tuition fee for kindergarten could be double her current salary. A majority of the interviewees reported that they had to work in order to gain a second income for the family.

Without being asked how they cope with financial stress, they reported spontaneously that they had been very cautious in spending money. They tried various means to save as much as they could, such as cutting hair by themselves, renting an apartment without basic facilities, or even giving birth in a village. Here are two illustrative quotes:

“Financial stress is very real but embarrassing to talk about. At one time, my son was sick and consumed more than ten pieces of disposable nappy a day. I told my son to save for mom because that was a lot of money! Each nappy costs roughly one Chinese dollar. Our parents-in-law do not work and they need our provision too!”

“Yes, finance is the source of stress, particularly because our parents are old. My mother was sick recently and needed an operation. My child's schooling and my husband's health are some of my concerns.”

The next question asked how the interviewees cope with financial stress. In addition to living a frugal life, interviewees relied on budgeting, living further away from the city, financial support from family members, and supply of provisions from others to cope with financial stress. Here are three illustrative quotes:

“I calculated the income, the fixed expenses such as rent, food, etc., I would not blindly proclaim that I have faith in God to supply, I do real budgets.”

“When we had a child, my parents and relatives brought us clothing and necessities.”

“I prayed and relied on God. Sometimes God sent someone to help.”

Other stresses

Interviewees were invited to talk about stresses other than loneliness, role expectations, and financial issues. Altogether 11 responses were collected. Five of them were related to financial issues as well as the fulfilling of family responsibilities, such as not being able to support an adult child in purchasing an apartment, not being sure if the family can support a child in entering a local primary school, and not being able to visit parents more often. Three interviewees reported stress from conflicts at work. The other stresses included poor in-law relations, worries about the health of family members, and physical separation from the husband due to work.

The coping strategies for other stress were similar to the coping strategies for loneliness, role expectations, and financial matters. Interviewees reported that they coped with the stress by talking to God and to trusted persons such as prayer partners or co-workers.

Discussion

This qualitative study was conducted to investigate the experience of stress among pastors' wives in China and their coping strategies. As with the findings of previous studies, the interviewees in this study experienced financial stress, stress from loneliness, and stress from role expectations. Financial stress arose from low salary and was worsened by a lack of residential status in the city they served. Under China's household registration system (hukou), individuals without urban residency of a city are not able to get access to education, medical care, and other social services for themselves or their children (Wu et al., 2014). As a result, pastors' children are denied entry into public schools in the city and need to enroll in schools either for migrant children, which are usually of lower quality, or pay sponsoring fees to get into the public schools. Even if these children gain access to public primary and middle schools, they are not eligible to take the high-school entrance examination in the city and need to return to their hometown for the exam (Wu et al., 2014). Medical expenses are another concern that interviewees faced. With marketization, Chinese people no longer enjoy free or low-cost medical benefits. With their collective culture, Chinese people are expected to help with the financial needs of the immediate family as well as the extended family. Even though some of the interviewees were not experiencing financial stress at the time of the study, many of them worried that they would be in financial stress when their aging parents retire or when their health slips in the future.

Prolonged living with economic hardship takes a significant toll on the health and well-being of individuals and families (Wadsworth et al., 2011), and economic stress not only disrupts family relationships and processes, but also constrains the ability to cope with stress and contributes to psychological problems in family members living with economic hardship (Wadsworth et al., 2011).

Stress from loneliness was exacerbated by the interviewees finding it difficult to share personal struggles with others. The social assumption that a clergy family should be blessed

and free from adversity echoes a previous study in which clergy spouses perceived that they were viewed differently because of their role as clergy spouses (Walker, 1985). Regarding stress from role expectations, our study found that the absence of stress from role expectations was due to the lack of interaction between the pastors' wives and the congregation members as the wives were either pastors themselves or full-time employees. Some interviewees reported that they did not disclose their identities as pastors' wives in the workplace as pastor was not considered a proper occupation in the mainland Chinese society.

For couples that are both pastors serving different churches, it is understandable that both churches would see little of their pastor's spouses (Daniel, 2009). Although a clergy's wife used to give unpaid service at the church in the past, churches today recognize that clergy couples should not represent a two-for-one deal. Whether a clergy's wife serves as a volunteer in the church should depend on her own calling (Daniel, 2009). In our current study, we found that most of the pastors' wives did not play an active role in the pastors' churches. The authors consider that the detachment of pastors' wives from their husbands' churches may bring negative impacts. First, church members may not have the experience of having a pastor's family living among them. They may hear preaching on family issues from the pulpit, but they may not have the opportunity to experience it from a clergy family. Second, the absence of a spouse may remove the opportunity to protect a clergyman from distractions and sexual temptations in the congregation.

Those who experienced stress from role expectations were again subject to the perception that pastors' families should be perfect in every aspect, including having a perfect wife and perfect children.

Our study reveals that some interviewees did not experience stress from role expectations because they felt that they were invisible in society. Others, due to feelings of insecurity,

attempted to hide their identity as a clergy spouse from their social network. Compared to the 600,000 clergymen and women in the United States (Hartford Institute for Religion Research 2018), the clergy population in China is insignificant. As a result, people may not have clear role expectations of the clergy and their wives.

This study departs from previous studies in that it finds infrequent reports of stress from role ambiguity, stress from intrusions into time and space, and stress from congregational unfitness.

Family support, social support, and intra-personal support were most frequently reported as coping strategies for stress. These resources are similar to those previously reported in the literature.

Practical implications

We can draw the following practical implications from this study. First, as most of the interviewees were experiencing with financial stress or were worried about financial stress in the future, there was an urgent need for TSPM churches to review the compensation packages for their pastors. Churches should consider the provision of medical coverage and education allowance for clergy who do not have household registration for the city they work. Churches should educate their members that a pay package to support the clergy a decent life is a demonstration of care and love for the clergy. Ignoring the financial struggles of the clergy spouse may create resentment among their children, leading the pastors' kids to abandon the church (Daniel, 2009). The clergy family may not have a financial contingency to handle an unexpected crisis such as severe illness or accidents of a family member. There is a need to set up an emergency bursary to provide support to the Chinese clergy families when needed. Some participants anticipated financial stress related to the future education of their children. Overseas Christian universities may consider support them by establishing tuition subsidy or

scholarship for clergy children as a way to alleviate some of the financial stresses they anticipate.

This study reveals that clergy wives experienced little emotional support from the church community in coping with stress from role expectations. The church community should be informed of the situation and should be more understanding and considerate toward their clergy families. There is a need to initiate psychology support services and programs to help the clergy wives to acquire effective stress management skills. There are many websites in the Western countries that equip clergy families to cope with stress. There is a need to establish such websites in China too.

This study shows that clergy wives did not have any forms of social network that enabled them to support one another. Only one interviewee mentioned repeatedly that she would like to have a mentor. This indicates that most of the interviewees were either not aware of their own pastoral needs, or did not verbalize such needs. With social support being one of the coping strategies, there is a need to establish online and offline support groups among the clergy wives. In 2017, China has 55.8 percent of the population using the Internet (Chi, 2018), making online community feasible. Some of the interviewees who are retired mentioned that they experienced a higher level of stress when they were working. It is not clear whether the reduced stress is attributed to their maturity in handling stress or no longer having to deal with job stress. Future studies can identify participants who can manage the stress well. These participants have the potential to serve as mentors for younger pastor wives in acquiring such skills through sharing and mentoring.

This study did not find husbands a major source of support for the clergy wives to cope with stress. Creating programs that encourage husbands to communicate openly with their wives on the stresses should be considered.

Limitations

This study is exploratory in nature, based on a convenient sample in one Chinese city, and the findings cannot be generalized into other cities in China. The study covers only the Three-Self churches and does not cover the house churches. Interviewees who are also pastors themselves are over-represented in the sample.

Conclusion

This study on stress and coping strategies among pastors' wives in China generated similarities and differences with previous findings in the literature. Financial stress is experienced due to low salary and the lack of medical insurance and education allowance for family members. Some of the interviewees experience loneliness because they cannot find people who understand their struggles. Unlike previous findings in the literature, stress arising from role expectations of the spouses' congregations is not high. This is because most of the interviewees are either pastors themselves or full-time employees who have minimal presence at their spouses' congregations. Stress coping strategies employed include family support, social support, and praying. This is the first study of stress among clergy families in China.

Appendix 1. English translation of the questions asked

1. Could you describe a situation in which you really feel very stressed as a pastor's wife?
2. Some studies say the life of a pastor's wife is very lonely. Do you agree? Could you describe your experiences?
3. What are the things that happen whenever you are lonely? How do you cope?
4. Some studies say the role of a pastor's wife role carries expectations from husband, church leaders, and brothers and sisters from the church. Do you agree? What are your experiences?
5. How do you feel when you are asked to serve in the church?*
6. How do your husband or your children respond to your serving in the church?*
7. How do you cope with role expectations from people around you?
8. Some studies say pastors' wives experience financial stress. Do you agree? Are you comfortable to share with me the finances of your home?
9. Could you describe how you cope with financial stress?
10. What other stresses do you experience in your daily life as a pastor's wife?
11. Could you describe how you cope with it?
12. Are your parents involved when you encounter any of the above stresses?*
13. Do you feel that God intervenes when you feel stressed?*

*Not analyzed in this paper

References

- Blanton, P., & Morris, M. (1999). Work-related predictors of physical symptomatology and emotional wellbeing among clergy and spouses. *Review of Religious Research*, 40(4), 331-348.
- Boss, P. (2002). *Family stress management: A contextual approach* (2nd.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Carroll, J. S., Olson, C. D., & Buckmiller, N. (2007). Family boundary ambiguity: A 30-year review of theory, research, and measurement. *Family Relations*, 56(2), 210–230.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*, London: Sage.
- Chi, D. (2018). China's netizen population hits new high amid mobile Internet boom. *GBTimes*, February 1. Retrieved on April 11, 2018 from <https://gbtimes.com/chinas-netizen-population-hits-new-high-amid-mobile-internet-boom>
- Chen, F. (2013). A brief comment on the system to support pastors. *Tian Feng*, 6, 32-33.
- Daniel, L. (2009). Redefining expectation: The pastor's husband. *Christian Century*, July 14, 28-31.
- Darling, C, Hill, E., & McWey, L. (2004). Understanding stress and quality of life for clergy and clergy spouses. *Stress and Health*, 20(5), 261-277.
- Frame, M. (1998). Relocation and wellbeing in United Methodist clergy and their spouses: what pastoral counselors need to know. *Pastoral Psychology*, 46(6), 415-430.
- Frame, M. W., & Shehan, C. L. (1994). Work and well-being in the two-person career: Relocation stress and coping among clergy husbands and wives. *Family Relations*, 43(2), 196–205.
- Friedman, E. (1985). *Generation to generation*. New York: Guilford.
- Guzman, N.E.Q., & Teh, L.A. (2016). Understanding the stresses and coping resources of Filipino clergy families: A multiple-case study. *Pastoral Psychology*, 65(4), 459-480.
- Hartford Institute for Religion Research. (2018). Fast facts about American Religion. Retrieved on March 14, 2018 from http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html#numclergy
- Hill, R. (1949) *Families under stress*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Hill, E. W., Darling, C. A., & Raimondi, N. M. (2003). Understanding boundary-related stress in clergy families. *Marriage & Family Review*, 35(1–2), 147–166.
- Hoge, D. & Wenger, J. (2005). Pastors in transition: *Why clergy leave local church ministry*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

- Hunt, H. D. (1990). Clergy marriage: A unique partnership. In H. D. Hunt (Ed.), *The stained glass fishbowl: Strengthening clergy marriages* (pp. 23–36). Valley Forge, PA: The Ministers Council.
- King, W. (1988). *The clergy family project of the diocese of Alabama, Birmingham, AL: The Episcopal Diocese of Alabama*.
- Krahn, H.G. (1978). The silent church in the midst of radical change in China. *Direction*, 7(3), 20-31.
- Lavee, Y., & Olson, D. H. (1991). Family types and response to stress. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 53(3), 786–798.
- Lee, C., & Balswick, J. (1989). *Life in a class house: The minister family in its unique social context*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Lee, C., & Iverson-Gilbert, J. (2003). Demand, support and perception in family-related stress among Protestant clergy. *Family Relations*, 52(3), 249–257.
- Liang, O. (2009). *Clergy Stress: Seventh-day Adventist Pastors in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, CA.
- Ma, L. (2010). 2010 Blue book of religion: Estimated 23.05 million of Christians in China. Retrieved on March 8 from <http://minzu.people.com.cn/GB/166717/12529764.html> (in Chinese)
- McMinn, M. R., Lish, R. A., Trice, P. D., Root, A. M., Gilbert, N., & Yap, A. (2005). Care for pastors: Learning from clergy and their spouses. *Pastoral Psychology*, 53(6), 563–581.
- Meek, K., McMinn, R., Brower, C., Burnett, T., McRay, B., Ramey, M., Swanson, D., & Villa, D. (2003). Maintaining personal resiliency: Lessons learned from Protestant Evangelical clergy. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31(4), 339–347.
- Morris, M. & Blanton, P. (1994a). Denominational perceptions of stress and the provision of support services for clergy families. *Pastoral Psychology*, 42(5), 345-364.
- Morris, M., & Blanton, P. (1994b). The influence of work-related stressors on clergy husbands and their wives. *Family Relations*, 43, 189-195.
- Morris, M., & Blanton, P. (1998). Predictors of family functioning among clergy and spouses: influences of social context and perceptions of work-related stressors. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 7(1), 27-41.
- Ngo, H.Y., Foley, S., & Lois, R. (2005). Work role stressors and turnover intentions: A study of professional clergy in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Resource Management*, 16(11), 2133-2146.
- Pan, S. (2006). Pastoral counseling of Korean clergy with burnout: culture and narcissism. *Asia Journal of Theology*, 20(2), 241-255.

Strauss, A.L. (1987). *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

The United Front Work Department (2013). Current situation of religion in China, *Minzu Tribute*, 3, 96. (in Chinese)

Tian Feng (2011). Editorial: Please pray for the growth of the pastors and ministry staff in Chinese churches. *Tian Feng*, 6, 37. Retrieved on March 8 from http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_61c5505a0100t5i6.html (in Chinese)

Wadsworth, M. E., Santiago, C. D., Einhorn, L., Etter, E. M., Rienks, S., & Markman, H. (2011). Preliminary Efficacy of an Intervention to Reduce Psychosocial Stress and Improve Coping in Low-Income Families. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 48(3-4), 257-271.

Walker, A. (1985). Reconceptualizing family stress. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, November, 827-837.

Warner, J., & Carter, J. (1984). Loneliness, marital adjustment, and burnout in pastoral and lay persons. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 12(2), 125-131.

Weber, R. (2004). The rhetoric of positivism versus interpretivism: A personal view, *MIS Quarterly*, 28(1), 429-449.

Wu, X. (2014). Eight crisis faced by ministry staff today. *Tian Feng*, 3, 32-34. Retrieved on March 8 from <http://www.jdjcm.com/jiaohui/544.html> (in Chinese)

Wu, Q., Tsang, B., & Ming, H. (2014). Social capital, family support, resilience and educational outcomes of Chinese migrant children, *The British Journal of Social Work*, 44(3), 636-656.

Xie, X. (2010). Religion and modernity in China: who is joining the Three-Self Church and why. *Journal of Church and State*, 52(1), 74-93.

Yang, L. (2013). Pastors are human being too. *Tian Feng*, 3, 30-31. Retrieved on March 8 from <http://www.jdjcm.com/html/2013101985337567488894.html> (in Chinese)

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.