The Elderly Living in Nursing Homes: Cross-Culture Comparison

Su-hsien Chang • Miao-chun Fang

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand and compare elder's daily life in living in nursing homes in America and Taiwan. Authors used a focused ethnography method for data collection and observation of the elderly's daily life in nursing homes of Taiwan and another nursing home in America. Then, a cross-cultural comparison was presented. One common theme that was revealed in the study was that "the nursing home is a place to be idle". There were four domains under the major theme: surrounding environment, residents, recreation and privacy and autonomy. The environment domain was categorized to two subcategories, internal environment and external environment. The external environment of the two cultures' nursing homes is different, but the internal environment has similarities and dissimilarities. Recreations for residents are very similar for both nursing homes, but nursing home residents in the U.S. have more space for activities than nursing home residents in Taiwan. In addition, health care providers in both cultures try to respect residents' privacy and residents have some autonomy, but American nursing home residents have more autonomy than residents in nursing home of Taiwan. In sum, the findings contribute to knowledge of elders' daily life living in nursing homes by demonstrating differences and similarities between American and Chinese elders in Taiwan. The study raises questions about the effects of institutional, professional and cultural factors on the disposition to care for elders. (Tzu Chi Nursing Journal, 2004; 3:2, 41-49.)

Key words: Nursing Home, Elder's Daily Life, Cross-Culture Comparison
fewer limitations in ADL still cannot manage their lives independently because they are unable to keep track of money, do minor housework, take medicine, and run errands. As a result, they may need to move in to a long-term care facility such as a nursing home. The nursing home in the United States is designed to help people with chronic conditions to compensate for limitations in their ability to function independently (United States General Accounting Office, 1995).

On the other hand, placing adult parents in long term care settings is considered as a violation of traditional filial obligation among many Chinese in Taiwan, it has become new caregiving alternative. After War World II, because the living standard and quality of health and medical care have improved in Taiwan, life expectancy has increased from 53.38 years in 1951 to 72.60 years in 2000 for men, and from 56.33 years to 78.3 years for women. Although the Chinese people in Taiwan have prolonged their life span, their health status may not be satisfactory. According to the Ministry of the Interior (MOI, 2001) in Taiwan surveyed health status among 4067 people aged 20 or over. The result was that 79.3% of the people were satisfied with their health status, only 19.7% were not satisfied. Men were more satisfied with their health status than women. Elders were less satisfied than young people with their health status. Also, 27.9% of the elderly over 65 were not satisfied with their health status.

In addition, industrialization and urbanization not only change the family structure in Taiwan, but also the value of filial duty and elders’ living arrangement. According to the National Statistics of Taiwan, ROC (2001), the family composition was 55.8% nuclear families and 22.3% three-generation families. Elderly aged 65 and over living with children and grandchildren were 30.9%; living with spouse, 24.0%, and living alone; 1.4%. In 2000, living arrangements for the elderly aged 65 and over were 58.1% with three-generation families; 17.4% with spouse; 6.7% with relatives; and 16% alone. Although, most elderly like to live with and be taken care of by their children, they may not able to do so because of physical or mental limitations and the need for other’s assistance. In the past few decades, nursing scholars in Taiwan have been studying about which people are more likely to be admitted to long term care facilities. They found that nursing home entry is associated with advanced age, gender, educational level, and independency levels of elders (Chiu, Shyu, Liu & Wang, Chang, 2001; Liu & Tinker, 2001; Shyu & Lee, 2002; Wu, Li & Chang, 1997). For instance, Liu and Tinker (2001) indicated that the average age of people in nursing homes was greater than in the community. More women than men resided in nursing homes compared with their counterparts in the community. There were more widows or widowers lived in the nursing homes. People who received higher education were more likely to live in nursing homes when they are aging. Also, elderly people in nursing homes were severely dependent. Specific medical problems such as cardiovascular, neurological, and skeletal muscular diseases were major contribution for nursing homes admission in Taiwan.

The result of increasing aging population and people who need assistance with basic activity of daily living such as feeding, bathing, dressing, washing face, brushing teeth, toileting, and bowel and bladder care, transferring, ambulating and stair climbing, the needs for nursing homes are increasing. According to the MOI in Taiwan (2004), in 1996, the number of nursing homes was 16 that could provide 1200 beds for senior adults, and 70.3% of the beds were occupied. But in 2003, this number increased to 738 that were 24,882 available beds, and 72.02% of the beds were occupied. Although, some elders have positive perceptions of living in nursing homes, most elders perceive living in nursing homes negatively (Lee, 1997a, 1997b; Yeh, Shey & Lin, 2002). Unfortunately, the elderly living in nursing homes in Taiwan may not be aware that their negative perceptions become stressful events. They only know that they are not happy living in nursing homes. Consequently, their perceptions of quality of life decreases.

Owing to culture is formed through history, human beings as individuals are determined not only genetically, but also culturally. That is why each person has his/her unique characteristics. To understand a human being, culture entities and the culture history of society should be considered (Shin, 2001). As we know Chinese people are very proud of their history, which is more than five thousands years old. The way of Chinese living and thinking are influenced by the Chinese cultural heritage, which are
Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Thus, traditionally, Chinese believe that the group and collectivism are basis of the strength of a family. Young children uphold their obligation to the family such as respect and support to their family members, especially elder parents. That is the concept of filial piety that is taught in early children among Chinese (Pang, 2000). On the other hand, the United States of American (U.S.A.) only have few hundreds years' history. American people emphasize individualism, which focus on self-determination, independence, autonomy, respect for the dignity of an individual, and the success and well-being of an individual (Sung, 2000). Thus, there are great cultural differences between two countries. The result of this not only influences elders' daily life of living in nursing homes between two countries' elders living in nursing homes. To improve the quality of life among elders living in nursing homes in Taiwan in the future, the purpose of this study was to understand and compare elders' daily life in living in nursing homes in America and Taiwan. The research question of this study focused on “what is daily life like in a nursing home?”.

**Literature Review**

People who have lived independently in a community since they were young find the transition to institutional life in late age difficult. A sociologist, Erving Goffman, called a nursing home a total institution. The central features of total institutions are the breakdown of the normal barriers that separate the main spheres of life such as sleep, work, and play, and the handling of many human needs by a bureaucratic organization. Bureaucratic management involves the care and movement of people in blocks so that they can be supervised by person whose chief activity is surveillance (Quadagno, 2002).

People who are from western countries such as the United States of America emphasize individualism. Individualism can be characterized as self-determination, independence, autonomy, respect for the dignity of the individual, and the success and well-being of an individual (Sung, 2000). Thus, living in a nursing home in the advanced years can mean loss because elders may need to give away or sell their lifelong possessions. The most wrenching loss is the loss of independence to make even simple decisions for oneself about indulging in small pleasures. For example, walking in the neighborhood, shopping with friends, and choosing what to eat for dinner. In addition, immigrants who enter nursing homes face unique obstacles in adjusting to institutionalization because of language barriers and cultural differences. In recent years, some nursing homes have become more sensitive to the cultural needs of residents. Foods and activities that nursing homes provide may reflect different ethnic background. However, most care providers in nursing homes are too busy providing basic care that may forget that residents who come from different cultural background have different needs.

What is daily life like in a nursing home? The monotonous daily routine is the most difficult aspect of life in nursing homes. A rigid routine results from pressure on health care worker to meet the basic needs of residents in the nursing home such as feeding, dressing, bathing, and preparing for bed. Moreover, the nursing home itself must be kept clean and orderly. A sociologist, Jaber Gubrium, called this daily routine “bed-and-body-work” (Quadagno, 2002). As a result, the monotonous daily routine reduces the quality of life for residents in nursing Homes. Many elders' perceptions of long-term care facilities are negative. For instance, in Taiwan, the elderly perceive the nursing home as a dumping place where one idles until death. The elderly believe that admission into nursing homes is "being closer to death and possessing an uncontrolled future". Elders also worry about the quality of care provided in these nursing homes and anticipate problematic human relationships with roommates and nurses. But some elderly have positive perceptions of living in nursing homes such as getting general and nursing care, making new friends, and having companionship, and increasing social contact (Lee, 1997a, 1997b).

Who are the people most likely to be admitted to a long-term care facility? In the United States, in 1995, about 5% of individuals aged 65 and over lived in nursing homes. Approximately one-third of them stayed at least 30 days (Cynthia, 1995). The actual number of nursing residents, the percentage of the aged population, and length of stay are increasing. Nursing homes in the 21st century have
always been filled with chronically ill older people. Because of the recent change in Medicare and Medicaid, the typical nursing home resident is even more ill and frail than in the past. Moreover, in Taiwan, residents of nursing homes are the elderly who are intubated, are more dependent, and have a low level of consciousness before they were discharged from the hospital (Shyu & Lee, 2002). Studies that were done in Taiwan also show that elderly who have moderate mental dysfunction or need assistance with their daily living will more likely be discharged to long-term care facilities (Chiu et al., 2001; Wu et al., 1997).

No matter which culture you are from, becoming a resident in a long-term care facility means several alterations in one's social context such as physical relocation, changing relationships with family and friends, and developing new relationships with facility staff. Everyday events and activities for residents can become relatively fixed and scheduled (Liukkonen, 1995). Opportunities for choice and independent decision-making decrease because the individual resident must conform to the larger group's needs (Kane, 1991). Thus, living in a nursing home may become stressful for the elderly. Consequently, the quality of life among the elderly living in nursing homes may decrease.

Data collection methods

A cross-sectional, descriptive, comparative study was used. Two private nursing homes located in Taiwan and United States were selected for the investigation. A focused ethnography method was used for data collection. During the data collection, the researchers not only observed residents' daily life of living in the nursing home, but also talked to some nursing home staffs and residents. Based on the collected data, the content of observations and conversations with nursing home staff and residents was analyzed in order to find major theme, categories, and patterns. In addition, the influence of both cultures on the nursing home life was compared.

Results: Cross-Culture Comparison

One common theme that was revealed in the study was "the nursing home is a place to be idle". Everyday events and activities for nursing home residents are fixed and scheduled. The major entertainments for both nursing home residents are watching TV and reading newspapers. Elders also fall asleep when they are doing these activities. Moreover, daily life is invariable. It begins with eating breakfast. Next, residents watch TV or read newspapers. Then, it is the time to have lunch. After the meal, they take a nap, when they awake from the nap, they watch TV and read the newspaper again. In the evening, they will have their dinner. After that, they continue to do what they usually do during the day. At the end of day, they go to bed. The next day, their activities begin again.

Although, nursing home residents of both cultures have similar daily lives, residents in America nursing home have more fun than residents in Taiwan nursing homes. Nursing home residents in America have pets to keep them company. Residents in the American nursing home have more interactions with other residents than residents in the Taiwan nursing home.

There are four domains under the one major theme: surrounding environment, residents’ recreation, privacy and autonomy. This study found some diversity and commonalities within the four domains among both counties' nursing homes.

The environment domain can be categorized to two subcategories, internal environment and external environment. The external environment of the two cultures nursing homes are different. There is a big difference in the geography of the two countries, the nursing homes in Taiwan are surrounded by people, cars, motorcycle, buildings, and is noisy. There is less space for movement. Although nursing homes in America are surrounded by cars and people, it has its own courtyard with trees and grass, swimming pool, and parking lots.

In addition, the internal environment between nursing homes of two cultures have similarities and dissimilarities. The nursing homes in these two cultures were designed to be like a home for residents. For instance, both have kitchens, living rooms, dinning rooms, and bathrooms. The frequency of meals and showers is very similar for less independent nursing home residents. But the nursing
home in America is designed to be more like a home than a nursing home in Taiwan. The nursing homes in Taiwan is designed to be more like a hospital.

Activities for residents are very similar for both nursing homes. The geography and population density between the two countries are very different. Nursing home residents in the US have more space than nursing home residents in Taiwan. Because Taiwan is a small island and has a high population density, there is not much space.

Health care providers in both cultures try to respect residents' privacy. For instance, there is a curtain between two resident's beds. But health care providers in the American nursing home are more aware and respectful of residents' privacy than health care workers in the Taiwan nursing home.

Residents in these two nursing homes have some autonomy. For instance, residents can choose where to eat and what to eat. Nevertheless, American nursing home residents have more autonomy than residents in Taiwan's nursing home. American nursing home residents can manage their money, although, the amount is limited. Residents in American nursing home can call their friends or their friends call them if they want to. Those situations do not occur in Taiwan.

Discussion

In comparing societies cross culturally, this study found that a nursing home is a place to be idle but residents in American nursing homes have a higher quality of life than residents in Taiwan nursing homes. To understand why there is difference, it is necessary to understand the transition occurring in the 21st century in Taiwan.

As we know, Chinese people are very proud of their history. It is more than five thousands year old. The way of Chinese living and thinking about health has also been strongly influenced by several Chinese philosophies and religions especially Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Confucius, who was recognized as the greatest teacher in Chinese society, stated five important characteristics of Confucianism. Confucianism emphasizes that human beings should respect their parents, show loyalty to family, lack self-centeredness, and maintain harmony with other people (Chen, 2001; Graham, 1990). Taoism teaches people that human beings should be in harmony with nature. Buddhism emphasizes “Inn” and “Ko”. “Inn” is the cause; “Ko” is the effect. If people do many good or right things, they will have a better life in the future or the next life. In addition, whatever a person does may not only influence his/her destiny, but also affect his/her children and grandchildren (Ching, 1993).

Thus, traditional Chinese believe the strength of the family is based on the group and collectivism. In the traditional Chinese family a person should sacrifice his/her own personal interest if it is in conflict with what benefits the family as a whole. Therefore, the extended family is the most common family structure. Moreover, the Chinese value education very highly. But traditional Chinese people believe that a good woman should not be educated. She needs to stay at home to take care of all family members.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, industrization and urbanization have changed the structure of Taiwanese families. Changes have occurred in the economic, academic, political, and family structure. For instance, more young people and couple like to live independently, and women like to work rather than stay at home. These changes leave elders to live alone or be cared for by health services. Hence, Chinese elderly in Taiwan gradually feel that to obtain other’s respect, they should take care of themselves, learn new knowledge, respect and love their adult children, and assist with housework or family tasks. They also believe that doing housework and caring for others not only improves their physical health, but also brings self-worth and happiness (Chen, 1996a, 2001b)

Although the elderly perceived that self-care is important to earn other people's respect, they are more likely to be taken care of by their children when they get sick. According to MOI (2000), 30.40% of elderly who are aged over 65 stated that they are likely to be taken care of by their children when they are hospitalized. Forty seven percent of the elderly who are over 65 also stated that their financial supporters are their children. And 62.95% of people who are aged from 50 to 64 have a job to support themselves. Thus, life satisfaction among elderly decreased as age increased beyond 65 years of age. The reasons are
related to their sex, education, ethnicity, marital status, decrease income, living arrangement, and level of activity participation (Chen, 2001).

Therefore, results of economic growth and structural change in society. Taiwan in the past few years has significantly influenced Chinese values and the belief system evolution. These changes leave elders to live alone or to be cared for by health services. Elders do not like to live in nursing homes in Taiwan, because they perceive that they should be taken care of by their adult children and that a nursing home is an idle place for their life. They also believe that living in a nursing home in advanced years violates the traditional concept of family duty. It may mean "abandonment by children", "loss of personal life", "less respect from others", "sense of worthlessness" and "sense of uselessness". Thus, elders may not adjust well when they move to a nursing home. Consequently, the quality of life among elders living in nursing homes in Taiwan may be lower than the elderly living with their adult children or relatives.

On the other hand, American people place more emphasis on individualism. This may be help elders adjust to living in nursing homes better than Chinese elders. In addition, the population density and aged population in the US is lower than in Taiwan. For instance, the total population of the 50 states in the US is 281,421,906, and 12.4% were aged 65 and over in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). On the other hand, the total population in Taiwan was 2,216,700, and 8.5% were 65 and over in 2000 (MOI, 2002). Therefore, the elderly living in Taiwan have less space than elders in the US.

In addition, another reason for the adjustment difference between nursing homes residents in America and Taiwan may be relate to nursing home design. Nursing homes in America are designed to be more home like than nursing homes in Taiwan, which are designed to be more like hospitals.

**Conclusion**

People coming from different cultural backgrounds may have different perceptions about a single event. To take care of elderly people, health care providers need to sense understand that elders coming from different cultural backgrounds have different needs. The findings of this study contribute to knowledge of elders' daily life living in nursing homes by demonstrating differences and similarities between American and Chinese elders in Taiwan. Also, the study raises questions about the effects of institutional, professional and cultural factors on the disposition to care for elders. Therefore, to improve the quality of life among nursing homes elders in the future, health care providers in Taiwan need to recognize how the transitions affect elders' perceptions of aging and filial piety. Ultimately, health care providers may be able to provide better care for nursing home residents in Taiwan.

However, the present results were obtained from two nursing homes in two different cultures (Taiwan and United States). There are many similarities and dissimilarities in building constructions and organizations of nursing homes in the United States or Taiwan. Also, there are lots of diversity and commonalities between private nursing homes and public nursing homes. Thus, the nursing home were selected for data collection for this paper might not a standard representative for all nursing homes of both cultures. Those would be the major limitations of this study.

**Reference**


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編輯組

2004年4月1日慈濟大學護理學研究所徐南麗所長帶領畢業班研究生們與靜暄及明香兩位懿德媽媽共同相聚。這兩位媽咪可是非常用心的使出個人不同魅力。健談豪爽的靜暄媽咪著個人生活中『無子西瓜』的分享，幽默風趣的敘述她的一生，過程中充分展現出她在慈濟25年來的快樂及信心，發揮『帶動笑』效果，真是一位空間菩薩。『超優氣質』的明香媽咪，由『勿忘我』手語教學中，讓研究生孩子們體會上人法語，聯繫彼此之際的橋樑。兩位懿德媽媽一剛一柔堪稱絕配，她們共同勉研究生要將『知足、感恩、善解、包容』應用在生活中。『一切都是觀念，觀念會影響態度』，『縮小自己、表示誠懇』，『善解：善待別人，就是善待自己』。兩位懿德媽媽告訴研究生女兒們，每個人身上都有西瓜籽（計較、煩惱等），要試著在現今環境中改變自己，去除煩腦，也千萬記得『不要小看自己、因為人有無限的可能』，來勉勵研究生，精益求精，更上一層樓。

十年樹木，百年樹人。人才的培育除了老師外，懿德媽媽，也是勉勵研究生完成論文畢業的靈魂人物呢！
(左二為李明香媽媽，右三為無子西瓜作者紀靜暄媽媽)
居住於護理之家老人的生活：跨文化比較
The Elderly Living in Nursing Homes: Cross-Culture Comparison

張素嫺 方妙君

摘　要

本文的目的在於探討及比較居住於美國及台灣護理之家老人的生活情形。本文的作者運用人類學方法做為資料收集的方式；並觀察一間位於台灣及一間位於美國護理之家老人的生活情況；然後，做一個跨文化的比較。探討結果發現兩個文化中有一個共同主要主題，那就是對老人而言“護理之家是一個無聊的地方”。除此之外，在本文中也探討共同主要主題所包含的四大領域：包括護理之家周圍環境、住民的娛樂、隱私及自主權。在護理之家周圍環境領域包括兩個類型：內在環境與外在環境。兩個文化護理之家之外在環境雖有不同；但內在環境卻有些相同但也有些差異點。在居民的娛樂方面；兩個文化有許多相似點；但美國護理之家居民有較多活動的空間。而且；兩個文化的健康照護者都盡量尊重居民的隱私權及提供居民一些自主權；但是美國護理之家居民比台灣護理之家居民有較多自主權。總之；本文結果可提供對於居住於美國及台灣護理之家老人的生活情形相同及差異點的新知訊。並對於機構、專業人員及文化因素對護理之家老人的生活情形的影響提出些顧思。(慈濟護理雜誌, 2004；3:2, 41-49.)

關鍵語：護理之家、老人生活、跨文化比較。

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