ABSTRACT. Within the context of elder mistreatment, little attention has been paid to ethnicity and cultural factors as independent or causal variables. Focusing on the Japanese as an example, this paper explores cultural factors that may be associated with family conflict and elder mistreatment, including the use of silence as an extreme form of punishment. Also explored are the interrelationships of dependency (amae), holding back (enryo), and being in the way (jama); of social obligation (giri), personal indebtedness (on), and natural feelings or desires (ninjo); and of filial piety and casting away the elder (obasute). Currently-used research and detection protocols will not identify elder mistreatment among the Japanese unless they are modified. This paper provides suggestions for these modifications, as well as suggestions for practitioners who may treat Asian victims of elder mistreatment.

Key Words: cultural variables, elder abuse, elder mistreatment, ethnicity, Japanese, silence

INTRODUCTION

Within the context of elder mistreatment, defined in this paper as other-inflicted suffering that interferes with the maintenance of the quality of life of the older person (T. Johnson 1986), little attention has been paid to ethnicity and cultural factors as independent or causal variables. So far, in the research literature, the majority of the victims have been reported to be Caucasian females, with little being said about ethnic group differences (Block and Sinott, 1979; Lau and Kosberg 1979; Phillips 1986; Pillemer 1986; Godkin, Wolf and Pillemer 1989).

While some preliminary information is available (see for example, Stein 1991), not much is known about how elder mistreatment manifests itself among ethnic minority groups and if the prevalence of elder mistreatment is higher or lower in these groups. Even if we were to study elder mistreatment among certain groups, what would we be looking for? Do Asians mistreat their elders, and if they do, to what extent and in what fashion? What cultural variables seem to contribute to elder mistreatment? Are American-Western methods of elder mistreatment research, diagnosis, and treatment applicable to Asian-Eastern groups? If not, how are these methods to be modified?

What follows is a section that briefly introduces in general terms the Japanese in America, and the second section, using the Japanese as an example, focuses on cultural variables that may be associated with family conflict and elder mistreatment within one ethnic group. The subsequent sections provide practice considerations, research topics with regard to the Japanese and elder mistreatment, and research methodological considerations. The paper concludes with a discussion arising from some of these initial questions.
THE JAPANESE IN THE UNITED STATES

The Japanese have been in the United States for a relatively short time, first immigrating to Hawaii as contract laborers on plantations in 1885 (Mindel, Habenstein, and Wright, Jr. 1988). Immigration to the mainland began in the 1890s, with most doing domestic and unskilled labor on the railroads, in canneries, and in the logging, and mining industries. Initially, many of the Issei, or first generation Japanese, came as single men, who intended to return home after making their fortune. When it became clear that they would not be returning home, the unavailability of potential brides due to anti-miscegenation laws and cultural differences compelled many to marry women in Japan with help from their relatives and community, and through the “picture bride” practice of exchanging photos with women in Japan who subsequently joined their husbands in America. Immigration after the Gentleman’s Agreement of 1907 involved relatives, and by 1920, more than 100,000 Japanese lived in Hawaii. Currently, based on the 1990 census, there are an estimated 850,000 Japanese in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992).

The Issei brought with them the structure, language, and values of Japan’s Meiji Era (1868–1912), including the ie, or house or household as the primary unit within a larger “family” context, the community (Nakane 1970); a patriarchal system that gave more rights as well as responsibilities to first-born sons; and family rituals during holidays such as New Year’s Day, and O-Bon, a summer festival honoring the dead. Hierarchically, loyalty and commitment to one’s community was primary to one’s devotion to family, and the needs and wants of any individual were always secondary to the former two (Kitano 1969). Heavy emphasis was placed on the education of the Nisei or second-generation Japanese, as the chief means of upward mobility.

Currently, there are very few Issei still alive; the oldest Nisei are in their 80s and the youngest in their 50s. The Sansei, or third-generation Japanese have assumed caregiving roles, providing direct care either in the elder’s home, or visiting them in facilities. Wide variation exists among the Nisei and the Sansei with regard to their integration of American values and attitudes with those learned from their Issei parents and grandparents. The extent to which Japanese values are maintained are dependent on age and degree of exposure to other ethnic groups, the makeup of the immediate community, socialization practices of the family, and degree of isolation from other Japanese families.

While their families vary in the rate and extent of acculturation, it is believed that many Asians retain some distinctive values from their traditional cultures, and that currently, these values play a significant role in their interpersonal functioning (Sue and Sue 1990). F. Johnson (1993: xiv), studying interactional behavior among Japanese Americans in Hawaii, found certain behaviors of the Nisei and Sansei to be similar to those in Japan despite many years of separation from the Japanese culture. Some Asian-Americans are viewed as having a two-layered personality, a deeper core personality associated with the traditional culture that is sometimes not obvious to others, and an outer layer, associated