

韓國老年學研究

Korean Journal of Research in Gerontology

2001, Vol. 10, 135-158

Adjustments of Korea-born Immigrant Elderly in the United States

Yongjin Son

Department of Social Welfare, Mokpo Catholic University

(Abstract) A sample of 9 Korea-born elderly people (2 men & 7 women) living in New England, aged 69 to 81, was interviewed through telephone to investigate the extent of their adjustment to immigration life. A questionnaire was developed to assess mental/physical health status, acculturation level, intergenerational interaction, life satisfaction, and factors linked to immigration life stressors. Due to a small sample size, any types of statistical analyses were not conducted. All respondents rated their health as somewhat worse compared with a year ago, while a majority of them did not show any problems in emotional health. A grasp of English was found to be the least acculturated area. Most respondents rated their financial satisfaction as even. No matter how long they resided in the U.S. or what SES they were located

* 이 논문내용 일부는 미국 Ohio주 Cincinnati에서 개최된 Gerontological Society of America에서 1997년 11월 27일 발표되었던 것이다. 이 논문에 관한 일체의 서신왕래는 (우) 530-742 전라남도 목포시 석현동 894-1번지 목포카톨릭대학교 사회복지학과 손용진 교수 앞으로 하시기 바랍니다. 저자의 e-mail 주소는 yongjins@mail.mcu.ac.kr입니다.

in, the Korean American elderly sampled still followed Korean customs. Marginalized from their families and American society in general, the interviewees not only expressed their wish to be independent from their adult children financially, but also help them as much as they could. Those whose primary source of income was the Supplementary Security Income rated financial difficulties as their paramount concern for their future living conditions. This paper argues that U.S. welfare policy needs to reflect acculturation status of the minority elderly who still maintain a strong attachment to their ethnic heritage.

[Key Words: Adjustment, Elderly, Korean-American, Welfare Policy]

Living in a different culture is a stressful and an unpleasant experience. Compared to young immigrants, older Korean immigrants are found to feel more alienated (Moon & Pearl, 1991; Moon & Williams, 1993). This could be related to the fact that elders are socialized into Korean culture under Confucianism. The Korean elders' way of thinking may be useful in their home sociocultural environment, but that does not help them in their new country. Since a more traditional culture has been so deeply ingrained in their behavior patterns and expectations, Korea-born immigrant elderly have a high likelihood of experiencing cultural and social adjustment problems.

Typically, adjustment problems tend to be harsher for new immigrant ethnic groups (Min, 1988). Korean elderly immigrants are among the recently-arrived immigrant groups who have to cope with stress resulting from different culture. They have a relatively short immigration history in America comparing to other Asian minority ethnic groups. Consistent findings are that Korean elderly immigrants as a group face difficulties in their host country due to limited resources for adjusting into the new world (Koh & Bell, 1987; Kiefer, Kim, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 1985; Kang & Kang,

Adjustment of Korean-American Elderly

1983). The focus of this research is to describe how Korean-speaking American elders adapt to their lives in America.

Exploratory telephone interviews were conducted with 9 Korean immigrant elderly persons who reside in the New England area. This project was intended to serve as a part of on-going research in which a culturally sensitive instrument would be eventually developed. For this purpose, a Korean language questionnaire, partly developed by the author and borrowed from existing surveys, were used to assess demographic background, health status, life satisfaction, intergenerational exchange, level of acculturation, and immigration life stress.

Several assumptions are made. Overall, the Korean-speaking elderly are assumed to be less acculturated into American society. Due to a lack of cultural adaptive skills, they are more likely to rely on existing community-based resources such as church, neighbors, friends, and families. Finally, those having high level of acculturation are more likely to have better health status and higher life satisfaction.

Rationale for Study

Although the numbers of Korean-speaking elderly have increased over the years and are expected to expand in the foreseeable future, little information and data on Korean immigrants, particularly Korean elders, have been generated. Generally, the Korean population is treated as a comparison group under the Asian elderly category. Instead of being recognized as unique cultural heritage, Korean immigrants are erroneously understood as sharing the same ethnic culture with the Chinese and Japanese (Hurh & Kim, 1984).

In face of unfamiliar social and cultural surroundings, how the

minority elders cope with foreign culture and how well they mediate such cultural shock through utilization of available resources are not well understood. Hence, findings of the current study will provide a basic foundation for future research on how Korean immigrants ameliorate adjustment difficulties through availability of family and ethnic community resources.

More importantly, the study aims to gain a better understanding of how the Korean elderly experience old age in an unfamiliar environment. Policy planners have often neglected service needs of Korean elders because they erroneously assumed that Asian Americans as a whole seem to take care of their own or rarely become social problems (Koh & Bell, 1987). Public policy has failed to incorporate the heterogeneity of Asian populations into aging policy considerations. Inadvertently, public policy toward Asians are directed to targeting them as a single, homogeneous group. Public policies have largely been directed to Asian. Although the numbers of Korean-speaking elderly have increased over the years and are expected to expand in the foreseeable future, little information and data on Korean immigrants, particularly Korean elders, have been generated. Generally, the Korean population is treated as a comparison group under the Asian elderly category. Instead of being recognized as unique cultural heritage, Korean immigrants are erroneously understood as sharing the same ethnic culture with the Chinese and Japanese (Hurh & Kim, 1984).

In face of unfamiliar social and cultural surroundings, how the minority elders cope with foreign culture and how well they mediate such cultural shock through utilization of available resources are not well understood. Hence, findings of the current study will provide a basic foundation for future research on how Korean immigrants ameliorate adjustment difficulties through availability of family and ethnic community resources.

Adjustment of Korean-American Elderly

More importantly, the study aims to gain a better understanding of how the Korean elderly experience old age in an unfamiliar environment. Policy planners have often neglected service needs of Korean elders because they erroneously assumed that Asian Americans as a whole seem to take care of their own or rarely become social problems (Koh & Bell, 1987). Public policy has failed to incorporate the heterogeneity of Asian populations into aging policy considerations. Inadvertently, public policy toward Asians are directed to targeting them as a single, homogeneous group. Public policies have largely been directed to Asian Americans rather than to specific Asian groups.

Korean Elderly Profiles

With a major change in the immigration law in 1965, the number of Korean immigrants has drastically increased. Before the enactment of the 1965 Immigration Act, only 100 Koreans had immigrated to the U.S. each year under the quota system. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments eliminated the restrictive national origin quota system (Kim, 1976). The Act was intended to attract well-educated and skilled immigrants and to reunite families, and thus a vast number of Koreans took advantage of family reunion categories to migrate to America. By the 1980s, the number of South Koreans who immigrated through family-member visas far exceeded the number who came through their own skills and education (Bandon, 1994).

Consequently, Korean immigrants, including the elderly, have been identified as the most rapidly growing segment of the U.S. population. Koreans 65 years and older tripled from 8,613 in 1980 to 35,247 in 1990 (Census Data, 1990). Foreign-born Korean elders represented 91.7% or 31,162 out of 35,247 elderly immigrants. The

sociodemographic profiles for the Korea-born elderly illustrate that they deserve to draw public attention. According to the 1990 Census data, the poverty rate of the Korean elderly reached about 20.4%, while the total American poverty rate was 10.2%. In 1990, about 42% had less than a 9th grade education and only 10.6% a bachelor's degree or higher. Compared to 20.5% of Japanese elderly, only 11.7% are currently participating in the labor force. A large majority of the Korean elderly do not have a good grasp of the English language. The same 1990 Census data reported that 79.9% of Korean elderly 65 and over responded that they do not speak English very well and 88.3% of them said that they spoke a language other than English.

The above sociodemographic figures show that a majority of the Korean elderly are disadvantaged and vulnerable to cultural adjustment problems. A main reason for Korean elders' immigrating to America is to reunite with their families, thus they are not culturally prepared for their host country which exacerbates their difficulties in adjustment.

A typical migration pattern of the Korean elderly involves invitations from their adult children immigrants whose acculturation is superior to their aged parents. Before emigration from Korea to America, adult children were educated through curriculums at school influenced by Western culture. Access to learning English was much more prevalent. They were more frequently exposed to American culture through American movies and novels as they grew up. The Korean-American elderly, most of them having followed their children to the U.S., were not adequately prepared themselves for cultural adjustment. It is the only way they can maintain family ties whose importance in their value system is very great.

Adjustment of Korean-American Elderly

Literature Review

Socioeconomic status (SES) is found to be a strong predictor of how well the elderly adapt to the American culture. People who are located in higher SES levels are better capable of controlling their negative environments. Korean elderly immigrants tend to have difficulties if he or she has little education, has arrived in the U.S. recently, and lives alone (Kiefer et al., 1985). Adversity in Korea-born elders' daily life was reported as a result of adult children's level of cultural assimilation (Kang & Kang, 1983). Co-residence with aged parents may be a reflection of filial piety. However, when elders found their status degraded to that of doing house chores, they tended to feel more alienated and powerless.

Stresses resulting from immigrant life could be aggravated or lessened depending on the elders' respected status. Although the elderly are aware that they are not being respected for their old age as much as previous generations have received respect from their children, they are more likely to experience stress in cases of frequent exclusion from a major family decision-making process or when performing degraded roles such as doing house chores, taking care of their grand children, and cooking. Kang and Kang (1983) report that the elderly arrive with high hopes of being respected, but the elderly's initial high expectations soon turn into disillusionment and frustration (p. 48).

Contrary to expectation, the level of acculturation was not related to mental health status (Lee, Crittenden, & Yu, 1996). Lee and her colleagues interviewed 162 Korean immigrants aged 50 and older in Chicago to investigate the prevalence of depression and its relation to acculturation level (e.g., level of preparation for American life before immigration, English proficiency, and exposure to English media) and life stress. Results of data analyses showed

Yongjin Son

that level of life stress exacerbated the level of depressive symptoms. However, the level of acculturation had no significant effect on depressive symptoms.

A deep-rooted traditional culture still affects the elders' lives. Hurh and Kim (1984) state that young Korean immigrants' adaption pattern is thought of as adhesive. In other words, they are Americanized both culturally and socially to a limited extent. In short, Americanization would not replace or weaken any significant aspect of Korean traditional culture and social networks. Although their sample did not include the elderly, it can be inferred that Korea-born immigrant elderly are more likely to be attached to traditional cultures and norms considering that they are recently arrived in America.

Method

Sampling Method. The sample was collected using a snow-ball technique. That is, from the New England Korean Directory, the author found the current president of the Korean Elderly Association. After an initial telephone conversation with him, the author personally went to a church where we had arranged to meet. After the church service, reasons for the current research project were explained; namely that, the purpose of the study was to examine the Korean elders' life adjustment patterns and problems. As he promised on the telephone, he agreed to provide names and phone numbers of the Korean-speaking elderly. Originally, eleven individuals were contacted. But, one of them refused to be interviewed and one other person answered partially such that two individuals were excluded from the analysis.

Sample Characteristics. All 9 interviewees (2 men & 7 women; mean age 74) were contacted through the telephone. All were born

Adjustment of Korean-American Elderly

in Korea. Except for one person living in Manchester, New Hampshire, the other persons reside in about an hour's drive from Boston. Their residency in America ranged from a minimum of 7 years to a maximum of 23 years ($M = 16$). Three of them were currently married, four were widows, one was a widower, and one separated. When the elderly were married, either the husband or wife was interviewed. No two of them was interviewed. Three people were college-educated (1 woman & 2 men), 3 with less than an elementary school education, and 3 in between. Three live on Social Security, the rest rely on the Supplementary Security Income (SSI).

Construction of Questionnaire. Since there were no available questionnaires for examining the immigrant Korean elders' adaptation processes, a part of this project was to develop a culturally-appropriate instrument with the aid of existing literature. The questionnaire was composed of six parts. They are: demographic background, acculturation level, immigration life stress, intergenerational exchange, life satisfaction, and health status section.

Demographic Background. Nine questions were included under the demographic background section. The year a person came to America was in fact used for conceptualizing one aspect of acculturation, but it was asked in the demographic profile section. Another background variable, the reason for immigrating to America, was included in the demographic background section, but it was also used to determine how well the Korean elderly fit into American society. Other seven demographic variables were age, education, occupation in Korea, work history in America, church attendance, income, and marital status.

Acculturation Level. Several indicators were used to measure levels of acculturation. They were acquisition of U.S. citizenship,

ability to read newspapers/magazines in English & watch American TV, whether having American friends/acquaintances or not, involvement in the American community, length of residence in the U.S., and observance of American and Korean holidays.

Immigration Life Stress. Interviewees were asked what had been the main source of stress associated with immigration. They were asked, “Since you have immigrated to America, I assumed that you have been faced with incidences resulting from ignorance of American culture. Can you tell me at least one example which makes you feel embarrassed or stressed?” When the elderly were not fully aware of the meaning of stress, the surveyor sometimes reworded it as being a source of headache, or troublesome problems which could be uniquely experienced in a foreign culture. Examples were given, such as feeling embarrassed because of a language problem, feeling betrayed by their married adult children due to a lack of respect, and feeling isolated from close friends back home. A 10-point Likert-type scale was used to tap immigration stress. It was scaled from 0 (= not at all stressful) to 10 (= very stressful).

Intergenerational Interaction. Included variables were: number of adult children, frequency of contact with grown-up children (daily, weekly, or monthly), types of support received (emotional and/or financial), and mode of contacts (visits, telephone, etc.).

Life Satisfaction. Surrounded by unfamiliar environments or stressful situations, how to cope with foreign culture was indirectly measured with a 5-point scale of five culturally adapted questions. Four items were adopted from the General Social Survey which was developed by The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. One additional item was developed and added by the current researcher. Each question started with, “Are you satisfied with” and ended with a specific area (e.g., “the

Adjustment of Korean-American Elderly

neighborhood where you live,” “health and physical conditions,” “financial situation,” “friendships,” “your life as a whole when you look back over your life,” and “the way your children treat you”). The answer ranged from very satisfied (= 1) to very dissatisfied (= 5). The last item was uniquely added to tap indirectly aspects of the felt filial piety. The higher the score is, the greater their dissatisfaction with life.

Health Status. This section contained three questions. One item assessed a global health status, and the question was “Would you say your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?” The second question was “Compared with one year ago, would you say that your health is much better now, somewhat better now, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse than it was then?” The last question was “What about your emotional health – how good you feel or how stressed, anxious or depressed you feel? Is it excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?”

Findings

This project was a pilot study in which a culturally adopted questionnaire would be eventually developed, thus the current study was not intended to include a large number of people. Any types of statistical analyses was not reported due to a small sample size. Hence, the primary analytic tools were limited to report respondents’ own words and interpreting dialogues. When answering categories were formatted in a Likert-type or ordinal scale, most of the respondents had difficulties in selecting their answers. Instead, they started answering like open-ended questions. Findings were presented in terms of motive of migration, immigration stress, acculturational level, economic circumstances, interaction with children, living arrangement, physical/mental health, and life

satisfaction.

Motive of Migration. If the interviewees' motivation to migration to America was simply to join their married adult children and did not have a work history since immigrating to the States, they seemed to experience more cultural and economic adjustment difficulties in later life. This may result from the fact that they did not prepare themselves for adjusting to their host country either culturally or economically. The followers of adult children were living in poverty, because they did not have any specific ideas of how they might provide for their own income security in later life. Seven of the people sampled stated that they came to America at the invitation of either their son or daughter. The pattern was that their grown-up children came to the U.S. earlier and sent for their aged parents who usually did not bring any financial resources with them.

In contrast, two immigrant elderly were somewhat prepared for migrating. One female respondent and her adult children, were brought to America by her husband who had already settled and had his own business. Another male respondent stated that his whole family migrated to America for the purpose of improving their life situation. Relative to the involuntary migrant elderly, these two intended respondents living on Social Security benefits fared well economically.

Immigration Stress. When asked to give an example of immigration stress, some of the sampled people responded that language barriers were the major cause. Rather consistent answers followed. When they came to the States, for the first few years, they could not go outside freely for fear of being lost. As they stayed longer, they said they overcame such difficulties by knowing which bus they had to ride without knowing the language. That is, they were getting accustomed to America. The

Adjustment of Korean-American Elderly

others responded that they did not go outside and interact with the rest of society, thus they had not experienced any episodes stemming from cultural misunderstanding.

Acculturational Level. Two-thirds of respondents had obtained an American citizenship. This reflects the rapid assimilation trends among the Korean elderly despite a lack of understanding of American culture. However, this assimilation process of obtaining citizenship may not be understood as their real intention of being a American. Typically, Koreans are very resistant accepting foreign customs and values. Current U.S. welfare policies are trying to deny benefits and services to legal foreign-born individuals who do not possess citizenships. Thus, the assimilation as a result of having citizenship is expected to accelerate dramatically, considering that non-citizens will lose various types of public benefits.

In general, the sampled elderly were not adapted to American culture, either. The most important holidays being observed were rated as Korean Thanksgiving Day, Lunar New Year, Korean Independence Day, and Korean Memorial Day. American Thanksgiving Day was also observed by some. But other respondents answered that Korean holidays were not important to them any more.

The grasp of English was found to be the least assimilated area. With the exception of one person, all respondents were ignorant of English, and gained information from local Korean newspapers and enjoyed Korean videotapes of soap opera and dramas which were made in Korea and transported through satellite. Although some of the sampled people tended to watch American TV, they responded that they did not understand the content of the programs and simply viewed them. None of them answered that they spoke to their own adult children, spouse, and friends in English at home.

Yongjin Son

Mrs. Kim (20 year-residency in America) who considered her English to be better than her peers, said, "although I went to a girls high school under the Japanese colonial period, and attended a pharmacy school in Seoul during the tumultuous pre-Korean War periods, I studied English to pursue my studies in pharmacy in the States. So I read and write English pretty well. When I immigrated to America in 1977, I felt privileged because upper-middle class or highly-educated people had the ability to go abroad."

Other than Mrs. Kim, regardless of educational achievement, all respondents answered that their level of English comprehension was poor. They were not only ignorant of the American society which surrounds them, but also they were pretty much isolated from the community in which they live. No one was involved in any type of American community activity. However, except for one person (who was a non-church goer), all spent a considerable amount of time in Korean church activities, and went to ethnic activities such as "Kyung-ro" (respect for the elderly) celebration party sponsored by a Korean local church. No one had close American friends or acquaintances. That was to be expected, because they had never attended English-speaking schools or had ever been hired in a white-collar job. Those who had a work history and thus became eligible for Social Security also did not have any American friends from their workplace, either.

However, without being assimilated into American culture, some of them were acclimated to life in America. Despite a low level of acculturation (poor English proficiency and lack of understanding of Western culture), Mr. Ahn (81 years old widowed, and college educated living with Social Security) represented an excellent example of a full adaptation to the U.S. He had been the president of the Korean Elderly Association for several years, and he was very cooperative throughout the project. When his daughter sent for him in 1978, he found it difficult to meet his age peers, so he decided to convert to Christianity. He

Adjustment of Korean-American Elderly

organized and led all the activities such as the Korean Independence Day celebrations. These days, he was preoccupied with raising monies to find a place for the Korean elderly to meet and help each other. He had immersed himself in improving the well-being of the elderly Koreans since he started living separately from his adult children's family.

Mrs. Ye (82 years old, high school educated, living alone on SSI) was another example of a person who had adapted to foreign life very well despite low acculturation. She was very proud of her adult children and grandchildren for their academic achievements in America. She named first-class universities where her grandchildren were currently enrolled and her children had graduated from.

"I have a high life satisfaction living in America. Each morning I start a day with Yoga. During the day, I am busy helping the elderly in trouble. These days, I make a regular visit to a 89-year woman living alone. I bring with me something to eat such as rice when I visit her. In the evening, I listen to my favorite's preacher's sermon."

Mrs. Ye and her husband were church founders in Korea. Her son who attended a university in America was also a preacher in the U.S. Her husband made a regular visit to see his wife and adult children's families. She said that she lives in America to maintain close ties with her adult children's families.

Economic Circumstances. In contrast to seven of the interviewees who did not show dissatisfaction with financial situations, two people interviewed were greatly dissatisfied with their economic well-being. These two financially dissatisfied elderly were expecting great financial strains when the SSI benefits to non-U.S. citizens is stopped in August, 1997¹⁾. These two elderly

1) When the pilot study was conducted in 1996, the U.S. immigration lawmakers legalized a reduction in public assistance benefits such as

Yongjin Son

people, Mrs. Lee and Mrs. Shim (both married), fit perfectly into the multiple jeopardy hypothesis – being women, older, poor, sick, and with a low level of acculturation. Mrs. Lee only had four years of education and Mrs. Shim had also three years of schooling. They acknowledged that they did not fare well economically before migration. Since they did not have enough resources, they could not send their children to college in Korea. Thus, their adult children did not have a decent job in America to provide financial support for them. Being concerned about their future financial situation, Mrs. Shim (70-year-old, 12 years in the U.S.) said sadly,

“If I am forced to move into my children’s place due to monies, it will be like hell. I cannot do things in my own way. I will be an unwelcome guest to them. They can barely manage with their income. I will be both a financial and an emotional burden on them. Their financial problems will be exacerbated by my co-residence with them. I do not know what to do when it comes the next year of August. If the situation gets worse, I have no alternative but to go back to Korea. I never have had a happy moment throughout my entire life span. My parents died while I was a child. Since then, I moved from relative to relative. At a young age, I married a man who was much older than me, thinking that I would be well treated. But I was wrong. I worked to death with no income. I was born in a bad historical period and had experienced all political/social turmoils. I came to America in hopes that my later life would be better with a favorable welfare system. I cannot pass the citizenship test, because I forget what I already knew, so how can I learn new material? Why does the American government allow the poor elderly to live here without having the ability to support ourselves?”

Interaction with Children. Regardless of the quality of the relationship with their adult children, the sampled elderly were found to maintain a high frequency of intergenerational contact with their married adult children. All respondents said that their married adult children did not ask for their opinion regarding

SSI as of the summer of 1997. All non-U.S. citizen elders are required to pass citizenship tests to maintain their current level of government relief benefits.

Adjustment of Korean-American Elderly

family decisions.

Mr. Seo, 70 years old and living on Social Security, immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 55. Before migration, he was a journalist and politician. Unlike the other interviewees, he and his wife co-resided with their married adult children.

“Since I am not familiar with American life, I do not expect them to ask for my opinion regarding their business. When we hold family meetings, I still act as a head of my family. But I feel neglected and useless when they decide something in their own ways. I cannot express my unhappiness against my children in words. Cultural and generational differences clearly exist, so I have to adjust myself to new trends.”

Mrs. Kim (20 years residing in America), widowed about 15 years ago, is 69 years old and living in a government-subsidized apartment with Social Security benefits.

“America’s culture is opposite from that of Korea. The husband and wife are central to deciding family matters without consulting with their aged parents. Since I do not expect much from my grown-up kids, I do not have grievances against them. Since I was widowed in America, I spent years making money to put them through college, so I have not set up any goals for myself. These days, I have a lot of time to do what I have so far missed. I do not want to do anything for them any more. So I do not expect anything in return. They are all grown-ups and have their own kids, and I cannot control them. Sometimes, I find myself being careful when dealing with them. Things have changed. They decide things without letting me know.”

Narrative analyses showed that the elder’s central role being played in the Korean family was no longer observed in America. Although the statistical confirmation cannot be made due to a small sample size, those who had lived longer in the States had fewer expectations from their children. Although most of the sampled interviewees expressed their regrets at the different social/cultural expectations, they appeared to be well adapted to their new environment.

Yongjin Son

Living Arrangement. Irrespective of the quality of the relationship and the adult children's living standard, a majority of respondents expressed a strong preference for living separately. In fact, all interviewees were living separately from their adult children except for one male respondent. Government aid programs such as housing aid for low-income elderly, Medicare, and the SSI program enabled the respondents to live independently. The high frequency of "close relation from a distance" appeared to reflect an aspect of fast acculturation with an aid of American government's federal and state welfare services. A consistent pattern of living arrangement was observed. Once the elderly arrived in the U.S., they co-resided with their married adult children's place and did the household chores such as raising their grandchildren. After several years, they started living separately with the Government's aid program for low-income people. Mr. Ahn, whose son is the president of the Korean Economic Association, said,

"My son always wants me to live with his family, but I feel comfortable living by myself. When I arrived in the States, I devoted myself to taking the grandchildren to school and bring them home after school. If my adult children succeed, it is my success also. That is why they respect me and practice filial piety. I know many elderly feel wretched, because their kids do not hold them in high regard. But I have an opposite attitude. We ought help them so that they become more successful."

Mrs. Yoon (77 years old, 8 years of education, has citizenship, 23 years in America, living on SSI income), lost her husband about a month ago. Despite her recently-widowed status, her voice seemed in control during the telephone interview. After caring for chronically ill husband for many years, she had expected to become widowed.

"I have cared for my husband for years. He lived out his life."

When Mrs. Yoon came to America in 1974 at the invitation of

Adjustment of Korean-American Elderly

her daughter, she had planned to help her daughter deliver a baby and then return to Korea. But she said she decided to settle in America. When asked whether she would live with her grown-up children if she became disabled or frail, she responded,

"I'd rather go to a nursing home than to be cared for by them. Children sometimes feel sorry to see me living alone. But I prefer living alone, because if I live with them, I must help them with the domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, and baby-sitting. When I first arrived in America and lived with them, I could not see my friends or go outside."

Physical and Mental Health. Most elderly people questioned rated their general health as declining each year, rating their general health as somewhat worse compared with one year ago. Except for two interviewees (who will lose SSI benefits), the rest responded that they did not feel stressed, anxious, or depressed. All rated their mental health as either being "very good" or being "excellent." The healthy mental status needs to be carefully examined. In Korean society, having mental problems is strongly stigmatized. For instance, instead of seeking professional counseling for stress or anxiety, people generally look to their close friends or relatives to solve problems.

Life Satisfaction. Despite insufficient income, most of respondents rated their financial satisfaction as even. Overall, most respondents had problems when a life satisfaction question was read and asked to select one item such as very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, and others. This may represent an education-related cohort effect of the Korean elders.

Discussion

A predominantly high proportion of the Korean-American elderly were born outside the U.S., and were acculturated under the influence of Confucianism (1990 census data). In this study,

most Korean elders were brought over to America by adult children. Consequently, they were expected to be marginalized from the host country. From this narrative study, those engaged in white-collar job back in their homeland found themselves with low-skill jobs in the new land. Their skills that have acquired throughout their lives in Korea cannot be exercised. Although Mrs. Kim was a pharmacist in Korea, she cannot practice it. Mr. Seo, a politician and writer, also cannot find a job in a similar field, and thus worker in a menial job.

The religious involvement was found to be an important factor in older immigrants lives, perhaps due to an absence of a Korean community as a place for gathering information and sharing a common ethnic identity. Two of the respondents did not go to church before immigration, but they started going to the church on Sunday to see their married children's families and to meet friends they made in America. A pivotal role of church in connecting the two societies indicates that policy makers should be responsive to the needs of minority elders through ethnic organizations.

A major finding of this study was that cultural norms and expectations still affected their mode of thinking and behavior. Although their expectation from their adult children is modified by exposure to American culture, they do not fully accept the American ways of thinking and behaving. The ethnic culture that the Korean elderly brought with them still affected their behavior. In view of the fact that the two cultures are strikingly different from each other, ethnic culture might be a salient factor in determining their expectations and behaviors. It appears that culturally, the Korea-born immigrant elderly will continue to maintain a strong attachment to their ethnic heritage. They all observed Korean holidays more frequently than American ones. While the sampled interviewees acknowledged that America's

Adjustment of Korean-American Elderly

attitudes toward parents and household living arrangements are different from ones they are used to, cultural expectations remained to be a subject of conflict between parents and children. From this narrative analysis, parents' despair became greater when they realized that their children did not return what they had sacrificed for their financial and physical well-being for their children's benefit.

Regardless of acculturational factors (e.g., length of residence in the U.S., acquisition of U.S. citizenship, English proficiency, sharing companionship with Americans, and American community involvement), the Korean-speaking American elderly sampled still followed customs that were acquired in Korea. This observation fits the theory that one's cultural heritage remains influential well into old age, and perhaps them adapt in times of adjustment difficulties.

The current research findings negate the model minority hypothesis which states that Asian families take care of their own frail elderly and maintain a high level of living standards as a result of hard-working attitudes. Coupled with a model minority myth created by the mass media, policy planners have frequently overlooked Asian elders' needs. It is argued that the minority in general has been denied a fair share of public, especially federal, support (Cho, 1990). Minority researchers have frequently criticized the model minority hypothesis as being equally bad as the previous minority image of needy group. It serves as a new form of discrimination and acts to intentionally avoid service needs to the indigent Asian elderly. From this analysis, it was shown that the adult children of the Korean-American elderly were still struggling to assimilate themselves into American society.

Those whose primary source of income was the SSI rated financial difficulties as their paramount concern for their future

living conditions. Although they wish to become U.S. citizens, their poor command of English prevents them from passing the citizenship test. This paper argues that sensible social welfare and immigration policies need to incorporate the level of acculturation of ethnic minority elders.

References

- Bandon, A. (1994). *Korean Americans*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.
- Census Data (1990). U.S. Census Bureau: Washington D.C.
- Cho, P. (1990). Family care of the Asian American elderly: Myth or reality. In *Aging and Old Age in Diverse Populations*. Washington, D.C.: AARP.
- Hurh, W., & Kim, K. (1984). *Korean Immigrants in America: A structural Analysis of Ethnic Confinement and Adhesive Adaptation*. Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Press.
- Kang, T., & Kang, G. (1983). Adjustment patterns of the Korean-American elderly: Case studies of ideal types. *Journal of Minority Aging*, 8 (1/2), 47-55.
- Kiefer, C., Kim, S., Choi, K., Kim, L., & Kim, B. (1985). Adjustment problems of Korean American elderly. *The Gerontologist*, 25, 477-482.
- Kim, B. (1976). An appraisal of Korean immigrant service needs. *Social Casework, March*, 139-148.
- Koh, J., & Bell, W. (1987). Korean elders in the United States: Intergenerational relations and living arrangements. *The Gerontologist*, 27, 66-71.
- Lee, M., Critternden, K., & Yu, E. (1996). Social support and depression among elderly Korean immigrants in the United

Adjustment of Korean-American Elderly

- States. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 42, 313-327.
- Min, P. (1988). Korean immigrants families. In C. Mindel, R. Habenstein, & R. Wright (Eds.), *Ethnic families in America: Patterns and variations* (pp. 199-229). New York: Elsevier.
- Moon, J., & Pearl, J. (1991). Alienation of elderly Korean-American immigrants as related to place of residence, gender, age, years of education, time in the U.S., living with or without children, and living with or without a spouse. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 32, 115-124.
- Moon, A., & Williams, O. (1993). Perceptions of elder abuse and help-seeking patterns among African-American, Caucasian, and Korean-American elderly women. *The Gerontologist*, 33, 386-395.

미국에 거주하는 한국노인들의 적응에 관한 연구

손 용 진

목포카톨릭대학교 사회복지학과

이 연구는 예비 연구로 미국 뉴 앵글랜드 지역에 거주하는 9명의 한국노인들을 대상으로 하여 6가지 영역의 이민생활 적응을 조사했다. 한국계 미국노인들을 위한 표준화된 설문지가 없어 본 연구자가 기존의 참고 문헌을 통해 건강상태, 문화동화 수준, 이민생활에 관련된 생활 스트레스 등을 묻는 설문지를 작성했다. 표본 수가 작아서 통계적 분석은 시도되지 않았지만, 대부분 정신건강의 문제는 없지만, 신체건강이 1년 전에 비해 더 나빠졌다고 응답했다. 영어의 이해가 제일 어려운 문화동화 영역이었으며, 경제적 만족수준은 대부분 중간정도로 대답했다. 미국의 거주 했으나 사회경제적 지위에 상관없이, 응답자들은 여전히 한국의 문화관습을 따르고 있었고, 경제적으로 자녀로부터 독립하기를 원했으며, 동시에 성인자녀들을 돕고 싶다고 했다. 수입이 전적으로 저소득층 보조수입에 의존하고 있는 노인들은 미래의 경제상황이 매우 나빠질 것이라고 답했다. 본고는 미국의 소수 인종을 위한 복지정책이 소수인종노인들의 사회 문화적 동화수준을 감안한 정책이 수립되어야 함을 제안하고 있다. 마지막으로 본 연구에 참가한 사람들이 자신의 감정과 느낌을 수량화하는데 어려움을 보였는데, 이러한 점으로 미루어 보아서 앞으로의 연구는 양적 및 질적 연구방법의 동시 사용이 훨씬 효과적일 것이다.

(논문접수일: 2001년 11월 3일)

(수정논문접수일: 2001년 11월 26일)

(논문게재승인일: 2001년 11월 29일)