

Research Report

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Title of Research: Cultural barriers to seeking help among Japanese older adults

Purpose of Research:

Many older adults do not seek help when they experience mental health problems, leading to delayed treatment and increased care costs (Arthur-Holmes et al., 2020; Blakemore et al., 2018). In Japan, cultural factors such as reputation concerns may prevent older adults from accessing both informal and formal help. While abundant literature has identified various determinants of help-seeking behaviors, less attention has been paid to the role of culture (Arnault et al., 2009), and much of the existing research has focused on Asian Americans (Kim and Lee, 2022). This cross-cultural design aims to advance our theoretical understanding of help-seeking behaviors by providing evidence in a global context. This study examines cultural factors that predict help-seeking among Japanese older adults through a large-scale survey and a cross-cultural comparison between Japan and the United States. The research has important implications for healthcare provision and policy, particularly in the context of global aging. Specifically, this project has two research aims: (1) to examine the cultural factors that influence help-seeking among Japanese older adults, and (2) to investigate factors that explain the lower help-seeking rates among Japanese older adults compared to their American older adults.

Content/Methodology of Research:

Two studies were conducted to address the research questions. Study 1 examined how reputation concern influences help-seeking attitudes among Japanese older adults using a large-scale survey. Study 2 investigated how reputation concern influences help-seeking intentions among Japanese older adults compared to Americans, using an online survey. American participants were included as a reference group to determine whether Japanese older adults are more reluctant to seek help from different sources and whether these effects can be explained by cultural values. Study 1 analyzed data from the Japan Gerontological Evaluation Study (JAGES), a longitudinal panel study of approximately 300,000 Japanese adults aged 65 or older across 40 municipalities. The focus was on the Module E questionnaire from the 2019 wave, with a sample size of 25,001. Among the respondents, 24.8% were aged 65 to 69, 30.5% were 70 to 74, 24.4% were 75 to 79, 13.9% were 80 to 84, and 6.4% were 85 and above. Using multilevel analysis, we found that reputation concern (i.e., “I am concerned about what the people in my neighborhood think of me.”; 1 = “Not at all,” 4 = “Very much”) predicted increased levels of psychological reluctance to seek help (i.e., “Do you feel embarrassed to talk to someone or ask for help when you are worried or stressed?”; 1 = “Disagree,” 4 = “Agree”) at both the individual and community levels. We also found that reputation concern predicted higher levels of depression, as measured by the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS-15; Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$). In other words, when older adults are concerned about their reputation or live in communities where people generally worry about others' reputations, they tend to be less likely to seek support and exhibit worse mental health. Study 2 examined how reputation concern influences help-seeking intentions among Japanese individuals compared to Americans using an online survey. We collected data through crowdsourcing platforms (Lancers in Japan and Prolific in the U.S.). We found that Japanese participants were less likely to seek both emotional support (i.e., asking a friend to listen to their worries) and instrumental support (i.e., asking a friend to help them pack and relocate) compared to Americans ($r = .38$ for emotional support; $r = .23$ for instrumental support). As predicted, these tendencies were further explained by cross-cultural differences in the concern about being rejected by others ($r = .26$ for emotional support; $r = .29$ for instrumental support).

Conclusion/Observation

As predicted, this study showed that concerns about reputation are a significant cultural factor hindering help-seeking

among Japanese older adults. These findings enhance cross-cultural understanding of how people from different cultures cope with distress or daily difficulties by clarifying the cultural elements that prevent older adults in Japan and the U.S. from seeking support. The findings also provide insights into how practitioners can facilitate help-seeking behaviors using culturally sensitive approaches. By identifying influential cultural barriers to help-seeking, the study contributes to the development of interventions and programs that address these barriers and promote better mental health for older adults in Japan. Future research should focus on developing effective methods to counteract cultural barriers to help-seeking among Japanese older adults.