Self-Concept Among the Older People in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Self-concept, which is sometimes referred to as self-esteem, is a difficult concept to measure. There are various items and domains can be used to measure the concept. This study sought to analyze self-concept among the elderly residents in old folk’s home, Malaysia. Using a non-probability sampling technique, a total of 203 elderly residents in nine old folk’s home nationwide were selected. Self-concept in this study refers to the score the elderly obtained as response from ten items asked to them on a five-point scale in which “1” stood for “strongly disagree” and “5” stood for “strongly agree”. Data of this study demonstrates that the majority of the elderly have a moderate level of self-concept. It is very important for the authority in old folk’s home to do something to improve self-concept of these elderly residents.

Key words: Self-concept; self-esteem; self-identity; elderly; senior citizens

Introduction

This paper is about older people in Malaysia. Until recently the number as well as the percentage of older people in Malaysia are still small. Although the percentage of older person in Malaysia is still small, but it is recorded that Malaysia has also shown signs of population ageing. In 1970, thirteen years after Malaysia gained independent (1957), the number of older population was 539,118. That was only 5.2% of the total population of Malaysia at that time. Ten years later (1980) this figure has increased to 745,152 (5.7%). In 2000, the percentage was still not exceeded 7%, and it is projected that there will be 3,216,000 older persons aged 60 years and older by 2020 with the percentage is around 11.3%. There are some indicators that can reflect the ageing of population in Malaysia. First, the median age is getting higher and higher. The median age is the age that divides the distribution of the population into two equal parts, where half of the population is below this age, and the other half is above it. The higher the median age means the greater the number of the older persons. The median age increased by over seven years between 1985 and 2020, from 19.6 years to 27.1 years, indicating that the population in Malaysia is shown sign of ageing. Old age dependency ratios and old age index are two more indicators of population ageing. Old age dependency refers to the ratio of persons aged 60 years and over per working persons (aged 15 – 59) per 100 persons, while old age index refers to the ratio of persons aged 60 years and over to the number of persons aged 0 – 14 years per 100 persons. These two indicators are projected to increase significantly indicating that the Malaysia has also shown signs of population ageing.

Following the growing number of older people in recent years, research about the older people is becoming an important agenda in academic milieu. Despite a large number of studies to explore the daily life of older people in Malaysia, the nature of self-concept of the older population living in old folk’s home is still relatively unexamined. Very sparse information is available about the nature of self-concept of the older population. Many questions about the self-concept of this population remain unanswered, whilst there is an increasing demand to understand self-concept in recent years. In an attempt to fill the gap, this paper therefore aims at analyzing the self-concept of older persons living in old folk’s home, Malaysia. Self-concept has long been a subject and received a widespread research attention. The self-concept in general is a term used to refer to how we think about and evaluate ourselves. While there are many studies focusing on the self-concept in Malaysia, most of the empirical studies are concentrated on teenage and adolescence. This study attempts to offer a different perspective by focusing on the self-concept amongst the elderly residents in the old folk’s home (Rumah Seri Kenangan) Malaysia.

Self-concept, which is sometimes referred to as self-esteem, is a difficult concept to measure (Dusek & McIntyre, 2003). Self-concept is how people see themselves through the eyes of others (Scott and Marshal,
2005). For Shaffer (2000), self-concept is a concept that refers to one’s perceptions of one’s unique combination of attributes. Self-concept develops through social interactions and will undergo many changes over the course of a lifetime (Shaffer, 2000).

The most widely term used to define self-concept is the totality of a complex, organized, and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes and opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence (Azizi Yahaya, 2012). Furthermore in his article, Azizi describes that we develop and maintain our self-concept through the process of taking action and then reflecting on what we have done and what others tell us about what we have done. Self-concept is developed through interaction with the environment. Self-concept is a multi-dimensional construct. Self-construction; self-image; self-structure; self-regard; self-identity or self-perspective are also terms used to refer to this concept (Andi Mappiare, 2006). Self-concept is related to personality, while personality is defined as a set of innate and learned traits that influence the manner in which every person responds and interacts with the environment (Hooyman and Kiyak, 1988). Self-esteem or self-concept seems to fluctuate across the life span (Santrock, 2005). One recent cross-sectional study assessed the self-esteem of a very large and diverse sample indicate that self-esteem rose in the fifties and sixties, and then dropped in the seventies and eighties (Robins et al., 2002; Santrock, 2005). Low self-concept has been proven to be implicated in many adjustment problems. Therefore it is very important for the researcher to investigate the level of self-concept of these elderly residents in the old folk’s home. The objectives of this paper are to discuss: (1) some characteristics of older population in Malaysia; (2) the self-concept of older persons in old folk’s home, and (3) to trace the Social forces behind the self-concept of the elderly.

Material and Method

Design:

The design used in this study was a mixed method approach, which is a combination of the sociological method of face-to-face interviews, and the anthropological method of participant-observation. The data reported in this paper is part of a larger study conducted to examine the religious participation, self concept and the need for counseling service among the elderly residents in old folk’s home in the late 2007 and early 2009 (Zainab Ismail, Wan Ibrahim Wan Ahmad, Siti Rugayah Hj. Tibek, Ideris Endut & Fariza Md. Sham, 2010).

Sample:

This study is conducted at old folk’s home, Malaysia with special reference to old folk’s home located at the northern parts of Malaysia. There are nine old folk’s home, located at every states in Malaysia. Using a non-probability sampling technique, a total of 203 elderly residents in nine old folk’s home are selected. The study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data. Major data for the quantitative analysis are derived from face-to-face interviews. Data were collected during 90-minute structured interviews. The interview schedule, containing both closed-ended and open questions, covered a wide range of questions regarding demographic, socio-economic, marriage and family background, health and living arrangement, and relevant to this paper are variables related to self-concept. Data for the qualitative analysis are derived from unstructured interviews, information from key informants, and field observation.

Measurement:

Self-concept in this study refers to the score the elderly obtained as response from ten items asked to them. Experts argue that a combination of several methods should be used in measuring self-concept (Santrock, 2005). There are various items and domains that can be used to measure the self-concept. To determine the level of self-concept of the elderly, the respondents are asked one question that contains 15 items. The elderly are asked to respond, either: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) not so agree, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree. The data gathered were analyzed using descriptive approach. To obtain a general picture of the self-concept of the elderly this study refers to the score the elderly obtained as response from ten items asked to them on a five-point scale.

Results and Discussions

Socio-demographic Profile:

Although the residents come from various states in Malaysia, the majority of them are from Kedah, Perak, Kelantan and Johor. There are also residents from India, Indonesia, and Pattani, Thailand. Information regarding the socio-demographic of the elderly respondents is presented in Table 1. The majority of the elderly population
in this study is man (68%). The average age of respondents was 70.3 years, while the mod is 65 and the median age is 69.0 years. The age of oldest respondent was 92. All of the elderly belonged to one of three marital statuses; single, divorced and widowed elderly. A majority of them have children. Although the majority of the elderly has a formal education, the educational level of the respondents is low. There are some of these elderly who attended religious education. More than half of the respondents were working. Those who reported as working before entering the old folk’s home, the majority of them work in agriculture. Result of the study shows that nearly all of the elderly had a very low income (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of socio demographic profile of the elderly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio demographic profile</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>68.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widow/Widower</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>63.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schooling</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>56.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Schooling</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>78.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>90.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Working</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600 and (-)</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>601 – 3 000</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 001 and (+)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Answer</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Zainab et al. (2010)

The Level of Self-concept of the Elderly:

To determine the level of the self-concept, whether low, medium, or high, all the scores obtained from the scale are categorized into three categories, namely (1) 10-16 as low, (2) 17-23 as moderate, and (3) 24 - 30 as high. Any elderly with a score (1) were categorized as having low levels of self-concept, while respondents with a score (2) categorized as having a moderate level of self-concept. The elderly with a score (3) is said to have a high level of self-concept. It is interesting to note that although the myth of the self-concept of the elderly in old folk’s home is low, almost all of the elderly have a high level of self-concept. From 203 respondents, a total of 160 elderly (78.8%) have a high level of self-concept. The remaining 42 elderly was found to have a moderate level of self-concept. Only one elderly who has a low level of self-concept. In general, the level of the self-concept among the respondents is something that can be proud of (Table 2).

Table 2: The Distribution of the Level of Self-Concept of the Elderly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Level of Self-Concept</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>78.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Zainab et al. (2010)

Social Forces Behind the Self-concept of the Elderly:

Passing through old age, or particularly, the process of ageing involves numerous stressful life experiences (Hooyman and Kiyak, 1988). The self-concept is very important for the elderly as it may influence the whole activity of their everyday life. Low self-concept can develop other problems in life (Usher et. al., 2000). This is particularly true in later life. Social relationship with friends and officers at the old folk’s home level, contributes to the development of self-concept of the elderly. Besides, qualitative information from unstructured interviews found high levels of self-concept amongst the elderly in the old folk’s home is particularly related to all of these residents are the people who are in the final stages of life. In the Islamic context, when the person is
in the final stages of life, they definitely hoping will end this life with a good ending. Although these persons 
previously were individuals who did not adhere to religious teaching, but when they get older, they generally 
will try where possible to return to the religion. Most Muslims when they are in the final stages of life will hope 
for Allah's pleasure. For this reason most of the elderly in this old folk’s home view of their lives as positive, 
giving them a high level of self concept. In addition, most of the elderly felt that they were pleased with what is 
prescribed by God. They have admitted all things given by God to them. This kind of characteristic can give 
tremendous power to them in facing life in the old days. This characteristic can also work to prevent them from 
frustrated with what they have in life and from depressed as well. They will try to always be happy; even though 
some of them suffered physical condition is not perfect.

All Muslims in general agree that all religious activity is important. While not all older persons committed 
to any organized religious activities, they are aware of any religious activity is important for them. What makes 
some of them do not participated in religious activities organized because there are some obstacles they face. 
Most people at old age were no longer as healthy as a young age. Health status clearly becomes one of the 
reasons why some of them decided not to participate in religious activities organized. But they hope that one 
day, when their health permits, they will participate fully in religious activities.

Conclusion:

To conclude, this paper is about older people, particularly about the self-concept of the older people in old 
folk’s home, Malaysia. In general, this study concludes that the level of self-concepts of the majority of the 
elderly respondents is high. Because self-concept can undergo many changes over the course of a lifetime, the 
authority of the old folk’s home, Malaysia should therefore pay a great attention to the programs that can 
improve resident’s self-concept. Emotional support from officers in old folk’s home can also powerfully 
influence their self-concept. Therefore it is very important for the authority in old folk’s home, Malaysia to do 
something to develop a positive self-concept among these elderly residents.

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