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Mental Health and Acculturation in Korean American Caregivers

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Mental Health and Acculturation in Korean American Caregivers

This pilot research project, funded by the Senior Health Institute at Thomas Jefferson University, examined the relationships between caregiving burden and acculturation stress among 50 Korean immigrant women who were providing care to their elderly relatives. We also tested the feasibility of sampling, recruitment, and interviewing procedures.

One goal of this research was to examine effects of acculturation on the caregiving process in the Korean American family. New immigrants face acculturation problems such as cultural conflicts, language barriers, role changes, racial discrimination and the lack of social networks.¹⁻⁴ The stressors to which immigrants are exposed may be further provoked by the responsibilities of caregiving for one's elders. We modified measures developed by Noh and Avison³ to assess whether caregivers experienced acculturation problems and found them stressful. Levels of acculturation stress were then correlated with caregivers' depression.

The sampling frame included those women with the Korean surname of "Kim" (Kim being a common surname in Korea). Subjects in the pilot were selected among persons who were listed with the surname "Kim" in Philadelphia and suburban telephone directories. Sample selection criteria included being a Korean American woman between 30 and 65 years who is the primary caregiver for an elder who is also residing in the Philadelphia area. Also included in selection criteria was that the elder needed help with at least one instrumental activity of daily living (IADL) or activity of daily living (ADL). Surveys were conducted in Korean in the subjects' home or place of business.

We reached about 75% of the 50 persons in our sample by making five or more telephone calls. Among contacts, approximately 80% were ineligible for our study; 4.8% of our total sample consented initially to an interview. The main reason for refusal was time constraints of Korean American women who worked in labor-intensive family businesses. Another reason was unfamiliarity with scientific methods and self-disclosure to strangers. Respondent cooperation in future studies may be enhanced if respondents were referred through friends, elders, community organizations or ministers.

Out of 50 subjects, 27 caregivers were daughters-in-law, and 23 were daughters. Half of the caregivers lived with the elder. Elders were on average 78.4 years in age, widowed (80%), limited in activities of daily living (average of five ADL/IADLs), and all foreign born (average of 19 years residence in the U.S.)

The caregivers as a whole did not show high levels of depression. The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D)⁵ was used to measure mental health status. Among our subjects, the mean CES-D score was 5.3, with only three subjects showing high levels of distress (a score of 16 or more). Higher CES-D scores were modestly correlated with a higher number of stressful situations related to acculturation in the last month ($R^2=.296$, $p=.0364$).

However, neither acculturation stress nor higher CES-D scores were related to the number of the elders who reported health problems or limitations in ADLs/IADLs. We suspect that the CES-D, although previously validated in a Korean population⁶, may not fully capture the relationship between recent immigrants' mental health and the stress of providing care for elders with functional limitations. A cultural obligation to care for one's elders may moderate depression levels of Korean immigrant caregivers. We plan to conduct further analyses to determine what other important aspects should be considered and included.

Several cultural distinctions were observed from interviewing these second-generation Korean caregivers. Adherence to cultural practices remain strong where daughters-in-law are expected to care for aging parents. Extended family living arrangements in Korean American families are still prevalent. Participants held strong cultural values regarding their responsibility to care for parents in old age. A value system in which adult children are obligated to care for elderly parents/parents-in law may strongly affect the mental health of Korean immigrant caregivers.

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