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## Qualitative Exploration of Acculturation and Life-Span Issues of Elderly Asian Americans

### Keywords

Asian American elders, Consensual Qualitative Research, multiculturalism

ARTICLES

# Qualitative Exploration of Acculturation and Life-Span Issues of Elderly Asian Americans

Jee Hyang Lee, Nanseol Heo, Junfei Lu, and Tarrell Awe Agathe Portman

*Awareness of aging issues across diverse populations begins the journey toward counselors becoming culturally competent across client life spans. Understanding the life-span experiences of cultural groups is important for helping professionals. The purpose of this research was to gain insight into the qualitative experiences of Asian American elders. The authors conducted semistructured interviews with 8 participants between September 2010 and March 2011 and analyzed the data using the Consensual Qualitative Research method. Findings indicate unique patterns in life-span development with this population.*

*Keywords:* Asian American elders, Consensual Qualitative Research, multiculturalism

As the elderly population of the world increases, the need for specific mental health knowledge and understanding of diverse populations increases. In the United States in 2010, the total population of individuals ages 65 years and older was 13.0%, which is 40.3 million people; this indicates that the U.S. population of older adults (15.1%) grew faster than that of the total U.S. population (9.7%) between 2000 and 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). A review of the literature revealed that older adults in the United States are considered to be a homogenous group, even though elderly populations can be classified into subgroups.

The subgrouping is dependent upon varying ethnicities, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic statuses. A lack of discussion on cultural identities of elderly individuals exists in the literature, leaving readers to conclude that elderly clients may be unworthy of detailed consideration. Thus, the literature perpetuates the fact that senior adults are not given due attention in society. Given that the general population of elderly individuals may lack specific attention in the literature, then disenfranchisement of elderly people in specific groups can be magnified.

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In truth, elderly clients from specific ethnic cultural groups may be designated as a twice-underserved group, both by age and ethnicity. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), during the last decade, one of the fastest growing groups among all ethnic groups in the United States was elderly Asian Americans. Within the elderly population groups, Asian American elders increased at a rate of 43%, and Asians in combination with other groups were the third largest group (15.3%) among major multiple races in populations ages 55 and older. These individuals constituted over 1 million in 2010 and are projected to increase up to 7.5 million by 2050 (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2012). Given this rapid increase in the Asian American elderly population, attention to their mental health issues is imperative for the counseling profession.

More than 25 ethnic groups could be classified as Asian American (Iwamasa & Hilliard, 1999), such as people with backgrounds from Korea, China, and Japan. Each Asian cultural group experience may differ depending on its immigration history. Varying degrees of acculturation, immigrant status, reasons for immigration, family origin systems, and individual experiences serve as a motivation for examining similarities and differences of these elderly individuals across the life span. The need to gain understanding of shared cultural values underlies the foundation for differentiating elderly ethnic populations, specifically Asian Americans, as the target population for this study.

The current study is an ethnographic qualitative research study, as described by Hays & Wood (2011), which seeks to identify social patterns and norms of a culture-sharing group. The purpose of this research is to illuminate the life-span process of elderly Asian Americans regarding cultural identity, social relationships, and the perception of aging. It is imperative that mental health professionals increase their multicultural understanding through developing strategies and interventions for working with clients who are Asian elders. Illuminating the experiences of a few cases allows their voices to be present in the counseling literature, so that helping professionals working with elderly Asian individuals may consider the transferability of these findings to their Asian clients. We obtained data from semistructured interviews with eight participants, and we analyzed the data using the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method.

## METHOD

The target population for this study was Asian American individuals over age 55 who were living in the midwestern United States. A snowball sampling method was used to access potential participants. Three initial participants who met the criteria were identified by the research team. Additional prospective participants were solicited by asking the identified participants to submit the names of other possible contacts. Names were only given if the prospective participants granted permission to have their contact information released to us. Then, we contacted the prospective participants via telephone and provided appropriate information about the purpose and processes. After initial contact, prospective participants were given a minimum of 3 days to consult with their family members before submitting the

informed consent forms. Participation was voluntary. Informed consent paperwork was provided in Korean, Chinese, or English, depending on the participants' requests. Upon completion of the preliminary consent documents, interviews were conducted by the researchers who had initially contacted each participant. Interviews were scheduled to avoid interference with each participant's daily routines.

Eight Asian Americans (four men and four women) participated in this study. The CQR method requires a sample size between eight and 12; thus, basic requirements were met. Participants ranged in age from 60 to 82 years ( $M = 72.88$ ,  $SD = 7.59$ ) and reported that they had lived in the United States for 3 to 35 years or more, with a mean of 27.63 years or more ( $SD = 12.35$ ). All currently lived in the Midwest. In terms of ethnic background, five were Korean, one was Taiwanese, and two were Chinese (although one was from Hong Kong, which was a British protectorate until 1997). Their occupations were varied, including a retired teacher and a biochemist. Six of the participants were still employed. They worked in academia, their own businesses, or in a hospital.

**Data Collection**

Interviews with the eight elderly Asian Americans were conducted from September 2010 to March 2011 using a semistructured format with open-ended questions, which was approved by an institutional review board. Because the first language of three of the researchers was either Korean or Chinese, interviews were conducted in both Korean and Chinese when preferred by the participants. We began interviews by asking each participant about their basic demographic information, such as age, ethnicity, and number of years living in America. The next questions included seven topics, with each topic containing two to four specific open-ended questions covering the following information: Participants' perception of cultural identity, life history, challenges, family culture, social relationships, activities, aging issues, and counseling. For example, the questions for the topic of life history included, "How did you decide to move to the United States? When and why? What have you been doing in the United States? Can you tell me about some of your beliefs and values that you hold central while you live in the United States?"

All interviews were recorded by audiotape or hand written with the participants' permission. Whereas interviews in English were transcribed verbatim, those in Korean or Chinese were first transcribed verbatim in the language used and then translated into English. All participants were assigned a case number, and identifiable information was removed from the transcripts to maintain confidentiality. During this process, internal and external auditors checked the transcripts for accuracy and consistency to maintain qualitative rigor.

**Data Analysis**

The CQR method was used to analyze the interview data. The CQR method integrates qualitative approaches, such as phenomenological, grounded theory, and comprehensive process analysis, by emphasizing consensus among judges (Hill et al.,

2005). Major components of CQR include (a) the use of open-ended questions in semistructured interviews to obtain in-depth descriptions of individual experiences and maintain the consistency of data collection; (b) involvement of several judges (at least three) throughout the data analysis process to promote multiple perspectives; (c) consensus among judges regarding the meaning of the data; (d) at least one auditor to check the work against biased groupthink in the primary team; and (e) domains, core ideas, and cross-analyses in data analysis (Hill et al., 2005). Data analysis involved three essential steps: establishing domains, determining core ideas, and conducting a cross-analysis. Domains are topics to cluster or group the interview protocol data; core ideas are summaries of the data that abstract the essential meaning within domains; and a cross-analysis develops themes or categories that reflect the core ideas within domains across cases (Hill et al., 2005). The research team established consensus for the domains in this study, which are shown in the Appendix.

We independently developed core ideas within each domain. The primary consideration for establishing core ideas were the voices and expressive meanings of the interviewees as captured in a concise manner. The CQR judges worked together to combine and develop consensus of domains and categories to abstract core ideas for each case. The auditor reviewed and examined the accuracy and wording of the resulting domains and core ideas to ensure trustworthiness. Ultimately, all researchers reached a consensus on the domains and core ideas before moving into the cross-analysis.

We reviewed the domains and core ideas for similarities across the cases and established consensus for new conceptual labels for the cross-case categories. We reviewed all cases with the labeled categories to determine frequency in a consensus manner. Three labels for frequency were used for each category: *General* was applied to categories that occurred in all cases; *typical* was applied to at least half of the cases up to the cutoff for general; and *variant* was applied to two or more cases up to the cutoff for typical. The categories that occurred in only one case were dropped. Likewise, the domains and categories were continually revised to subdivide the domains or combine many variant or rare categories. The auditor reviewed categories labeled in the cross-analysis for appropriateness and conciseness. We again came to consensus on the outcome. A stability check and review was conducted by setting aside two cases from the initial cross-analysis. We analyzed these cases to see if new domains or core ideas emerged. There was no change in the domains or core ideas; therefore, we considered the results stable.

### **Researchers as Instruments**

The research team was culturally diverse, consisting of two female Korean doctoral students, one male Chinese doctoral student, and one Native American faculty researcher. All research team members have expertise in understanding cultural differences. Interviews were conducted by the doctoral student researchers, who also served as the primary judges in the CQR method. The faculty researcher served as the auditor to supervise student researchers and review the research process. The judges analyzed the data through several meetings and reached consensus. Dur-

ing the consensual process, all discussions were open, and efforts were made to minimize power issues. The external auditor reviewed the interview protocol and the cross-analysis process and checked the results for accuracy and trustworthiness.

## RESULTS

Data obtained from this sample of elderly Asian Americans reflected their life history, current life experiences, perspectives, values, and acculturation process. Eight domains were identified as a result of the CQR analysis: (a) reasons for immigration, (b) cultural attitudes and activities associated with either American culture or their ethnic culture, (c) cultural identity, (d) social relationships, (e) challenges and efforts, (f) important values, (g) perception of aging, and (h) perception of counseling services. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

### Reasons for Immigration

Participants reported four common factors that influenced their decision to immigrate to the United States. Most participants held positive perceptions of American society, such as more opportunities, freedom, and a better education system. For example, Choi, a 71-year-old professor, had an opportunity to participate in a big national project as a coprincipal investigator while he was a U.S. graduate student. This experience influenced his decision to stay in the United States. Choi recalled this experience, saying “It was a quite a shock as a graduate student. You can’t imagine my English at that time. . . . I cannot imagine that happening in Korea while you are a student without degrees.” Choi also mentioned more freedom in American society as one of the significant variables in his staying in America: “I knew once I went to Korea, my opportunity to do free research would be limited because as a junior member of faculty, you have to do all errands, given the terribly hierarchical structure in Korea.”

Four participants stated that the reason for their immigration to the United States was the availability of better educational opportunities for themselves or their children. They perceived the American education system as better than the systems in their original countries. For example, Wei (retired teacher), Baek (doctor), and Choi (professor) stated that they came to America primarily for their education, with no consideration of establishing a permanent residence. Moreover, Baek, Seo, and Jang reported that they came to America to give their children an opportunity for a better education. Baek mentioned, “we [my wife and I] want to let our children be educated in a better setting. So, we prepared for the immigration step-by-step.”

In addition to the positive perception of the United States, participants shared other common reasons, such as receiving family invitations. Four participants stated that they first came to America because they wanted to live with other family members or partners. For example, Chen, a 71-year-old female from Hong Kong, stated “I married and moved to this city because my husband worked in the dental school here at the University.” Also, Yoon, an 80-year-old female, described her immigrant history as follows:

My second daughter immigrated to the United States when she got married. She invited us to immigrate because I had had many difficulties to live in Korea. I and my husband moved to the USA first. Later on, we invited the rest of my sons and daughters. All my six children live in America and two thirds of them have live in the same city in which I live. After we moved to here, we lived happy together.

Another cause for immigration among the elderly Asian Americans was the historical events in their country of origin. For example, the Korean War in 1950 or the Tiananmen Square event in China in 1989 hindered some participants from returning to their countries. Wei, a 77-year-old female, explained “at the time, the Korean War started and he [my husband] could not go back to China. So we just settled.” Another Chinese male, Kao, also stated that “At first, we just decided to stay here for 1 year. However, because of the Tiananmen Square event, as well as the fact that I almost retired from my school, I decided to stay here and be a permanent citizen.”

Two participants reported financial difficulties in their original country as a reason for immigrating. This included Yoon, whose daughter invited her to immigrate to America. Yoon stated, “The decision was not that difficult because we were extremely poor [in Korea]. My daughter wanted us to live with no more difficulties. So, she invited us. I wanted to come here because to live in Seoul was very, very hard. I can live well thanks to my daughter. My husband also wanted to move to America. So, we came here.” Most participants reported two or more reasons behind their decision to immigrate to the United States. For example, Jang reported, “I had a certain problem in my body, so I needed surgery. But, I could not get an appointment in Korea to get surgery. So, I came to America. At that time [before I came here], it was very hard to live in Korea, and I also thought education here [in America] would be better for my children than in Korea. That’s the reasons I came to here.”

### **Cultural Attitude and Activities**

Participants involved in this study have lived in a minimum of two different countries across their life spans and continue to be engaged in both cultures. They reported sharing common attitudes and activities with Americans and with their own ethnic/cultural groups. All participants expressed possessing an attitude of thankfulness toward the United States for their experiences in the country. For example, Kao said, “She [my wife] said thank you to God and thank you to the U.S. This is also what I want to say” in response to a prolonged life expectancy for his wife living with cancer. Similarly, Jang mentioned, “I believe that I can save my life due to the advanced skills in the hospitals in America. I am very thankful about this.”

A negative perception that participants shared about American society concerned the issue of discrimination. Members were all in agreement that the American society exhibited racial discrimination. One participant reported experiencing microaggression.



I don't know whether they also have that kind of 'I-am-American' pride or not, but they are likely to behave in a hostile manner against people of color. One of the most competitive places is Indianapolis and my oldest son lived there as a post-doc. He told me when his family went out, people looked at them as if they were looking at monkeys in the zoo. Also, due to the language barrier, I was not able to complain when I was treated unfairly.

However, four participants reported that they had not experienced microaggression in the United States. Kao said, "Here [in America] people respect you no matter what kind of jobs you have." However, this finding may reflect the perception of Midwest culture in America; Chen mentioned, "My boss was nice to me without any discrimination. Of course, in this city, all people respect each other because it is so diverse. [However], it is not the same if you live in the East or the coasts. In these areas, people might look down on you if you are Asian."

Attitudes toward their individual ethnic cultures were considered positive by seven participants. This could be because individuals maintained traditional cultural values even though they had lived in America for a long period of time. Baek explained, "I selected and adapted good things from both cultures. I'm still following the good traditions of Korea. My family has kept following those good traditions of Korea. For example, at New Year's Day, my children come and bow to me, wearing Korean traditional costume. I give them pocket money for performing New Year's bow, as well as make New Year's resolution together." This attitude was based on familial pride in their original culture. The participants' attitudes resulted in the next generation preserving cultural traditions and languages. Baek mentioned, "My youngest son is 40 years old now but still follows Korean traditions. Although the second generation is likely to be highly Americanized, my children do not have a problem to interact with me in Korean." In addition, a couple of participants established and ran language schools to fulfill their wishes of preserving ethnic traditions. Kao stated, "When I saw the Chinese children here, I felt that they lost the chance to learn their mother language and one day they would forget their motherland. Determining with 12 other parents, we opened a Chinese school. I was chosen to be in charge of this school. As a result, I decided to devote my life to these Chinese children to teach them to love China as well as the United States. This is very important."

At the same time, half of the participants held negative or ambivalent perspectives of their country of origin. Choi described himself as "more likely to side with Koreans. But also it depends on the issues. When the Koreans went to the big demonstration and candlelight vigils against America, I could see the emotional bias of Koreans. Even understanding what happened." Because of this inconsistent attitude toward the original country, Jang said, "Although I received disadvantages due to my language barrier, I don't want to go back to live in Korea because it looks very bad when I watch TV news."

## Cultural Identity

Various terms were used by the participants to define themselves, including terms describing age, gender, personality, religion, and occupational roles. These variables provided insight into the construction of each individual's personal identity; however, Asian American cultural identity was the primary focus of this particular study. Participants were divided into two groups. Five of the eight participants defined themselves through their origin of birth ethnicity. This group, for example, stated that "although I live in America, I am Korean (Jang)" or "I am Chinese (Wei)." Kao's statement about his cultural identity was, "Although I am a Chinese American, I still perceive myself as Chinese." The other three participants, who held strong occupational identities, classified themselves dually by origin of birth ethnicity and as American. On the other hand, participants in the latter group identified themselves depending on the context. For example, Choi defined himself as "professionally or kind of an official identity, I am an American professor, naturalized American citizen. However, emotionally my identity is still very much Korean." Similarly, Baek identified himself as "I am a half American and a half Korean. I select and adapt good things from both cultures."

## Social Relationships

Participants' social relationships reflected their self-defined cultural identities. Six participants reported having relationships primarily with members of the same ethnic group. "I am only with my [Chinese] friends," as stated by Chen. Typically, ethnic churches were the most important places to maintain social relationships; seven participants shared this category. Jang mentioned, "My biggest activity is church. Currently, most of my relationships take place within my church." Baek also said, "I went to the church. There are some Korean relationships through that church." Choi also stated, "Social networking is the Korean church." Only two of the eight participants, Baek and Choi, reported balance in their social relationships between American groups and the ethnic groups. Choi reported his social relationships as follows:

We [my wife and I] were fully integrated in American social networks. And we also had a very active Korean faculty community. In the past, we totally integrated into American new young faculty here. We used to have get together monthly, sharing the culture, and were pretty well integrated into American community. When I was young, it was more American than Korean [in my social life]. I would say 60% Korean to 40% American at the beginning or first 10 years. Now, it is more like 70% Korean to 30% American as we get more older.

Acculturation through professional working relationships in America may have allowed these participants to expand their social relationships with American groups. Meanwhile, other Asian Americans tended to develop relationships

with people from Asia, bypassing non-Asian colleagues at work. Chen stated about her husband's social relationships, "My husband has some friends from Hong Kong or Taiwan, and he also has a colleague from Japan with his wife from Korea. So, we also have some Japanese and Korean friends."

**Overcoming Challenges**

Language barriers were cited by all participants as the biggest challenge (regardless of the initial level of English proficiency upon arrival to America). The language challenge permeated the lives of these participants, as indicated by the following statements regarding language across the life span. Chen said, "At first I acted as a mute person, even though I was able to understand [what people said]." Choi said, "The language is very hard. It is still the biggest one. I still struggle." Similarly, Jang reported, "The biggest challenge is language, English. I really need help when I go to the hospital. I need a person who can translate what I want to say." Wei also reported, "I still think of the language. I don't think I can express myself freely, really freely and more philosophically deeply with English."

Although participants made efforts to improve their language ability, they did not easily overcome this obstacle. Five participants reported that they made efforts to improve their language ability by taking English classes or using English more in their daily lives. For example, Jang used to attend English classes twice per week; as a result, she was able to "read a newspaper little bit." Some participants tended to ignore the language barrier; therefore, they made no effort to improve their English because they thought they were too old to learn a new language. Yoon said, "Even though I cannot speak English, I just live here. Although I cannot understand what people say, I am okay because they like me."

On the other hand, three participants tried to ignore their language barriers for specific reasons. One participant already had a certain level of English proficiency before he moved to the United States. The other two participants thought that it was unnecessary for them to learn English because of their mature ages. Seo said, "I can communicate with the [Native American] cashier using body language. It is just a little uncomfortable, not a necessity for me to learn English at my age. They like me."

Initially, the participants upon immigration were faced with difficulties obtaining ethnic foods and adjusting to socioeconomic class changes. Three participants mentioned the difficulty of obtaining ethnic food in the past. Chen stated, "At first, because there was no Chinese grocery store here, I had to order food from San Francisco. In the past, there were not many Chinese foods here, not like now." Overcoming this difficulty increased participants' relationships and social activities, as expressed by Chen: "I mainly relied on a friend who opened a Chinese Restaurant here, so I could have some home food to eat," or Yoon: "I felt pity for Korean students because at that time there was no Korean market. Thus, my daughter opened the Asian grocery store. I helped my daughter and shared food with Korean students."

Three of the eight participants reported the experience of decreasing their socioeconomic class in the United States, in comparison to their economic status in their countries of origin. For example, Kao had a reputation as an expert English teacher and was elected twice as a district representative in his country. However, after he moved to the United States, his occupational status changed. Kao stated, “I worked at Chinese restaurants, farms, or elsewhere. Later on, I found a formal job as a cleaner. In China, cleaner is ranked the lowest, but here was different.” Although he mentioned the better status of being a cleaner in the United States, he also reported that “We [my wife and I] felt not that good at first. [We] lost a balance. I was a people’s representative and expert in China, but I had to work like this [cleaner] here [in America]. I felt bad.” Another example was Baek’s case. He was a chief of an [anesthesiology] department in Korea, but he reported, “After I came here, I started from the resident life in the hospital again.”

Some participants reported an attitude of resigning themselves to limitations when they needed to adapt to the new culture in America. For example, when Kao was looking for work, he thought, “What else could I do?” Kao had to accept his status as an immigrant, which hindered him from obtaining a better job, so he tried to find a job within his limitations. This kind of attitude caused him to make more of an effort to improve his life, and gradually his status in America began improving.

Five of the eight participants made an effort to maintain their physical health through exercise. Wei said, “I joined a senior exercise group at the recreation center. I still go there every Monday, Wednesday, Friday for about 40 to 45 minutes and do exercise.” They agreed that they needed to exercise as they aged and to actively cope with physical challenges.

### **Important Values**

Elderly Asian Americans shared several common values based on Confucianism and/or Christianity. Kao defined “Confucianism as a way of life, kind of a moral life.” This moral life permeated many aspects across the life span. Confucianists value education, as mentioned earlier. Another important value based on Confucianism was respect for elders and filial piety, which were shared by four participants. Baek praised this value: “Another thing good from the Korean culture [that I want to maintain] is a tradition to respect older people and not ignore them.” Yoon blamed children “who are not supporting parents although they achieve some success in their life” and considered that they were not maintaining values. In addition, four participants shared the value that family is the most important thing in their lives. Baek stated, “I am 66 years old and I have invested over 60% of my life for my children.” Jang’s family value was revealed when she mentioned that family was the center of all her relationships. She said, “13 years ago, I visited Korea because of my youngest son’s wedding. But, there was nobody there. All my children were here.” This value also may negatively influence life; Wei said, “Too much Confucianism, too much family sometimes hinders critical thinking.”

Five of the participants revealed strong beliefs and values associated with Christianity. Seo said, “I have the Christian faith. From a certain point, I began to believe everything follows God’s will, and I began seeking God because I am a humble human. I realized that everything in this world doesn’t follow my will. All follows God’s will.” Additionally, Jang said, “I had difficulties, so I began to rely on God and prayed for help. So, my religious faith was growing and I became a devout Christian. I think young people should educate their children within Christian beliefs in order to lead them in a right direction from spreading sins in the current society, which I am seeing on [the] Internet.”

**Perception of Aging**

Participants had two different attitudes regarding growing older—psychological acceptance or denial of aging. Whereas six participants were in the former group, two were in the latter. For example, Choi immediately responded, “I am pretty old,” when asked about aging. Wei also showed psychological acceptance of her age by stating, “Getting old is definitely no fun. But, almost everything is the same, just not quite energetic. Sometimes I cannot sleep very well. That’s related to old age, but beyond that I do not think old age is bad.” On the other hand, Chen said, “I did not think about this [getting older] in the past and now since I am 72 years old, I should start to think about this.” In that sense, regarding the question about the plans for later in life, she answered, “I have no plan now since I just retired.” This information was interpreted as she was not ready to accept getting older psychologically.

Another category that may seem contradictory to filial piety emerged from seven participants who shared their desire to be independent from their children. Wei reported, “We are still very independent and can do whatever we have been doing.” This also included emotional and financial independence. Jung described this as “They [elderly people] want to live in the senior center, apart from their children. Government support is available for elders for a room in the senior center. I also think it is more comfortable. It gives more freedom to both parents and children. Moreover, this is related to the elderly’s wish of not being a burden to my children, even after the end of life.” Yoon said, “I have to tell my children to let my body be cremated if I die. Because they are busy, we cannot see each other even once a year. Then, how they can come to see me?”

Finding meaning in life was an emerging theme in this study. Four participants found their life meaning tied to their children’s achievements in terms of degrees and professional jobs. Yoon described it in this way: “I am satisfied because my children are doing well after they came here. They graduated from the university and got good jobs.” At the same time, seven participants shared their desire in later life to contribute to the American society, as a means of generativity. Some were actively working and advocating for their ethnic culture. Thus, they continued to try to find ways of contributing, including volunteer-

ing. Wei said, “I volunteer still for the church. I also volunteer for the school district as a translator. I used to teach Chinese school.” Similarly, Baek said, “I will feel great if there is something that I can contribute for students’ learning even after my retirement. I would like to be active as much as my health condition allows.” Moreover, Kao frequently mentioned, “All in all, I will keep introducing Chinese culture to Americans. I want to give them a real China. In the past, they might have had some misunderstanding. For me, it means I still need to contribute to the society and need to help others both for the U.S. as well as my motherland. I will do like this until the last minute of my life.”

### **Perception of Counseling Services**

Participants typically shared the awareness of the necessity and importance of counseling. Yoon acknowledged, “There are times for that [counseling]” because “everybody has some problems.” Kao agreed that “counseling is important”; Wei said, “Counseling service is very good.” However, participants also expressed a hesitancy regarding receiving counseling services in their lives, although they agreed with the importance of counseling in general. Kao said, “Counseling is important. However, I am an optimistic person. . . . so when they suggested to have counseling I think I can handle. In addition, I am a Christian. I have lots of brothers and sisters in the church. All of them care about me. So I feel I can treat myself good.” Jang mentioned, “In fact, we do not want to disclose our lives, so-called privacy.” Regarding this attitude toward counseling services, Choi explained the possible reasons in detail.

Everybody has some problems. In America, if I have a problem, getting some professional help is nothing, not a really big deal. However, as a Korean and Korea culture, there is a [different] culture. Koreans don’t reveal their problems. Even when they get stress. Still there are a lot of things Koreans do not advertise. They hide. Because it is a part of Confucian ethics, Korean don’t advertise the adversity they face. That’s a part of Korean culture. Face-saving is more important for Koreans, so it is less likely to expose your family secrets or troubles outside. But, what face-saving means is the culture expects people to succeed and to be able to manage [their problem] calmly. So, Koreans are less likely to talk about more small problems. They try to maintain they are capable [of] managing on their own.

On the other hand, two participants did not reveal reluctance toward counseling. For example, Baek stated, “If I get a chance to receive counseling services, it would be good. However, I did not have something which made me want to get counseling services. If I need it, I would receive it. I don’t care whether the counselor is American or Asian American if they have enough expertise.” Moreover, Choi reported, “Actually, I used counseling services. I would say

there are times for that. My philosophy is saying these things, it will relieve your tension, and also I do not want to be pretending.”

This finding may indicate that the concept of counseling services is changing among the Asian American elderly population, from a negative to a positive perspective. Although excluded from this article, various issues regarding elderly individuals concerning counseling were discussed by Wei, such as sleep and anxiety of aging, physical health issues by Chen, loss of partner by Kao, loss of friends by Yoon, and many small problems and stresses associated with marriage and children throughout life by Choi.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study of elderly Asian Americans provide insightful information that has implications for the counseling profession. First, we found that participants in this study still embraced Confucian values as a foundation for their lives. In the values domain, participants’ descriptions regarding respect for elders included a preference for being respected as seniors in an “Asian way” by young adults of the same ethnicity. The differences in behaviors and attitudes of respecting elders between Asian and Western countries have been reported by other authors (Sung, 2004). Respect for elders in Asian interactions basically encompasses a mutual recognition of hierarchy by age between the elderly and younger people. This expectation includes younger individuals being courteous, mannerly, and using proper language in the presence of elderly people, such as not calling elderly people by their first names and using the honorific language system of Mandarin and Korean societies. Participants described this manner of respect as using cultural common sense among their families and ethnic communities.

However, participants rarely perceived filial piety as their children’s responsibility for adult caregiving. All participants with married children did not live with their adult children, and most participants reported that they wanted to be independent from their children. This was considered a response to their perception of aging. This result is consistent with the description of filial piety in contemporary Asian society (Mui & Shibusawa, 2008; Sung, 1998). However, this result should not be considered a lack of any expectation of filial piety by the participants. One participant indicated that her children frequently gave her money or gifts, called, and visited her. It would be deemed a neglect of their ethical obligation as children if adult children “did not behave like her children.” Furthermore, even the participants’ description of the expectations of emotional respect from their offspring implies an alternative meaning than westernized concepts of family responsibility. With respect toward filial piety, Asian people perceive the respect toward aged parents as an ethical obligation and repayment for parenting efforts (Sung, 1998). Participant expectations of filial piety were a demonstration of elder respect by their offspring.

Another noticeable Confucian value emerging from the participant interviews was the heavy emphasis on education in their lives, combined with the family-oriented Asian American lifestyle (Julian, McHenry, & McKelvey, 1994). Confucianism emphasizes education as a lifelong duty to establish self, gain success, and enlighten the world (Yao, 2000). The emphasis on education under the competitive societal atmosphere in Asian countries often results in zealotry for education (Seth, 2002). This heavy emphasis on education emerged from participants in this study. Regarding the reasons for immigration, more than half of the participants reported that they chose to immigrate to the United States because of better education for themselves and their children. Some participants reported that they have devoted their lives to their children's education. Also, in the value domain, participant descriptions of education as a core life value may support the retention of Confucian values regarding education.

The interpretation of the prevalence of disclosures describing the participants' expression of their children's success and pride in their offsprings' accomplishments was attributed as giving major meaning across the life span to these elders. Meaning plays a critical role in the lived experience, as reported among older people (Reker, 2000). Although it is difficult to define the meaning of life, Krause (2004) expressed meaning as having values, a sense of purpose, goals, and the ability to reconcile things that have happened in the past. We considered life value as the participants self-assessing their life's purpose as encompassing their children's accomplishments. Related to the perception of the aging domain, participants' description of the desire for contribution and advocacy was also considered as another meaning found in their current lives. Most participants revealed a desire to contribute to the local community or advocate for their ethnic culture within the dominant American society. We interpreted these desires as determination of having purpose in later life and using their resources, such as professional knowledge, skills, and cultural competence.

None of the participants described a specific positive perception regarding aging as a process of becoming wiser or achieving greater harmony from the traditional Asian perspective. However, more than half of the participants stated that they have accepted aging naturally, and they did not express feelings of great loss or regret associated with aging. Six participants explained how they accepted and processed life changes in their later lives. They described efforts to maintain health to the best of their ability and prepare for retirement, or they expressed an appreciation of the American senior welfare system. Hence, we considered these six participants' descriptions of aging across the life span as psychological wellness. The other two participants' descriptions were void of reflection about aging, or they viewed aging as a current life limitation. Therefore, we concluded that these participants had not attained psychosocial acceptance of aging.

Participants described multiple purposes for immigration. Interestingly, we found that emergent categories in the purpose of immigration aligned with Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs: physiological (financial difficulties in



original countries), safety (influenced by historical events), belonging (marriage or family invitation), and self-actualization (better education for myself or children). This result implies that a deficit in one of these needs may have been the reason for immigration.

In terms of acculturation process, we considered that participants were situated on integration or separation tendencies according to four possible types of acculturation as reflected in Berry's (1990, 1997) model. Most participants reported that they maintained their original ethnic traditions, diets, and child-rearing practices. They wanted their children to maintain cultural traditions and languages. Meanwhile, only three participants reported value in maintaining a balanced social relationship between their original ethnic groups and Americans. Hence, we distinguished these participants as the integration tendency group. A few commonalities among the integration tendency group were found. First, they all worked or were still working in America. This implies that these participants had a relatively high number of interactions requiring English-speaking ability compared with the other participants, and they had more chances to become socialized with different cultural groups. In addition, they were all men and reported that they received high levels of education in their countries of origin before immigration. This result was consistent with Berry's (1997) finding of preimmigration status, education, and gender influences on the acculturation process of immigrants. The result is also consistent with the reports that men may be at a decreased risk of problems associated with acculturation compared to women (Carballo, 1994).

Concerning cultural identity, the integration tendency group encompassed three participants who identified themselves as both American and their original ethnicity. In other words, participants' descriptions of their bicultural identities were common among integration tendency participants. At the same time, they all described their original ethnic cultures as an emotionally intimate identity, or inner identity. One participant distinguished his bicultural identity into two parts, for example; he officially and professionally identified as American and emotionally identified as his original ethnicity. This result was aligned with previous research noting that bicultural identity is a significant predictor of satisfaction for immigrants (Min & Kim, 1999). Rumbaut (1994) termed this type of acculturation process *additive acculturation*, characterized by an individual adapting to American ways for the actual benefits, while retaining attachment to and identity with his or her original ethnicity.

The remaining five participants were categorized into the separation tendency group, because they put less value on maintaining social relationships with other cultural groups. There were mainly two reasons for placing less value on social relationships with other cultural groups. First, some participants did not have the English language ability to socialize with other

cultural groups. Four participants did not have enough English-speaking ability to work in daily occupations; hence, they sought social support only from their ethnic communities. When these participants lived with their children, their children served in the role of language interpreter or cultural broker (Kim, Brenner, Liang, & Asay, 2003). After their children left them, those participants indicated that they had severe restraints in living because of the language barrier, even though young people in their same ethnic community or government service providers helped them occasionally. Secondary difficulties originating from the lack of English-speaking ability were reported as the challenge that two participants took most seriously because of the need for receiving medical services.

Participants in the separation tendency group had limited chances to become socialized within other cultural groups. As participants retired or lived as housewives within the boundary of their family and ethnic community, a natural tendency was to have limited opportunity to build intercultural social relationships. In addition, participant aging also influenced the motivation to interact socially with other cultural groups. Two participants described feeling more comfortable within the same ethnic social relationship as they got older. Consequently, most participants in the separation tendency group did not feel it was a necessity to socialize with other cultural groups.

Finally, participant coping strategies used to deal with current challenges were described as mainly problem-focused coping, rather than emotion-focused coping, as suggested by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Five participants reported that a challenge for them, as elderly people, was maintaining their physical health, which they did, for example, by participating at senior recreation centers. Meanwhile, regarding the challenges as immigrant elders, some participants displayed an avoidance attitude concerning their language barrier. In addition, more than half of the participants embraced a resigned attitude of the inability to change impassable challenges. Consistent with Choi and Gonzalez (2005), counseling services were underutilized as an emotional coping skill. Even though most participants understood the purpose of mental health services, six participants expressed a hesitancy to seek counseling services. One common thought among participants was the need to resolve problems by themselves, because a level of self-resolution was perceived as indicating maturity. This was also considered a byproduct of Confucian values, which emphasize self-control (overcoming self, 修己). In addition, one participant noted the Asian cultural code of saving face (體面) as a cultural barrier to counseling services, which means engaging in behaviors that avoid embarrassing oneself or another or bypassing all situations and topics of conversation that might cause embarrassment. This result is consistent with previous research (Berg & Jaya, 1993; Ngo-Metzger et al., 2003) that provided a perspective on the culture of saving face, which causes indirect conversation and avoidance of mental health services.

## CONCLUSION

In general, these participants had a good impression of the United States and still maintained basic components from their original culture, such as a belief in Confucius, which was reflected through a need to be respected by offspring, belief in education, contribution to their own ethnic groups, original cultural identification, and emphasis on family connection. However, adaptation to American beliefs also occurred among the participants. This included a willingness to live financially and physically independently, self-definition as a bicultural individual, and worth of work. From our perspective, all of the above-mentioned facts, no matter whether based on Asian or American cultural ideas, served the purpose of helping participants overcome challenges and maintain psychological well-being. Although the reasons for immigration varied among participants (e.g., financial hardship, safety concerns, family consideration, education, health matters), they all experienced different levels of difficulty in the process of living outside their country of origin. These difficulties included, but were not limited to, language barriers, racial discrimination (whether or not they explicitly admitted experiencing it or just expressed a belief that it existed), social status change, gap between generations, and lack of ethnic foods. The beliefs these participants had from their native homelands and from America encouraged them to find meaning for living and, as a result, reestablished their confidence and esteem in an unfamiliar land. They emphasized the merit of education, so they studied hard and supported their children for a better learning opportunity. They got together to join church and contributed to the maintenance and introduction of their own ethical cultures. They made friends with both Americans and people from their own groups. All of these aspects present and depict a lively story of how they struggled and searched for a sense of worth throughout the many years of living abroad. Their positive attitudes toward life are reflected in their views of aging. Even though these elders did not highlight the merit of wisdom or being in harmony with the environment, they focused on how to stay healthy and plan financially, and they had a deep desire for sharing their knowledge. As a result, these elders accepted aging as a natural process instead of a nightmare. On the other hand, participants indicated some concerns related to age, such as a progressive restriction placed on their physical functioning and experiencing anxiety about becoming a burden for their family because of health problems. A troublesome result was that Asian elders in this study lacked full awareness of the need for counseling services. Most of the participants expressed their acceptance about counseling services, however, with hesitancy. For the two participants who disclosed a good impression of counseling services, knowledge was lacking. Neither of these participants could give a clear definition of counseling nor name some specific services available through counseling. Therefore, we noticed that counseling was a vague concept for all of these individuals. The challenges,

positive attitudes and actions toward life and aging, accompanied by concerns about health, and a lack of a detailed understanding of counseling experienced by these participants indicate a need for counselors to rethink how to extend their services to this population.

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## APPENDIX

### Domains, Categories, Frequencies, and Illustrative Core Ideas of Elderly Asian Americans

Domain and Category	Frequency	<i>n</i>	Illustrative Core Idea
<b>Reasons for immigration</b>			
Positive perceptions about American society			
Having more opportunities	Typical	5	"I cannot imagine that happening in Korea."
Having freedom	Typical	4	"free research," "because we have freedom"
Better education for myself or my children	Typical	4	"We want to let our children be educated in a better setting. So, we prepared for the immigration step-by-step."
Marriage or family invitation	Typical	4	"because my husband worked . . . here"; "my daughter invited us"
Historical events in original country	Variant	3	"because of Tiananmen Square event" or "Korean War"
Financial difficulties in original country	Variant	2	"It was very hard to live in Korea."
<b>Cultural attitudes and activities</b>			
Associate with American culture			
Having an emotionally thankful mind	General	8	"Thank you to the U.S."
Discrimination exists, but no experience of it	Typical	4	"My boss was nice to me without any discrimination."
Associate with ethnic culture;	Typical	7	"My family has kept following good . . . traditions of Korea."
maintain traditional ceremonies			
Take pride in original culture	Typical	5	being proud of Korea
Children maintain original cultural tradition and language	Typical	6	They do understand and value the Chinese culture.
Negative perception about original culture	Typical	4	"I don't want to go back to live in Korea because it looks very bad when I watch TV news."
<b>Cultural identity</b>			
Defined as original ethnicity	Typical	6	"I am Korean"; "I am Chinese."
Defined as both American and original ethnicity	Variant	2	"I am a half American and a half Korean."
<b>Social relationships</b>			
Through ethnic church	Typical	7	"I went to the church."
Mainly with individuals from the same ethnicity	Typical	6	feel comfortable gathering with Chinese friends
A balance between the same ethnic groups and other ethnic groups	Variant	3	"We were fully integrated in American social networks. And we also had a very active Korean faculty community."
<b>Overcoming challenges</b>			
Challenges			
Language barrier	General	8	"The biggest challenge is language, English."
Socioeconomic class moved down	Variant	3	"After I came here, I started from the resident life in the hospital again."
Difficulty getting ethnic food	Variant	3	"No Chinese grocery"; "no Korean market."
Generation gap	Variant	2	I don't know your generation, but for my generation still is the way.

*(Continued on next page)*

## APPENDIX (*Continued*)

### Domains, Categories, Frequencies, and Illustrative Core Ideas of Elderly Asian Americans

Domain and Category	Frequency	<i>n</i>	Illustrative Core Idea
<b>Overcoming challenges</b>			
Challenges ( <i>Continued</i> )			
Efforts to overcome challenges			
Efforts to improve language ability by taking English classes or using English more	Typical	5	"[I] used to attend English class."
Efforts to maintain health by exercising	Typical	5	"I joined a senior exercise group at the recreation center."
Resigned to the limitation	Variant	3	"What else could I do?"
Ignore the language barrier	Variant	3	"It is not necessary for me to learn English at my age."
<b>Important values</b>			
Confucian values			
Belief about the power of education	Typical	6	Education is very important.
Elder respect	Typical	4	"respect older people and not ignore them"
Family-oriented life	Typical	4	"Too much family sometimes hinders critical thinking."
Christian belief	Typical	5	"All follows God's will"; "God saves us."
<b>Perception of aging</b>			
Psychologically accept getting older	Typical	5	"I am pretty old."
Psychologically withhold the fact of being old	Variant	3	"I did not think about this . . . now since I am 72 years old, I should start to think about this."
Desire to be independent from children	Typical	7	"We are still very independent."
Meaning of life			
Childrens' success	Typical	4	"When I came here, it was little bit hard to live, but now I am satisfied because my children are doing well."
Desire to contribute and advocate	Typical	7	"I will do like this until the last minute of my life."
<b>Perception of counseling service</b>			
Awareness of necessity and importance in general	Typical	4	"Counseling is important." "Counseling service is very good."
Hesitance receiving counseling service	Variant	3	I do not think there is a need.
No hesitance or have experiences	Variant	2	"If I need it, I would receive." "I used counseling service."

*Note.* *N* = 8. Categories with one case were dropped. Typical = applicable to at least half or more cases; Variant = applicable to two or three cases; General = applicable to all cases.