

Asian American Midlife Women's Attitudes Toward Physical Activity

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To explore Asian American midlife women's attitudes toward physical activity using a feminist perspective.

Design: A qualitative online forum study.

Settings: Internet communities/groups for midlife women and ethnic minorities.

Participants: A total of 17 Asian American women recruited through the Internet using a convenience sampling method.

Methods: A 6-month qualitative online forum was conducted using 17 online forum topics. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: Three major themes related to Asian American midlife women's attitudes toward physical activity were extracted from the data: keeping traditions, not a priority, and not for Asian girls. Because Asian American midlife women were busy in keeping their cultural traditions, they rarely found time for physical activity. The women gave the highest priority to their children, and physical activity was the lowest priority in their busy lives. Also, the women were rarely encouraged to participate in physical activity during their childhoods, and they perceived that their weak and small bodies were not appropriate for physical activity.

Conclusions: Several implications for future development of physical activity promotion programs for this specific population have been suggested based on the findings.

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It is statistically projected that Whites will constitute 64% of the U.S. population by the year 2020 (Slootmaker, Chinapaw, Schuit, Seidell, & Van Mechelen, 2009). In other words, one of three Americans will be an ethnic minority within two decades (Slootmaker et al.). Among these ethnic minorities, there are approximately 12 million Asians residing in the United States, and about 3 million of them are women aged 40 to 60 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). In addition, from 1990 to 2000, the rate of increase in the Asian population changed from 48% to 72% (U.S. Census Bureau). With the increasing number of Asian populations in the United States, it becomes imperative for nurses to consider greater cultural competence in practice areas of women's health, where cultural attitudes greatly influence health-promoting behaviors.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2003, 2004) reported that Asian American adults meeting the recommended levels of lifestyle physical activity was significantly lower than that of the total U.S. population. Recent studies also in-

dicated that the participation rate of midlife Asian American women in physical activity remains low (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). The prevalence rates of cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, obesity, hypertension, and all-cause mortality among Asian American midlife women (that can be effectively reduced by increasing physical activity) have been reported to be much higher than those of White midlife women (CDC).

One of the reasons for the low physical activity level of Asian American midlife women is that most physical activity promotion programs are rarely culturally appropriate. Several cross-cultural studies of midlife women's physical activity indicated clear ethnic differences in attitudes toward and actual participation in physical activity (Berg, Cromwell, & Arnett, 2002; Korean National Internet Development Agency, 2009; Margetts, Rogers, Widhal, Remaut de Winter, & Zunft, 1999). However, with few investigations on Asian Americans, little is known about how Asian American midlife women uniquely view physical activity and what

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motivates them to participate in physical activity (Im, & Choe, 2004). This lack of knowledge could result in culturally inadequate or inappropriate physical activity promotion programs aimed at Asian American midlife women.

The purpose of this study was to explore Asian American midlife women's attitudes toward physical activity using a 6-month qualitative online forum. This study is a part of a larger study that explored midlife women's attitudes toward physical activity of four major ethnic groups of midlife women in the United States (White, Hispanic, African Americans, and Asians). Herein, *Asian American* refers to those residing in the United States who have origins in the Far East, South-east Asia, or the Indian subcontinent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). For example, Chinese, Korean, Asian Indian, Filipino, and Sri Lankan are included as Asian Americans. In this study, for the convenience of the approach, it was assumed that *Asian American* could be defined as one cultural group. However, this approach may be a major limitation of this study because of obvious subethnic diversities within Asian Americans.

We used a feminist perspective as philosophical and theoretical basis of the study; we assumed that Asian American women's physical activity would be most comprehensively understood through considering the relationships among physical activity, the woman's body, and cultural ideals of health and beauty within the contexts of Asian patriarchal culture (Balsamo, 1996; Im, 2001). Asian American women have been implicitly educated and socialized to preserve their vital energy for childbearing and childrearing and to be ready for the role of wife and mother (Im; Zachariah, 2005). Consequently, Asian American women have been discouraged from participating in sports involving heavy physical activities (Im; Zachariah). In addition, low rates of participation in physical activity are mainly due to Asian women's interactions with their environments and frequently reflect biases from how they are viewed by others to how they view others. Finally, we considered Asian American ethnicity as a significant characteristic that influences women's physical activity and their attitudes toward physical activity, and we tried to disclose cultural contexts where Asian American women experience physical activity.

Methods

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the institution where the researchers

were affiliated. Only the findings from the online forum among Asian American midlife women are presented in this article. Findings from other ethnic groups can be found elsewhere (Im, Chee, Lim, Liu, & Kim, 2008; Im et al., 2010; 2.

Setting and Participants

The study announcement was made through Internet communities for midlife women (ICMWs) and Internet communities for ethnic minorities (ICEMs). These two settings were chosen because they have been reported to be effective research settings for studies among midlife women (Baehring, Schulze, Bornstein, & Scherbaum, 1997; Barrera, Glasgow, McKay, Boles, & Feil, 2002; Bowker & Liu, 2001; Im, Shin, & Chee, 2008). A total of 2,309 ICMWs and 4,421 ICEMs were approached for the larger study. Then, potential participants were asked to visit the project website through the study announcements made in the both settings. Among the participants of the larger study, a total of 22 Asian American women were recruited for the online forum. By the end of the 6-month period, 17 women were retained. Six to 12 participants are recommended as the ideal number for a focus group discussion including this online forum method (Stevens, 1996). Thus, we considered that 22 Asian American women would be an adequate number of participants.

The inclusion criteria for this study were midlife Asian American women who (a) were aged 40 to 60 years, (b) were ambulatory and able to participate in all forms of physical activity, (c) could read and write English, and (d) had access to the Internet. Those who had high cardiovascular and musculoskeletal risk factors such as (a) major signs or symptoms suggestive of pulmonary or cardiovascular disease (CVD); (b) history of a myocardial infarction, stroke, or type I diabetes mellitus; (c) blood pressure higher than 160/100 mm Hg; and (d) use of beta-blockers, Diltiazem, or Verapamil were excluded from the study. To check the exclusion criteria, we used the 7-item Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaire and several questions related to cardiovascular risk (e.g., a family history of CVD, current smoker, history of elevated cholesterol and blood pressure, and diabetes) that were developed and used in the study by Wilbur et al. (2006).

Sociodemographic characteristics and perceived health and menopausal status of the Asian American women are summarized in Tables 1 and 2. The mean age was 49.06 years ($SD = 5.86$). About

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