

ASA award winner probes the emotional, cognitive mysteries of choice

By **Alison Biggar**

P*i-Ju (Marian) Liu is ASA's 2011 Graduate Student Research Award winner. This award is given to spur academic and clinical interest in the field of aging, and rewards the best unpublished graduate research paper on a completed project relevant to aging and applicable to practice. Liu received the award for her work on the study, Do Older Adults Prefer Less Choice? The Impact of Personal Importance, Adequacy of Options, and Emotional Regulation, at the 2011 Aging in America Conference in San Francisco, Calif.*

Marian Liu lived with her parents and her father's parents in her native Taiwan, and says that while her grandparents watched her grow up, she, in turn, watched them grow old. As they aged from their 50s into their 80s, they were a continuous influence on her life and career.

Liu did her undergraduate studies in Taiwan as an English Literature major, but didn't like her "only option" of becoming an English teacher. Since both literature and psychology focus on people, she switched to psychology for graduate school. As a way of exploring her new specialty, she began volunteering in a local adult daycare center.

She expected the facility to "be miserable—but it wasn't." Instead Liu found the social workers to be lively, optimistic and grateful—a way of being that was shared by the elders at the center.

"Going in there I didn't understand the wisdom of older adults—how do they perceive life? It's like a journey, where each little setback does not affect their well-being," Liu said. She volunteered for two years, and from that experience decided upon gerontology as her specialty within psychology. Liu admits she was looking for the secret to how elders lived their lives with such gratitude.

Exploring Older Adult Cognition

In 2008, Liu began graduate school at Southern California's Claremont Graduate University, conveniently situated in a town peopled by retired older adults.

"In general, I'm interested in the decision-making process of older adults, and how cognitive and emotional factors come into play," said Liu.

To that end, Liu and her advisor, Scripps associate professor of psychology Dr. Stacey Wood, conducted a study on whether more or fewer choices are optimal when older adults need to make decisions. "Previous research said that older adults prefer less choice, so my research was built upon that," Liu said.

Liu's and Wood's research compared choice preference between older adults (older than 65) to younger adults (18 to 64). No matter what kind of decision is involved, older adults prefer to have fewer options from which to choose. Echoing previous research, their study found that even for something as complex as Medicare, older adults really only want six to seven options.

Younger adults, on the other hand, prefer up to 30 choices when it's an important decision like buying a car (or selecting healthcare), but if they don't care as much about the outcome, six to seven choices can suffice.

"We tried to examine underlying mechanisms of why this is the case, and our hypothesis supported that with younger people's cognitive abilities, such as working memory [and] processing speed—they're better than elders in all those abilities—and because of this higher level of processing information faster, they can remember more information from websites ... during their research," Liu said about her research findings.

It's the opposite for elders, and there are multiple theoretical implications. "When you apply this to aspects of eldercare, say you're trying to revise Medicare, most policy makers are younger, they don't have Medicare prescriptions, and they assume more is better," Liu said. "But older adults would prefer it to be simpler, with fewer choices. 'Just give us fewer choices,' is what they're saying."

Although Liu's thesis is, as she says, "just a small piece of a bigger project in the lab," and yet to be published, Wood and Drs. Thomas Rice and Yaniv Hanoach have published several articles on the project, and a congressional report from 2009 (cms.gov/prescriptiondrugcovgenin/pdr/itemdetail.asp?itemid=CMS1230359) cited their line of research on choices as evidence toward reforming the healthcare system.

Said Liu, "My ultimate goal is to see how to make elders happy, so that hopefully all policy decisions don't end up making things worse."

Taking the Research Further

With their study in the seeking-a-publisher stage, Liu and Wood have continued their research, extrapolating their findings to another topic area: financial elder abuse.

"Because Medicare options have been causing scams, and fraud, we're now looking at financial elder abuse. What are the mechanisms under that? Trust, financial capacity, declining cognitive abilities, what is allowing it to happen?" Liu asked.

In their initial research, Liu and Wood have learned that elder financial exploitation often involves a broad, complex spectrum of causes and perpetrators. "Dr. Wood and I are investigating risk factors of financial elder abuse, and I want to, further, take a new spin on that and explore protective factors among financial elder abuse cases." ■

*Alison Biggar is senior editor of **Aging Today**.*