

# Religious Activity and Psychological Health: A Preliminary Survey\*

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The change or transformation of self has been one of the most interesting areas for research psychologists, as well as for practitioners. Some theorists argue that the self-changes may be categorized into two groups: unintentional change and intentional change (Kiecolt, 1994). First, people sometimes change, even if they do not intend to do so. For example, people may be persuaded or induced to change by some cultic groups. Or, people may experience a sudden change of self after struggling with difficult problems. Sometimes this type of change is called 'quantum change' (C'de Baca & Wilbourne, 2004; Miller & C'deBaca, 1994). In the same vein, after some traumatic event, people may experience self-change in the direction of growth (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). Of course, this change is unintentional because nobody wants to experience a traumatic event in order to grow or change.

In contrast to these unintentional changes, people sometimes intend to change themselves, or intend to construct a particular kind of self in order to attain some goals. We are interested in the latter category, intentional change of self. In the present study, we deal with these intentional change through several questions; a) How do people, who intend to change themselves, interact with other people? b) What do they learn in these interactions? c) What aspects of self are changed by these interactions? d) Do these changes improve their psychological well-being?

To address these questions, we conducted a survey on the members of a religious group named Reiyukai, which was established in 1925 by Kakutaro Kubo and Kimi Kotani and designated as one of the Japanese 'new religious organization' deriving from the Nichiren tradition (Reiyukai is now divided into three groups). Reiyukai is an appropriate group to address our questions for in several reasons.

First, Reiyukai encourages its members to practice several activities. One of the most important activities is veneration of ancestors. Its members usually begin compiling a death register (Kakochō), upon joining the group. In this book, they register the death days of ancestors. Most members recite a sutra in front of this book in the home. The main component of the ritual is the recitation of Blue Sutra, *Ao-kyōkan*, in which the doctrine of Reiyukai is written.

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この論文は平成17年3月25日高輪プリンスホテルに於ける第19回国際宗教学宗教史会議世界大会でのパネル「ひとのころに関わる『法華経』の特徴」での口頭発表をまとめたものである。

Second, proselytization or enrollment is also designated as an important activity of members. The practical meaning of this activity is somewhat different among the three Reiyukai groups, the basic idea seems that, by proselytizing a person, they can form a tentative 'parent-child' relationship and can improve themselves together and achieve happiness.

Various types of group meetings are also important for the members. In the meetings, they present their experience or testimony before other members. These characteristics of Reiyukai are very interesting as a target of social psychological research, because their activities include social interactions in several ways.

1. Members have strong desires to change or improve themselves. In other words, they have strong motivation for the social interaction.

2. Their own experiences with others are regarded as of primary importance. So, social interactions in daily life (including symbolic interactions with the ancestors) are encouraged.

3. Proselytization (Michibiki) is regarded as an important activity, and it naturally involves social interaction with the potential member.

4. Disclosing these experiences in group meetings is encouraged. So, members learn many valuable things in these social interactions.

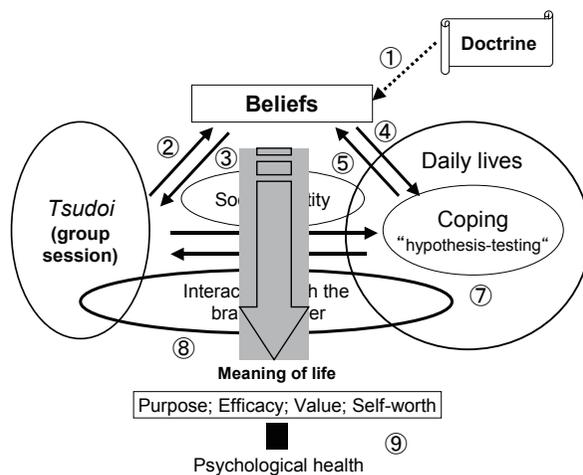


Figure 1 A tentative model of the relationship between variables which promote self-changes and psychological health.

Figure 1 shows our working model showing the relationship between activities, beliefs, and psychological health. Members form some beliefs about the world, self, or human relationships. Doctrine is one of the sources of these beliefs (①). Among a host of such beliefs, particularly interesting ones are 'if- then' type beliefs. For example, the members may form the belief that 'if they change their own behavior (ex. behave submissively), then, their families will go well' .

These beliefs may differ in their degree of certainty. So, there may be some beliefs about which members are somewhat unsure. In the former example, they may not be sure that their families go well even if they behave submissively. In these cases, the belief is somewhat like a

'hypothesis' to be tested. They must test to see if the hypothesis or belief is 'true.' In other words, the beliefs need to be validated. In this respect, interaction with other members, particularly with leaders, and interactions in group meetings are important. Members may visit or call their branch leader on an individual basis for counseling. And members are encouraged to attend meetings and learn many things there. In these interactions, the beliefs may be reinforced. Finally these beliefs will be summed up and construct the meaning of life (Baumeister, 1991).

Although the relationship between psychological health and religiosity is not fully understood, researchers have hypothesized that religion may influence mental and physical health because of at least six mediating factors. Pargament et al. (1998) and Emmons (1999) suggested that religiosity helps support healthy life styles, helps promote personality integration, increases generativity, provides for social support, provides uniting strategies, and provides a sense of meaning and purpose.

Among these six factors, the last two seem particularly important in the case of Reiyukai. That is, it provides unique coping strategies, and it also provides a sense of meaning and purpose.

One of the subgroups of Reiyukai gave us a chance to conduct questionnaire research within its members, so, we set several research questions and attempted to construct a questionnaire to answer them.

1. What motivated members to join the group?
2. What do they talk about when they enroll others?
3. What are important factors that promote change in groups (tsudo meetings)?
4. What kind of 'beliefs' do they have?
5. What kind of self-changes do they perceive by joining the group?
6. Do they believe in "internal locus of control"?
7. Are members psychologically healthy?
8. What factors are related to psychological health?

## Methods

We constructed a questionnaire to address these research questions. This questionnaire contained the scales and other questions described below:

**GHQ (General Health Questionnaire)** Originally this scale was developed as a screening instrument to detect psychiatric disorders (Goldberg, Gater, Sartorius, Ustun, Piccinelli, Gureje, & Rutter, 1997; Goldberg & Hillier, 1979), but now, it is widely used to assess the general status of psychological well-being. We used the twelve-item version of the GHQ.

**Locus of Control Scale (LOC)** The concept of Locus of Control concerns the perceived source of control over one's destinies. Internals view themselves as having control over their own destinies. In contrast, externals are those who tend to see control as residing elsewhere. Locus of control scales were developed to measure individual differences in this belief about control.

It would be reasonable to assume that the belief in internal control will be positively related to the degree of psychological well-being, because subjects may believe that they can attain some goals by changing their action or way of thinking. We used the LOC scale developed by a Kanbara, Higuchi, Shimizu (1982).

**Other measures** In addition to these often-used scales, we devised some scales to measure relevant variables: 10 items which tap the factors promoting changes in groups (Tsudoi meetings); 13 items asking the perceived reasons of joining Reiyukai; 7 items which tap the messages which members emphasize when they try to proselytize beliefs to others; 10 items to measure the perceived benefits of attending group meetings; 23 items to measure the aspect of self-change produced by religious activity; and 12 items to measure the beliefs of respondents concerning merits of being members or practicing religious activities. Items of these scales will be shown in the tables of the results.

### Procedure

We distributed the questionnaire with an introductory letter and return envelope to the members attending meetings held in Osaka (N=260), Tokyo (N=120), and Kitakyushu (N=140). As mentioned earlier, Reiyukai is now divided into three groups. Among these groups, all respondents in the present study belong to so-called Kubo group. We asked the members who were attending the meeting to take several questionnaires and further asked them to complete one, and to hand other questionnaires to other Reiyukai members (family members included). Within a month, 260 (males=69; females=190; unknown=1), questionnaires were returned. So, the response rate was exactly 50.0 %.

## Results

**Age of the respondents** Figure 2 shows the number of respondents for each age groups. The distribution is somewhat biased toward the older age, and the average age was 52.03.

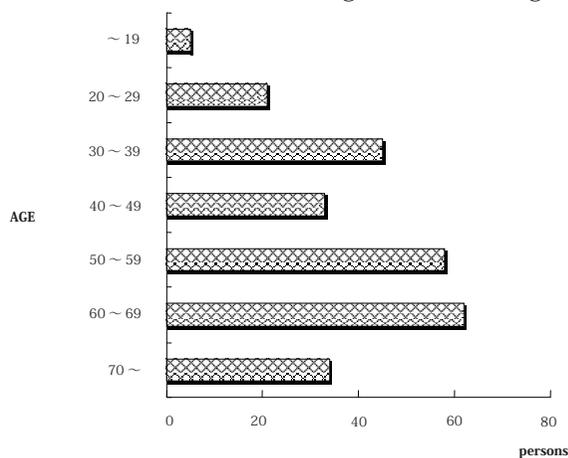


Figure 2 Number of respondents for each age group

**Reasons for joining Reiyukai** Figure 3 shows a list of the perceived reasons for joining Reiyukai. There would be many life events that prompt people to join religious groups. Among thirteen life events we listed, the most frequently chosen one was 'married life,' followed by worries of personality, worries of relationships, and family problems. These results seem to suggest that major concerns which led them to join the group seem to be about problems of 'self' and 'relationships,' rather than illness or financial problems.

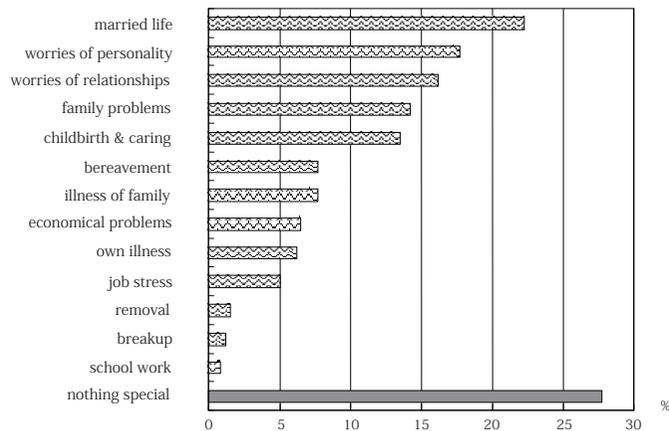


Figure 3 Life events which prompted people to join Reiyukai

**Proselytization** As mentioned earlier, proselytization, or enrollment, is one of the important activities of Reiyukai members, although its priority is somewhat different among three subgroups. We asked the respondents what they would say when they proselytize others. The most frequently chosen alternative was 'You can change your view of life by joining Reiyukai,' followed by 'Joining Reiyukai will promote good relationships with others.' (see Figure 4). So it is suggested again from these results that the main motives of the members to join the group are 'self' and 'relationships'.

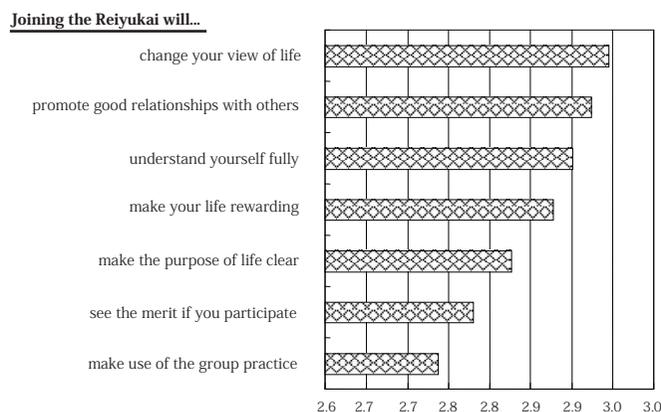


Figure 4 Mean ratings of the 'merits' emphasized in enrollment

**Experiences in Tsudoi** Most members attend the Tsudoi meetings on a regular basis. In a typical meeting, it opens with the facilitator’s talk, usually on his own experience in daily life. After that, he or she encourages others participants to speak of their own experiences. Some members eagerly raise their hands to talk, others are named by the facilitator to talk. When one member is giving his or her story, other members listen to it in a very responsive and accepting manner. What do they learn in these group meetings? Groups, by their very nature, provide members with information, support, and guidance. And so, many personal and interpersonal problems can be resolved when confronted in a group rather than alone.

<b>Universality</b>	Recognition of shared problems
<b>Hope</b>	Increased sense of optimism from seeing others improve
<b>Vicarious learning</b>	Developing social skills by watching others
<b>Interpersonal learning</b>	Developing social skills by interacting with others
<b>Guidance</b>	Accepting advice and suggestions from the group members
<b>Cohesion</b>	Feeling accepted by others
<b>Self-disclosure</b>	Revealing personal information to others
<b>Catharsis</b>	Releasing pent-up emotions
<b>Altruism</b>	Increased sense of efficacy from helping others
<b>Insight</b>	Gaining a deeper understanding of oneself

Figure 5 Ten functions or 'benefits' of group interactions

We used a scheme suggested by Forsyth (1999) in order to tap the perceived 'benefits' of attending the meeting (See Figure 5). For example, groups provide members with a sense of universality. Thus they can be assured that they all have problems. Furthermore, groups bring 'hope' to the members, so they can infer that 'If other members can change, so can I.' We converted the meaning of each factor to an appropriate question. For example 'universality' was worded, 'I feel relief to find that my problem is similar to that of most other members.' and 'hope' as 'I'm hopeful to see other members successfully cope with the problem.' Respondents were required to answer on a 5-point scale (strongly agree ~ strongly disagree).

Figure 6 shows the average rating for each item. The average for 'vicarious learning' is the highest among the ten items, followed by 'Guidance' and 'Interpersonal learning.' In contrast, the mean ratings for 'catharsis' and 'self-disclosure' are comparatively low. These results seem to suggest that members attending this kind of meeting learn more by observing other members and listening their stories, rather than by talking their own stories. This may not be surprising, as the time allowed for each member’s talk is limited. Members can get valuable information

from other members' stories, and maybe from subsequent verbal interactions.

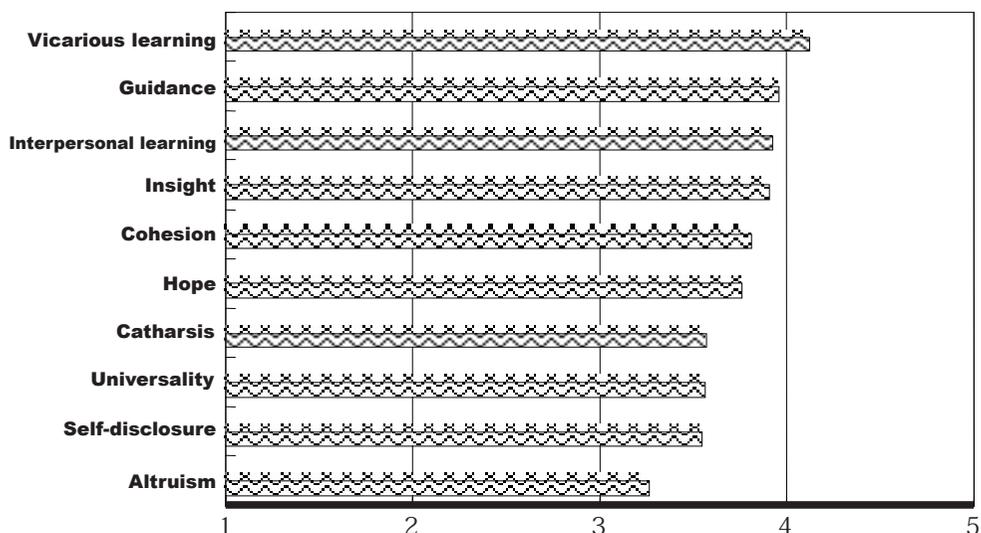


Figure 6 Mean ratings for the 'benefits' of attending the meetings

**Perceived self-change** A factor analysis was conducted for 23 items which aimed at measuring the perceived change of self. Three factors were obtained. The first factor consisted of 6 items, such as 'Come to understand other people's good will,' 'Come to realize that people support each other,' 'Come to show kindness to others,' etc., and it was named 'Benevolence.' The second factor consisted of 7 items including items, such as 'Become confident in oneself,' 'Come to think that I can overcome difficulties,' 'Become to eager to try new things' etc. This factor was named 'Confidence and aspiration.' The third factor, which consisted of 5 items, was named 'Feeling of being accepted,' and items such as 'Have come to think that I'm not alone,' 'Have come to believe that my family really loves me,' 'Have come to feel other persons' kindness,' were contained.

**Beliefs** The belief scale consisted of twelve items. Each item contained the 'benefits' of doing practice or joining the group. For example, it contained such items as 'By changing one's behavior and way of thinking, most troubles in relationship with others can be resolved.', 'By joining Reiyukai, you can be free from unhappiness.', 'Reiyukai shows us what is most important in life,' etc. For each respondent, twelve ratings were summed up to form a 'belief score.' The higher the score, the stronger the belief that some practice led to the correspondent effects.

**GHQ** Figure 7 shows the mean GHQ scores for each age group. The lower scores show a better status of psychological health. The average score was 3.98, as indicated by the dashed line in the figure. It can be seen that the average scores of those in their sixties and seventies are

lower than those of younger age groups. Although it may be tempting to conclude that religious practices could lead to the psychological well-being among the members, it may not be the case. The checked bars in the figure indicate the data from a larger survey conducted by Ando, Matsui, Fukuoka (2003). In this survey, 786 respondents completed a questionnaire which contained GHQ-12, exactly the same version of the scale utilized in the present study (Katayama, 2004). So the results of this survey could be compared as 'controls' to the results of the present research.

As can be seen in Figure 7, the average scores for each age group are very similar between the present sample and 'control group'. For example, in both groups, the averages of the sixties age group are lower than the younger groups. Furthermore, overall average of the HIRC21 data (grey-colored bar) is almost identical to the average of the present data (dashed line). So it may be concluded that the pattern of GHQ scores indicated in the present data is not specific to Reiyukai.

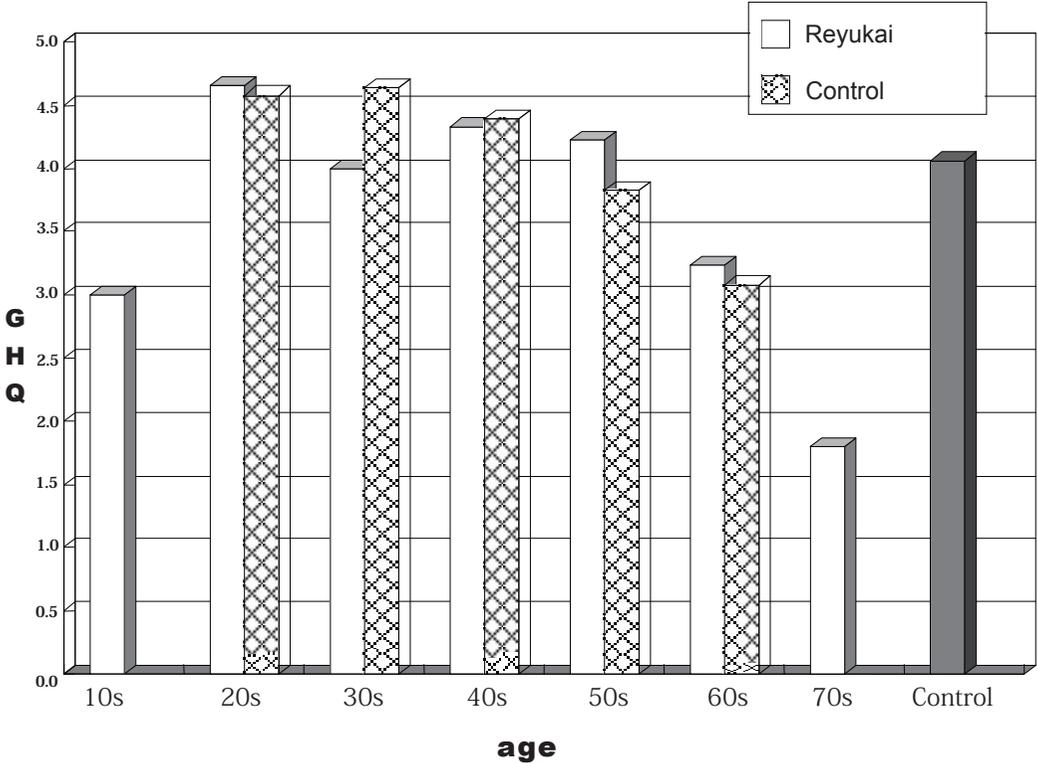


Figure 7 Mean GHQ scores for each age group

**Locus of control** LOC scale measures the perceived source of control over one's destinies. "Internals" (those who have high scores on this scale) tend to view themselves as having control

over their own destinies. In contrast, “Externals” (low scores on this scale) tend to see control as residing elsewhere. Figure 8 indicates the average scores for each age group. There were not significant differences between age groups, and the overall average was 49.3. As in the case of the GHQ data, we tried to compare the present LOC data to that of ‘controls.’ Fortunately, HIRC21 also conducted an internet survey which contained the LOC scale used in the present study. As shown in Figure 8, the mean LOC score of Reiyukai sample (M=49.3) was higher than the average of this comparison group (M=47.1). Thus, on average, Reiyukai members may have a tendency to believe that they have control over their destinies.

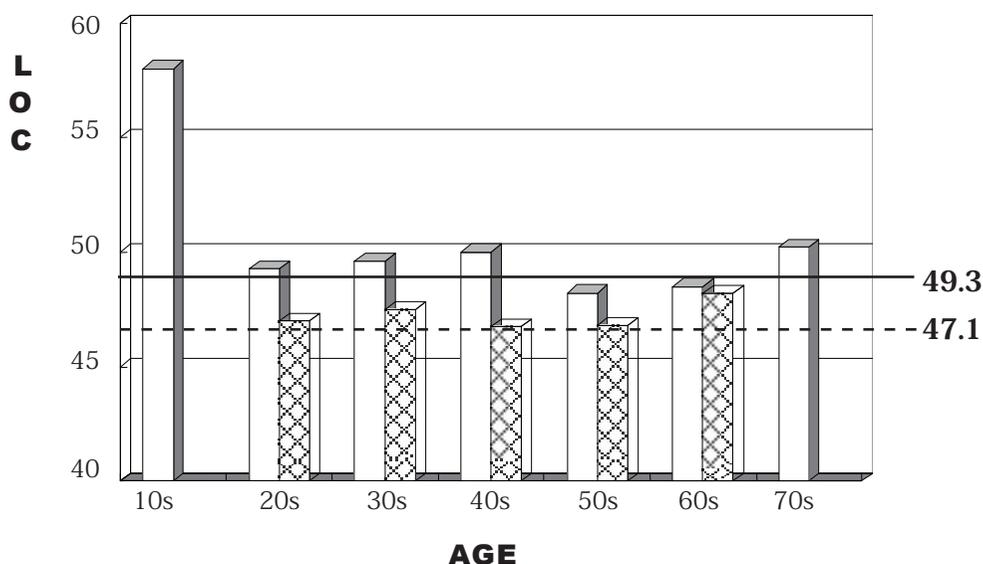


Figure 8 Mean LOC scores for each age group.

**The relationships of GHQ, LOC and other scales** Finally, correlation coefficients were calculated to see how GHQ and LOC scores were related to the aspects of self-change and beliefs. As shown in the left column of Table 1, GHQ was negatively correlated with the belief scale and three factor scores of the self-change scale. These results suggest that the more strongly the members hold beliefs about the merits of the religious activities, and the more members perceive self-change along these three dimensions, the healthier they are psychologically.

On the contrary, the LOC score was positively related with the four variables, suggesting that belief in their own control lead members to enhance the degree of 'benevolence,' 'confidence,' and 'feeling of being accepted.'

Table 1 The correlation coefficients between GHQ, LOC, belief scale, and the three factors of perceived self-change scales.

	perceived self-change scales			
	belief scale	benevolence	confidence	being accepted
<b>GHQ</b>	-.17*	-.17*	-.23**	-.18*
<b>LOC</b>	.27*	.30*	.42*	.25*

\* p<.05      \*\* p<.01

### Discussion

The present study mainly aimed at investigating how Reiyukai members interact with other and potential members, what they believe concerning their religious activity, and how they perceive the changes of self through these activities. Furthermore, it was investigated how these variables are related to psychological health.

Overall, the results obtained in this study seem to indicate that the main 'theme' of the members concerns changes of self, family members, and their lives. In this sense, it seems of interest that the mean locus of control score is higher than that of the 'control group.' It may be that belief in the internal locus of control motivates the behaviors aiming at change of self or family members and the 'success' of these behaviors in turn may reinforces the belief in the control.

Along the same line, although the status of psychological health of Reiyukai members was not different from that of the general population, among members, good psychological health was related to the strength of beliefs and three aspects of self-change.

Although these results are of interest in themselves, our study is only a preliminary one. So, in future studies we need to specify the causal relationship among variables. For this purpose, a longitudinal design may be preferable. Furthermore, our respondents were members of the three subgroups of Reiyukai, so it is necessary to compare the preset findings to other religious groups in future studies.

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