

Help-seeking Attitudes among Japanese American Older Adults

TAZUKO SHIBUSAWA, PH.D.

ADA C. MUI, PH.D.

This study is part of a larger research project that addresses the relationship between social support and mental health among Japanese American older adults.

Using data collected in Los

Angeles, *Help-seeking Attitudes among Japanese American Older Adults*

examines the socio-cultural variables that are associated with their seeking help for personal care.

With increasing costs of institutional care, in-home care is viewed as a viable alternative to ensure independent living among frail elderly (Benjamin, 1993). Research is available on the cost-effectiveness of home care services, but there has been little research that reflects the perspectives of elders who seek home care assistance (Applebaum & Phillips, 1990). Moreover, very few studies examine the effects of ethnicity and culture on attitudes towards seeking formal care, i.e., help from non-family members (Noelker et al., 1998).

In traditional Asian cultures, adult children were expected to care for frail parents. Seeking help from non-family members is, therefore, a new concept for many Asian American elders. How do Asian American elders feel about seeking paid help from non-family members? Are they willing to receive help from workers of a different ethnicity or from those who do not speak the same language? Do they want to be cared for by their adult children, or do they prefer to receive care from a non-family member? The purpose of this study was to address these questions among Japanese American older adults.

Because of immigration patterns, Japanese American elders have the highest proportion of U.S.-born elders among Asian Americans. Recent figures indicate that 63% of Japanese American elders are U.S.-born in contrast to 16% of

Chinese American elders (Elo, 1997). Investigating Japanese American elders can, therefore, lend potentially useful information on the effects of acculturation among Asian American elders.

According to previous research Japanese American elders have retained cultural values of their country of origin and are comfortable depending on their adult children for care (Kiefer, 1974; Osako, 1979). It is important to note, however, that these studies were conducted over twenty years ago when the Japanese American elderly population was composed primarily of first generation immigrants known as *Issei*, who were born in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Today most *Issei* have passed away, and the majority of the elderly in the Japanese American community are those born in the U.S., known as *Nisei*, or are elders who immigrated to the U.S. after 1965 following changes in the immigration laws. Acculturation has been identified as a predictor for increased service utilization among Asian Americans (McCormick et al., 1996; Yamashiro & Matsuoka, 1997), thus it is likely that those who are more acculturated would be willing to seek help from non-family members.

Methods and Findings

Structured interviews were conducted with a community sample of 131 Japanese American elderly (53 males and 78 females), 60 years of age and over. In addition to basic demographic information, respondents were asked about their health and mental health status, social support, and social network. Attitudes toward help-seeking were measured by asking if the respondents agreed or disagreed to an index of 16 statements pertaining to seeking help for personal care from family and non-family members.

Varimax factor analysis extrapolated three factors from the collected data that consisted of 10 statements ($\alpha = .79$). The three factors were conceptualized as (1) preferences for helper characteristics ($\alpha = .67$); (2) interpersonal concerns

toward the helping relationship ($\alpha = .67$); and (3) attitudes towards depending on family members for care ($\alpha = .62$). Preferences toward helper characteristics included willingness to seek help from those who did not speak their language or were of a different ethnicity or sex. Concerns toward the helping relationship included reluctance to seek help because of fear of losing personal control, having to burden the caregiver, and fear of losing privacy. Attitudes toward depending on family members included concerns toward being too dependent or being a burden on family members.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the effects of the demographic and cultural variables on each of these three factors. Results show that acculturation was associated with all three aspects of help-seeking. Elders with lower levels of acculturation preferred helpers of the same cultural and linguistic background and of the same sex, had concerns about the interpersonal aspects of the helping relationship, and did not feel comfortable towards depending on family members for support. Elders with low income were also reluctant to seek help because of concerns about the helping relationship, and did not want to depend on family members for support.

The results of this study confirm previous studies that identify acculturation as an important predictor for help-seeking. Older adults who are less acculturated are reluctant to seek help from someone of a different ethnic and linguistic background, have more concerns about the helping relationship, and are reluctant to become too dependent or a burden on their family members. Given their language preference, it is understandable that they prefer help from someone who speaks the same language. They are also more at ease with people of the same cultural background, which may make them reluctant to receive help from someone of a different ethnicity. Concerns over the helping relationship may be due to the lack of models in non-kin helping relationships in traditional Asian cultures. Elders may not be used to asserting their needs and negotiating for what they need from the helper. Furthermore, when elders feel that they may not be

able to reciprocate for the help they receive, they may be more reluctant to become dependent on their family members. In addition, elders may feel that their children are more acculturated than they are, and do not retain the cultural values of filial obligation. The narrower range of acceptable help for elders who are less acculturated places them at risk for not obtaining necessary services.

Another important finding was the association between low income and concern about the helping relationship, and reluctance to depend on family members for support. Low-income elders may be reluctant to seek help because their services are paid through SSI. They are not able to select and chose the help they want, and they also may feel disempowered in the helping relationship because of their income status. They may also be more reluctant to become dependent on their children, because they have limited resources to share with their adult children. The results of the study indicate that social workers need to be sensitive to socioeconomic factors as well as cultural factors when assisting elders to seek home care.

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