

Un-Autobiographical Autobiographies: Investigating the Life-stories of Ten Elderly Nisei
Christian Women at a Local Japanese American Church

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Purpose and the Method of Research

Japanese-American people in the United States have encountered numerous challenges and difficulties before, during, and after World War II, including the wartime internment and other types of racial discrimination that are unique to their ethnic community. Historical as well as social aspects of their experiences have been well documented by historians and anthropologists. However, the spiritual aspects of the Japanese-American experience have not been fully investigated. This research was conducted in an attempt to reveal how the struggles of the Japanese-American communities have been impacting the spirituality of elderly Japanese-American women in certain contexts, both individually and collectively. "Spirituality," however, is a difficult term to define. The White House Conference on Aging, held in 1971 in Washington D. C., wrestled with the term "spirituality." Several definitions

were presented to allow for a better grasp of the term. Members of the conference used various definitions: a person's ultimate concern, a person's basic value, a central philosophy of life, and supernatural and nonmaterial dimensions of human nature (Thilbaut, 351). In the end the conference announced that "all persons are spiritual, even if they have no use for religious institutions and practice no personal pieties" (Thilbaut). Still, the term "spirituality" or "spirit" means different things to different people. Therefore, rather than rigidly defining the term at outset of the research, the participants were encouraged to freely define the term for themselves.

In thinking about research alternatives and method choices in studying a group of people, there are two ways a researcher can approach the subject. One is a quantitative approach and the other qualitative. A quantitative approach requires the use of "standardized measure so that the varying perspectives and experiences of people can be fit into a limited number of predetermined response categories to which numbers are assigned" (Patton, 14). One of the advantages of this approach is that it is possible to evaluate the feedback of a large number of people, using a limited set of very specific questions. A quantitative approach, in general, gives a broader and more general picture of reality. A qualitative approach, on the other hand, produces results not arrived at by statistical procedures or other ways of quantification. This method can approach the field of research "without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis," thus contributing "to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry" (Patton). This approach produces rich and detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases; however, one is dependent on the ability and the skill of individual researchers. A specific issue here is which approach, quantitative or qualitative, can bring about the results that most accurately reflect the lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings of elderly Japanese-American Christian women. Since "qualitative methods are descriptive, discovery-oriented, language based, and address the meaning of human experiences," they therefore are most sensitive and appropriate to the investigation of "various types of meaning in life (personal, experiential, social, cultural) and existential topics that center on spirituality and religiosity" (Reker, 577). I, as a researcher, strongly believe that a qualitative approach is the most appropriate method for studying this group of people and this topic.

The research also employs a method of phenomenology. Phenomenology, as a theory of qualitative inquiry, is fundamentally concerned with the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a person or group of people. A phenomenological study, therefore, focuses on descriptions of what a person or a group of people experience and how it is possible that they experience what they have experienced (Patton). The "grounded theory,"

which was also used in this study, takes the approach of phenomenology one step further and focuses on the emerging theories from systematic comparative analysis, which is grounded in fieldwork (Patton). Perhaps grounded theory is most accurately described as a research method in which the theory is developed from the data, rather than the other way around (Straus & Cobin). Therefore, the first and foremost purpose of this research is to attempt to build a meaningful and reliable theory based on the fieldwork among elderly Japanese-American women, which focuses on their spirituality, and which could make a significant contribution to the Japanese-American community and the larger society.

A group of elderly Japanese-American women from a Japanese-American Christian church in Orange County, California was chosen as research subjects. It is a church with over a hundred years of history and is attended by over four-hundred Japanese-Americans. From these about sixty are considered in this study: they are elderly women in their late sixties or older. In order to further limit the participation according to the purpose of this research, six conditions were applied to potential participants: 1) each participant must be a female; 2) she must have been born in the United States; 3) she must have been born to Japanese parents; 4) she must have lived in the United States for most of her life; 5) she must be over 65 years old; and 6) she must acknowledge herself as a religious person for most of her life. I feel a bit awkward labeling all those who are over the age of sixty-five “elderly” because many of them, especially those who are in their sixties and in their early seventies, are very healthy and active. Aging actually begins at different points in one’s lifespan and there are many different indicators of aging, such as biological, psychological, or social age. Chronological years are relatively poor markers of normal aging, since some people are “old” at fifty-five, whereas others are “young” at seventy-five (Woodruff-Pak, 13). However, it is also true that the commonly accepted age at which the term “aged” or “elderly” begins to apply has been at the age of sixty-five in the United States, and is usually connected with the common retirement age. The term “elderly” used in this research, therefore, only refers to the person’s chronological age and nothing else.

By limiting the parameters of participation to these specifications, one is reasonably assured that the participants are: 1) elderly Japanese-American women who have experienced the war-related difficulties (not all Japanese-Americans were interned, but all were discriminated against during and after the war in one way or another); 2) elderly Japanese-American women who are able to make comments on their spirituality or religion; and 3) elderly Japanese-American women who are facing (and perhaps currently experiencing) age-related limitations and difficulties.

A variety of qualitative data focused on their past and present life as well as their

religious beliefs and activities was gathered with the use of triangulation method. This included standardized open-ended interviews, observation, and comparison of people's behavior both in public and in private, as well as observation of naturally-occurring social interactions in their own religious community. Standardized open-ended interviews were conducted on ten willing elderly women who agreed to be interviewed. Interview participants were required to sit through approximately two hours of an in-depth interview and to have reasonable cognitive ability to recall their past, talk about their present life, and discuss their future. Thirteen pre-determined open-ended questions were asked, ranging from their war-time recollections, joys, and difficulties in their present life to their view of God.

Observation 1

It is very interesting to observe that although the language of the research participants is English, several Japanese words were used often in the context of conversations concerning the health issues. The most often-used word by many was "shikataganai" and "gaman." The word "shikataganai" means, "it cannot be helped" in Japanese. It is a common word in Japanese and is usually used in the context of facing difficulties that are very hard to overcome. The word was used in a conversation this way: "It is very difficult for me to walk a long distance." "Shikataganai. You are old." The word "gaman" means patience or endurance. It was often used in a verb form "gaman-suru," or in the form of command "gaman-shinasai," meaning "be patient." Conversations such as, "I have a lot of pain in my legs. Gaman-shinasai!" took place between many seniors.

Being Japanese, I was really puzzled to hear so often, out of so many Japanese words, these words that are very pessimistic in nature. However, after having examined many research papers on the topic of Japanese-American history, I have learned that these exact words have been documented in the context of the Japanese internment and war-related difficulties. In fact, most books on Japanese-American history list these Japanese words in their subject indexes. Some authors explain that these words show the often pessimistic and docile attitude of Japanese people who did not put up much resistance in the midst of immense social injustice during World War II (Harth). Others see these words as a testimony to the patience and the endurance of Japanese immigrants displayed by many in overcoming the difficulties and the challenges that plagued their community over the years (Kitano). Yet others, especially those with a psychological viewpoint, explain these expressions as a part of Japanese people's psychological defense mechanism for enduring hardships (Matsushima).

Observation 2

Another observation, which really stood out to me, was the expression of hospitality. Most interviews took place at the participants' homes. Most women were very hospitable, and this coincided with traditional Japanese culture. However, the expressions of hospitality varied and I saw an emerging pattern, which corresponded with the problem of the participants' openness.

Those participants who repeatedly declined to participate in the study were mostly concerned with the appropriateness of what they offered (food or drink) to me at their homes. Several of them asked if the way in which they prepared tea was good enough for me. One said, "The way I make the tea is probably not the right way." She said this knowing that I am a Japanese national who grew up in Japan. It seems that somehow many women felt growing up in the United States as a Japanese was inferior to growing up in Japan. And those women who were very concerned with the appropriateness of what they offered to me were also very concerned about their performance as interviewees. Most of them asked me if they did a good job in the interview and if they was helpful.

Putting the above observations together as a pattern of behavior, the refusal to participate on the part of many elderly Japanese-American women may have to do with their self-confidence or self-esteem.

Problem of Openness

The first pattern that became readily apparent from the research was the refusal to participate. When they were asked to take part in a project many agreed to participate. However, as soon as they came to a realization that the researcher will be asking many in-depth questions concerning their personal spiritual life and religious views, the majority of them declined to participate in this study. It may be true that many Japanese-American women tend to be very shy and are inclined to stay away from public exposure, which perhaps comes from their cultural upbringing. However, many women who were active participants in various church activities, even many who were in leadership positions among women at the church, refused (always very politely) to participate. So this behavior of refusal cannot simply be attributed to their shyness.

This refusal to participate in this study was often connected to their refusal to value their own opinions and experiences. In declining to be interviewed many women said, "I have nothing to tell." Many others stated, "I will not be a good interviewee." Others said, "My life is not that interesting." Again, many women who were in leadership positions among women at the church refused to value their opinions and experiences.

This pattern of refusal continued into the interviews. Many elderly women who, after many phone calls and encouragements, participated in the interview, refused to name the difficulties and challenges in their lives. Two women refused outright, saying, “I have (and had) no difficulties in my life.” Many others changed the subject and explained their family members’ difficulties and challenges rather than their own.

Many also refused to be critical or refused to pass judgments on the authority, namely the U.S. government, which inflicted so much pain in their lives, especially during WWII. Most women did not even use such terms as “injustice” or “unfairness” to describe the predicament they were forced into during the war.

Many women also refused to show emotional expressions, other than smiles and laughter. Only two women cried during the interview. Though the interviews were not psychological counseling sessions and were not designed to dig deep into the psyche of the participants, many answers often included long-suffering illnesses and the death of spouses, which are usually considered highly emotional topics. Several women even showed the opposite emotional reactions: some were smiling as they continued to explain the long battle with cancer and the circumstances surrounding the passing of their husbands. I am not a trained psychologist but seeing a smile on the face of an interviewee as she explained the death of her husband was a peculiar sight.

Layer upon layer of refusals really characterize most of the participants’ behavior and interview answers. I saw this as a silence on the part of many elderly Japanese-American women.

Interpretation and Interpretative Tools

What led many elderly Japanese-American women in this study to deny their self-significance and lose their self-confidence? Did they choose to withdraw themselves in order to cope with life’s difficulties or did some external force silence them? And what are the implications of their silence?

Before diving into the interpretation phase of this research, I will now discuss how certain interpretative tools shaped this study. I chose three different groups of theorists in interpreting the silence of the researched women. I will briefly examine each of the theorists and their theoretical frameworks.

The collaborating authors of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* published an influential study in 1986. Like Gilligan they were motivated by the absence of women in developmental psychology, both in the theory-making position and as research subjects (Bkenkey, Clinchy, Goldberg & Tarule, 1997). In this study, the researchers interviewed over one hundred

women in order to understand women's cognitive styles. From this empirical data, the book described five different characteristics in women's knowing. The focus of this work is principally in the area of developing for women a means of gaining a greater sense of self.

Traise Yamamoto teaches at the University of California, Riverside. She is a professor of English who specializes in Asian-American literary and cultural studies, in poetry, race and gender theory, and in autobiographical studies. In 1999, she wrote a book titled *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese-American Women, Identity, and Their Body* (Yamamoto). Through an examination of post-World War II autobiographical writings, fiction, and poetry, Yamamoto argues that many Japanese women writers have employed a kind of defense mechanism by masking themselves textually as well as psychologically as subjects. She also looks at how the West has sexualized, infantilized, and feminized Japanese culture for over a century in a very damaging manner.

Carol Lakey Hess is a practical theologian who teaches at the Claremont School of Theology as a professor of Religious Education and at Claremont Graduate University as a professor of Religion. In 1997, she published a book titled, *Caretakers of Our Common House: Women's Development In Communities Of Faith*. Writing from an explicitly feminist perspective and employing Gilligan and Kegan's theories, she provides an account of the ways American society can conspire to weaken the full development of women and their spirituality. She also encourages communities of faith to create environments in which women can find their own voices as expressions of their authentic selves through "hard dialogues and deep connections" (Hess, 209).

Therefore, three distinct perspectives are used to provide the interpretative framework for this study: the developmental psychological perspective of the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing*, the literary analysis of Yamamoto in the field of Asian Women's Studies, and the feminist theology of Hess.

Oppression Causes Women to Become Silent

I found that the several women described as "silent" in the book *Women's Ways of Knowing* were strikingly similar to the silent women in this study in several aspects. Silent women in the book had a very difficult time describing themselves. They devalued themselves and did not trust their own abilities to think and understand. They were also almost blindly dependent on authorities (Bkenkey, Clinchy, Goldberg & Tarule, 25). There was, however, much dissimilarity. Silent women who were described in the book were very young, uneducated, and poor. They also experienced much domestic violence with very little social support from their family or community (Bkenkey, Clinchy, Goldberg & Tarule, 28).

Silent Japanese women in this study are elderly, well-educated, economically secure, and have very loving family members and a community to which they belong. So if it was not the age, education, economic status, or domestic violence that pushed those Japanese women to their silence, what did? Authors of the book concluded that some women become silent as a result of oppressive influences in their lives. Four examples of oppressive influences were named: poverty, isolation, violence and extreme sex-role stereotypes (Bkenkey, Clinchy, Goldberg & Tarule, 32). Out of those four oppressive influences, although in different forms compared to those the young women experienced, I believe that silent Japanese women have experienced three: namely, isolation, violence and extreme sex-role stereotypes. But before naming those influences, I will examine another empirical researcher's perspective on the issue of silence.

Traise Yamamoto, in her groundbreaking work on Japanese women's subjectivity *Masking Selves, Making Subjects*, which reviews autobiographies of many Japanese-American women, observed that "Nisei women's autobiographies are frustratingly un-biographical, not given to personal disclosure or passages of intimate self-reflection" (Yamamoto, 103). Yamamoto repeatedly points out the instances of the lack of emotion or the hiding of self in many Japanese elderly women's autobiographies. As a result she reveals that in the American literary circles Japanese women's autobiographies are not taken as self-revealing narratives that the autobiographies often are, but are "mostly recognized as sociological and/or historical documents and taken at face value" (Yamamoto, 104). I see similarities in Yamamoto's description of elderly Japanese women's autobiographies and the silent participants of this study. Although those women who wrote their autobiographies thought of their experience and its documentation as very important, they did not see themselves as important subjects. Many silent elderly Japanese women in this study also seemed often emotionally detached from their selves and devalued their personal experiences. Yamamoto, although much younger, being a Japanese woman herself, draws attention to negative imageries that were forced on the Japanese women as oppressive influences that made them the way they are. One influence comes from traditional Japanese imagery of quiet, selfless, and hardworking wife/mother. The other comes from American sexual stereotypes (Yamamoto, 172). So both Yamamoto and the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing*, coming from a developmental perspective and from a literary criticism standpoint respectively, indicate from their empirical data the strong connection between oppressive influences in women's lives and women's becoming silent.

In her writing *Women and Men in the Social Order*, feminist Christian theologian Mary Elizabeth Moore also named the two most devastating oppressions of women. One was

poverty and the other was also violence (Moor, 1989, 71). She stated that many North American women (as well as those from other parts of the world) are constantly exposed to these types of oppressions. I believe that sexist attitudes as well as ageism are also forms of psychologically violent oppressive influences that plague many elderly American women.

I theorize that most elderly Japanese-American women in this study did not choose to be silent, but were silenced by oppressive influences that they encountered during their life's journey. I am also naming it a 'spiritual silence' since many were silenced from expressing and addressing human being's most basic concerns, such as one's self-worth and one's central philosophy of life. Spiritual silence is not a harmless characteristic in a person but produces many negative consequences in one's life, such as isolation, self-hatred and depression. These consequences are especially harmful to many elderly persons who are facing difficult challenges that are related to our normal aging process, such as loss of companionship or loss of physical and mental abilities.

I now name five oppressive influences that plagued or are currently plaguing the female participants of this study and that are unique to the experiences of elderly Japanese-American women, influences that are quite possibly responsible for making them more silent than many silent women in the United States.

(1) Racism as an Oppressive Influence on Japanese-American Women

The first and most obvious oppressive influence on many Japanese-American women was the racism that they endured before, during, and after WWII. All of the research participants encountered numerous challenges and difficulties including the wartime internment and other types of racial discrimination (in one way or another). It is probably not necessary to describe their experience in detail at this time, but this oppressive influence most likely affected both Japanese-American women and men, making many become silent.

(2) Traditional Japanese Culture as an Oppressive Influence on Japanese-American Women

The second oppressive influence that is unique to most elderly Japanese-American women came from Japan's traditional culture of male dominance. Many Japanese immigrants from the 1800s and early 1900s were exposed to this principle. Traise Yamamoto names "strictures and demand of domesticity" upon Japanese immigrant women, which are rooted in Japanese cultural traditions that placed women in that society of lower class citizens, as oppressive silencing factors (Yamamoto, 172). Perhaps the moral treatises called the "Onna Daigaku" which was created especially for the Samurai woman in 1672, can serve as a great example of what Yamamoto was expressing. Kaibara Ekken, who wrote these treatises, was

one of most vigorous proponents of intellectual training of women in his era and taught women to deny their desires. According to Kaibara, a woman has no particular Lord. She must look to her husband as her lord and must serve him with all worship and reverence, not despising or thinking lightly of him. The great life-long duty of a woman is obedience (Kaibara). A woman must be obedient not only to her parents but also to her husband and to her son in her widowhood. Therefore, education for women was focused on becoming a good wife and a good educator of her children. Perhaps the attitude of that era towards women can be condensed in one famous quote from a Japanese Samurai leader, Sadanobu Matsudaira. He said, “When women are learned and clever in their speech, it is a sign that disturbance is not far off ” (Dore, 66). Parents of most elderly Japanese-American women in this study were born and grew up in Japan during the last part of the Samurai era. In fact, it became apparent during the interviews that most of their parents, as well as their childhood communities in general, held very a low view or esteem of women.

(3) Stereotypical Images of Japanese women in the United States as an Oppressive Influence on Japanese-American Women

The third oppressive influence comes from racist, stereotypical images of Japanese women promulgated by many Americans throughout the 20th century. The book *Women's Ways of Knowing* also names “extreme sex-role stereotypes” as a form of oppression that influences the silent women (Bkenkey, Clinchy, Goldberg & Tarule, 29). It is useful to examine this unique oppressive influence at some length.

There are several distinct stereotypical images of Japanese women that have become accepted by many Americans over the years, which have also greatly affected the lives of Japanese women in the United States. The first and most popular imagery of Japanese women is the sensual geisha girl who is devoted to men (Kuzuma). Since Japan had no diplomatic relationship with the outside world for over 200 years, when it was introduced to the West merely a century ago it was done in a way to arouse people's curiosity. Japan was often described as a land of enchantment with strange dresses and customs. When Japanese women were introduced to the world many writers emphasized the quiet and submissive character of Japanese women, which partly came from years of oppressive, male-dominant teachings. This description, coupled with the imagery of geisha girls, quickly sexualized Japanese women. This 'sexualization' of Japanese women spread to the other women from Asia. Soon, most of them were thrown into an “undifferentiated pool of Asian women whose (assumed or enforced) foreignness and physical exoticism promise a range of delights” (Yamamoto, 65). They were often seen as submissive, yet sexually active. In popular American novels, plays,

and films, Asian women have been, for decades and decades, perpetrated as: Geisha Girl, Lotus Blossom, China Doll, Madame Butterfly, and Dragon Lady (66).

The second image of Japanese women is the helpless, heathen women oppressed by Japanese men and culture who need to be saved by enlightened American men. On top of very sexualized imagery of Japanese women, they have begun to be seen as women who need to be rescued from unenlightened, Japanese culture and oppressive men. A beautiful Japanese heroine, who suffered greatly under an oppressive society, was rescued by a gallant Western lover who treats women with gentleness. This type of imagery has also been repeatedly portrayed in American media even to this day.

What motivates American society, or to be more precise American men, to hang on to this type of imagery of Japanese and Asian women to this day? Yamamoto attributes this to a misguided yet widespread belief that Asian women have “somehow been untouched by decades of social and political feminism” (66). Asian women are seen as “cute (as in doll-like), quiet rather than militant, and unassuming rather than assertive (except sexually), as well as more feminine, loyal, and loving” (Lai, 163). This image of Asian women does in fact show more about the uncertain masculinity and low self-esteem of American men than anything else (Yamamoto, 67). But at the same time, this imagery and ostensible popularity of Asian women by American men has caused some American women to hold negative views of Asian women in thinking of them as an uncultured and unrefined group of women who need to be enlightened by American culture and feminism.

In spite of all this visibility as sexual and exotic objects, Asian-American women, including Japanese-American women, “remain invisible as subjects, within both dominant disclosure and much feminist disclosure” (67).

(4) Ageism as an Oppressive Influence on Japanese-American Women

The fourth oppressive influence is that of ageism. Ageism can be defined as “any attitude, action, or institutional structure that subordinates a person or group because of age or any assignment of roles in society purely on the basis of age” (Traxler, 4). American society has been described as maintaining a stereotypic and often negative perception of older adults (Busse). This negative and/or stereotypical perception of aging and aged individuals is readily apparent in such areas as language, media, and humor. And one of most psychologically damaging effect of ageism is that “it diminishe[s] elderly persons’ self-concept” (Woolf).

Feminist researcher Martha Larson contends that ageism also is “at root, more devastating for women than for men” (Larsen, 242). She speaks of a double-standard that is

more permissive about aging in men. It is especially apparent in our society's tolerance towards the sexual infidelities of husbands (243). Therefore, as aged individuals living in the United States, participants of this study have most likely been affected by ageism, even more so than their spouses. And I believe that their experience during WWII has also greatly amplified this problem.

Traditionally, Japanese society valued the older generation. It was one of the most important filial virtues to honor fathers and mothers, no matter how old they were. However, this traditional notion was drastically altered during the internment experience of WWII. Due to WRA (Wartime Relocation Authority) policy, the positions of responsibility inside the campgrounds were only allowed to be held by those of U.S. citizenship. This usually meant that the younger "Nisei" or the second generation Japanese occupied the place of importance, whereas the older generation was left out (Fong, 59). For many young Japanese-Americans in the internment camps, it may have been a common sight for their fathers and mothers to pass time doing immaterial work around their barracks, whereas they and their friends spent time running the camp. Seeing how the older generation was undervalued when they were young, many Japanese-American women in their old age may also tend to devalue themselves in their old age.

This tendency of devaluing aged persons also became evident during the observation of the study participants. When declining to participate in this study many elderly women told me to ask the younger people of the church to interview because "they would make better participants." I have also observed a tendency to connect the larger presence of younger people with a healthier church. It is generally recognized in many churches that the presence of all generations is more desirable. However, the participants' attitudes toward valuing younger people was often accompanied by self-loathing comments such as, "I am too old and not interesting."

(5) Implicit and Null Curriculum at the Church as Oppressive Influences on Elderly Japanese-American Women

The fifth oppressive influence may be unique to the Japanese-American women participants of the study who attended this Christian church in California. According to *Women's Ways of Knowing*, the silenced women relate to authority as being all-powerful and overpowering (Bkenkey, Clinchy, Goldberg & Tarule, 27). This study also points out that silenced women "see blind obedience to authorities as being of utmost importance for keeping out of trouble and insuring their own survival" (27). This reminds me of many silent women from the interviews who characterized the government as well as their God as

absolute and unchanging. During the interviews, those women acknowledged that they do not, in some of their words, “study the Bible to know much about God” but that they “trust in him.” Collaborative researchers of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* also uncovered that for silenced women “trying to know ‘why’ is not thought to be either particularly possible or important” (28).

So what caused the participants of this study to become who they are? I see the church (the church that these women belong to) as another cause of an oppressive influence. Did this church explicitly teach an authoritarian view of God, or a sexist view of God, or that God created women second because they are inferior to men, or did it discourage women to know God? Had some teachings occurred using phrases such as: “Women should never assume leadership position over men,” or “Women should always submit to the Bible’s authority and never question it in any way?” I, although cannot speak for the entire history of the church, during my observation at this church, did not see the evidence of that. However, I recognized through the course of my research implicit ways in which the church taught and encouraged women to be silent.

Maria Harris, in her work titled *Completion of Faith Development*, named three ways of teaching and learning: the explicit, the implicit, and the null. The implicit curriculum is the organizational structure and the rules of participating (Harris, 123). What does the organizational structure of this church teach women? I observed that the church’s leadership positions, the pastors as well as the elders, were occupied only by men. Even the leadership of church’s senior group, in which the ratio of women to men is 7 to 1, was also occupied by men. “The implicit curriculum deals with patterns of authority, criteria for decision making ... who has the power and who really is the boss” (Jackson, 32). Through these implicit ways of learning many women at the church were taught for many years to submit to male authority.

The null curriculum, or what is not taught, also sends powerful messages according to Maria Harris. What bewildered me during my observations at this church was a lack of discussion concerning cultural identities issues as well as gender issues. What do these implicit and null curriculums at this church teach if not the silence of women?

I mentioned that I encountered layer upon layer of refusals before and during my interviews. I now see that the deafening silence of many elderly Japanese-American women was caused by layer upon layer of oppressive influences that they have encountered during their lifelong spiritual journeys, including their experience at this particular religious community.

(6) The Researcher as a Cause of Women's Silence

Lastly, a point that I feel very strongly about making is that I may be to blame for the silence of many elderly Japanese-American women during the interviews. From the outset of this study I have recognized that in any type of qualitative inquiry, and especially for a research utilizing grounded theory, the researcher plays an important role in observing people's experiences. As a Japanese citizen, I may have, unknowingly, represented the traditional Japanese culture and/or religious culture and how it treats women. As a male I may have, unwittingly, symbolized different types of sexism that they have encountered. And as a religious educator I may have, unintentionally, embodied the authoritarian teachings in which they have been immersed. In retrospect, I may well have been the most significant silencing factor of this study and caused many silent elderly Japanese-American women to be even more silent. Although I have seen many qualitative studies on elderly Japanese-American women conducted by women researchers and yielding similar results to those at which I have arrived, I wonder if the outcome of this study may have been somewhat different if the researcher were a woman.

Future Considerations

Having seen the ways in which many elderly Japanese-American women's spiritual openness has been deeply influenced by their life experiences as well as by their religious encounters, and having also seen how one's spiritual silence predictably and unavoidably brings about many negative consequences, there is now one very crucial question remaining: how can an elderly Japanese-American women of this study gain, or in some cases regain, her spiritual openness? Obviously, it is not impossible to erase their painful past; nor is it reasonable to expect immediate and drastic changes to occur in our society that would turn away from racism and sexism. However, I feel strongly and passionately that Japanese-American churches can be used as vehicles to bring about positive changes in the lives of many oppressed and silenced elderly Japanese-American women.

I was very disturbed and concerned to learn through this study that a Japanese-American church may very well have, and most likely unknowingly, caused the study participants to become more silent spiritually. That is diametrically opposed to what I hope and desire Japanese-American churches to be. Churches, and especially this particular church, must always be critically reflective of their teachings and influences, both explicitly and implicitly. What, then, are some ways in which Japanese-American churches can change and provide opportunities for their own silent women to achieve positive changes in their lives?

During the course of this research, as mentioned earlier, the Japanese word “gaman” repeatedly emerged among the group of English-speaking elderly Japanese-American women. The word is usually translated as “selfless patience.” This word was often mentioned when they were talking about their wartime experiences or their illnesses. The word “gaman” seemed to be used as a virtuous action or an attitude to endure different challenges. Most of them felt that they had to “gaman” in order to be a good Japanese daughter, a Japanese wife, or a Japanese mother. I also felt that most of them believed that “gaman” makes them better churchgoers. The problem that I see here is not so much that this word was used often by many elderly Japanese-American women, for it is a very popular word which appears in many conversations between Japanese persons regardless of their age, gender or religion; the problem I see here is that the word is being used by many churchgoers without awareness that “gaman” is different from the Christian virtue of selfless endurance. Denying one’s self in Christianity means to abandon one’s sinful nature that is filled with worldly malice and unfairness, but at the same time to fill one’s self with divine values of hope, love and justice. In my opinion, the Christian scripture does not tell us to deny one’s self completely, but to love and accept one’s self. Churches should not allow the term “gaman” to flourish among the churchgoers, especially among those who have been oppressed, where it unintentionally encourages many women to endure their pains and sufferings blindly.

Japanese-American churches must also encourage women’s participation in various leadership positions to avoid implicit and null curriculums that discourage them from being open spiritually. They should go even further and provide an environment in which elderly Japanese-American women can gather to freely and safely express their concerns and pains in life, and have them heard, in order to bring about healing and sense of peace into their lives. Again, it is my sincere hope that the Japanese-American churches become places of providing life-changing opportunities for many oppressed and silenced women to experience spiritual healing.

Although I am unable to make further detailed practical suggestions at this time, as a researcher, I also see a great need in accumulating more data through different means of observations to make more analyses and interpretations concerning the spirituality of elderly Japanese-Americans and that of other oppressed Asian-American elderly people in our society. This is done not just to help them but also to learn from those who have endured so much. And as a researcher in the field of religion, I also see a great need for more religious/theological dialogues based on the lived experiences in order for caring religious communities, especially churches, to make a difference in the lives of elderly persons as well as in the lives of others.

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