



Social networks among lower income Korean elderly immigrants in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the composition and cultural context of the social networks of a sample of primarily lower-income Korean elderly immigrants and the resources and supports available through those network ties. In-depth, in-person interviews were used to investigate categories of network ties and the nature of network exchanges. Non-kin and organizational contacts were primary sources of emotional and instrumental support among this sample, with the norms and institutions of elder care in the U.S. shaping expectations regarding sources of support.

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Introduction

Research suggests that older people with supportive network contacts display better physical and mental health than those without (Cattell, 2001; Cohen, 2004; Han, Kim, Lee, Pistulka, & Kim, 2006; Kim, 1999; Kim, Hisata, Kai, & Lee, 2000; Lee, Moon, & Knight, 2004; Litwin, 2001; Moon, 1996; Mui, 1996; Okabayashi, Liang, Krause, Akiyama, & Sugisawa, 2004; Umberson & Montez, 2010). Such resources obviously vary widely across gender, class, geography, and ethnicity, and may have characteristics specific to certain immigrant and cultural groups (Due, Holstein, Lund, Modvig, & Avlund, 1999; Han et al., 2006; Kim, 1999; Litwin, 2001; Okabayashi et al., 2004; Wenger, 1996). Assessing supports available from informal and formal social network contacts such as spouses, children, friends, neighbors and social agencies is recognized as a critical initial step in facilitating resource mobilization among the elderly to enhance well-being.

Korean immigrants represent the fifth largest ethnic population among the 28 groups of Asian American Pacific Islanders living in the U.S., with most residing in the New

York City and Los Angeles metropolitan areas (Shelton, Matsushita, & Levenson, 2008; Sohn, 2004). Since most Korean elderly are first-generation immigrants who tend to maintain their traditional cultural beliefs and norms, they may encounter multiple adjustment problems in a new culture including language barriers, lack of transportation, and social alienation (Han et al., 2006; Lee et al., 2004; Moon, 1996; Yoo & Sung, 1997). Despite some stereotypes that Korean immigrants represent one of the 'model minorities' that experience few social or economic problems, it is estimated that 1 in 4 elderly Korean immigrants in the New York City area have incomes below the poverty line, and that 21% lack health insurance (Commonwealth Fund, 2002; Insurance and Health Care Committee on Consequence of Uninsurance, 2001; Shelton et al., 2008). Empirical studies also indicate that depression among elderly Korean immigrants is higher than that for the general population of elderly in the U.S., and for other Asian immigrant groups (Jang, Kim & Chiriboga, 2006; Lee & Holm, 2011). An understanding of the resources available through an elder's social network may assist in determining the formal and informal connections that might be developed to address service or resource gaps, and enhance well-being.

This study examined the composition and cultural context of the social networks of a sample of primarily lower-income Korean elderly immigrants and the resources and supports available through those network ties. The study is unique in

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the use of qualitative methods to explore network resources as identified and described by elderly Korean immigrants themselves, and how they are utilized to mobilize resources to manage their daily lives. We investigated through in-depth interviews the categories of people that respondents have relationships with (i.e., children, spouse, neighbors, or professionals/organizations), the kinds of supports they exchange with these network ties, and why. Given the importance of social network ties as channels for resource mobilization among the elderly, this study aimed to further an understanding of how and why the networks and resources of this sample may reflect the cultural norms and circumstances of this Korean immigrant group.

Literature review

Social networks

Social network theorists describe the social environment as a web of interpersonal and organizational ties that can be analyzed according to structural and functional qualities such as composition, size, reciprocity, and the content of the resources exchanged (Boissevain, 1974; Lin, 1999; Litwin, 2001; Marsden & Lin, 1982). Network ties may function as supportive, or not. Supports (or resources) provided among network contacts may include information, material or tangible goods, or emotional aid (Van Groenou & Van Tilburg, 1997). The resources that are accessed through social network contacts may also be described as social capital, the active or latent value that exists in the relationships between people (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999). Immigrants can be expected to benefit from possessing social capital in the form of personal acquaintances and organizational affiliations whose information, contacts, and relational obligations can provide both emotional and instrumental supports (Kao, 2004; Lin, 1999; Portes, 1988). Networks comprised of diverse contacts and sources of social capital are hypothesized as having the potential to provide access to a greater number of resources than networks that are limited in size and diversity (Granovetter, 1973; Montgomery, 1992). A common method for the derivation or mapping of social networks characterizes them according to the social role categories to which interpersonal ties are attached (Glass, Mendes De Leon, Seeman, & Berkman, 1997), and categories such as family, friends, work associates, neighbors, and organizations are analyzed as mechanisms through which various resources or supports are exchanged (Due et al., 1999; Glass et al., 1997; Litwin, 2001; Van Groenou & Van Tilburg, 1997; Wenger, 1996). Such resources are often categorized into two primary types—instrumental (material goods or hands-on assistance) and emotional (trust, empathy, psychological caring).

As a person grows older, the need for both types of support typically shifts as one's physical capacities decline (often necessitating additional instrumental supports such as housekeeping or meals), and as life transitions, illness, and loss may change or increase the role of emotional supports (Kauh, 1997; Van Groenou & Van Tilburg, 1997).

Culture and social networks

Research indicates that norms that govern the nature of relationships differ across cultures (Okabayashi et al., 2004;

Taylor et al., 2004; Yoo & Sung, 1997). For instance, in many Asian cultural contexts, individuals are encouraged to focus on maintaining harmony with social groups and conform to social norms and relationships by seeking consensus and compromise (Okabayashi et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2004). Especially in East Asian society, adult children are typically expected to obey and respect their parents' needs over their own, because the practice of filial piety is still considered by many a core of moral behavior (Okabayashi et al., 2004; Sung, 2001; Yoo & Sung, 1997). These core cultural differences in expectations and norms about relationships are likely to affect whether and how individuals seek and use support networks (Jang, Kim, Chiriboga, & King-Kallimanis, 2007; Taylor et al., 2004).

Korea differs significantly from the United States in old-age support. With a culture rooted in the virtue of filial piety, Korean families, especially adult children, continue to be a basic source of old-age security (Kim et al., 2000; Seok, 2009; Statistics Korea, 2006). Although co-residence with children has declined significantly during the past several decades, a large proportion of elderly in Korea, 42% in 2006, reside with their adult children (Statistics Korea, 2006), and are provided with hands-on care by them (Kim et al., 2000). In addition, an estimated 43% of elderly over age 60 in Korea receive financial support from their adult children as a primary source of income, while only 11% of them depend on public pension and assistance (Seok, 2009). In contrast, the majority of the elderly in the U.S. rely on public pensions (Social Security) as a primary income source. Most live independently from their children and levels of financial assistance from adult children to aged parents are low (Ruggles, 2007; Seok, 2009; Taylor et al., 2004).

Networks among Korean elders

Several studies have examined aspects of family relationships, social support, and the social networks of Korean elderly immigrants in the U.S. (Han et al., 2006; Kim, 1999; Lee & Holm, 2011; Moon, 1996; Yoo & Sung, 1997). Most are quantitative studies using nonrepresentative samples from various metropolitan areas in the U.S., including Los Angeles, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and a metropolitan region in the Midwest, and focus on factors affecting mental health and/or depression (Han et al., 2006; Jang & Chiriboga, 2006; Kim, 1999; Moon, 1996; Yoo & Sung, 1997). Overall, these studies report that Korean older immigrants in the U.S. most often rely on adult children, spouses, friends, Korean church members, or neighbors as sources of support. Evidence suggests that there is a trend over past decades for Korean elders residing in the U.S. to increasingly live independently from their adult children (Lee & Holm, 2011; Seo & Mazumdar, 2011). Han et al. (2006) and Yoo and Sung (1997) noted that while adult children are the most commonly mentioned category of support, they are used most often for instrumental assistance (transportation, banking) and seldom for emotional support for personal problems. Several studies report positive associations between supportive networks and mental health (Kim, 1999; Lee & Holm, 2011; Moon, 1996), though some (Han et al., 2006) find no effects of network size on mental health. Family conflict has been associated with higher levels of depression among

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