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Subjective Well-Being of Older Rural Muslim Community in Malaysia

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Subjective Well-Being of Older Rural Muslim Community in Malaysia

Abstract

While research on subjective well-being has been well developed and documented in developed countries, the nature of subjective well-being of this category of population is still relatively unexamined in Malaysia. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the level of subjective well-being of the older population in rural Muslim community in Kelantan, Malaysia. The design used in this study was a combination of the sociological method of face-to-face interviews, and the anthropological method of participant-observation. A total of 214 older population were selected as respondents using simple random sampling technique from sampling frame. Major data for the quantitative analysis are derived from face-to-face interviews, while data for the qualitative analysis are derived from unstructured interviews, information from key informants, and field observation. Results show that the majority of the respondents have a moderate level of subjective well-being. Their subjective well-being also differs according to their profiles.

Keywords: Elderly; Older Population; Population Aging; Demographic Changes

Introduction

The demographic landscape of Malaysian population has changed over the past 50 years. A rapid transition from high to relatively low fertility and mortality is not only slowing population growth but also fundamentally changing the Malaysian's population structure. As a result, the number and the proportion of the older population are rising significantly. Since the early 1970s, the population of Malaysia has shown signs of ageing (Chan, 1994). In 1957 at the time Malaysia gained independence, the number of the population aged 65 years and older was around 175 500 persons, which constituted 2.7% of the total population of Peninsular

Malaysia. In 1970, it was estimated to be 316, 852 persons, and in 1991 there were 657 401 persons aged 65 and above. The number of the elderly persons in Malaysia almost doubled over the last twenty years time between 1970 and 1991. It is projected to rise to 2 079, 000 persons in 2020. An overview of the age structure – that is the relative proportions of children, working-age adult, and elderly people - of the population for the past four censuses between 1970-2000 reveals a significantly decreasing proportion of population in the younger ages (0-14) and corresponding increase in the older age group. Pala (2005) shows that the proportion of the population aged 60 and above was 4.4% (1970) increased to 5.0% in 2000. It is

expected to increase further to 8.0% (2020). The increasing of older population has already been marked in developed countries in Europe and North America long ago.

Gerontological research literature has documented extensively on subjective well-being of older population outside Malaysia (see, e.g., Wilkening and McGranahan, 1978; Vaughan, Kashner, Stock and Richards, 1985; Douthitt, Macdonald and Mullis, 1992; Connidis and McMullin, 1993). Well-being is a confused concept, and many terms have been used to refer to this term. There are scholars who see subjective well-being as psychological well-being (see, e.g., Douthitt, Macdonald and Mullis, 1992). Douthitt, Macdonald and Mullis also use term overall life satisfaction to refer to subjective well-being. Scholars in general utilize variables such as satisfaction, happiness, or affect to denote to this concept, whilst there were some others view this concept as avowed happiness (Bradburn, 1969), personal well-being (Stark and Eshleman, 1998), global happiness (Stark and Eshleman, 1998), and quality of life (see, e.g., Campbell et al., 1976; Hall, 1976).

Assessing subjective well-being can be done in two general approaches. In the first approach, subjective well-being is assessed through one question regarding self-reported assessments on overall life satisfaction. Through this assessments, respondents are asked one closed-ended question, that is "Taking all things together, would you please tell us your overall life satisfaction. Would you say you are not too happy, pretty happy, or, very happy?" (Connidis and McMullin, 1993), or "In general, how satisfied are you with your life?". Response to these questions ranged on a three-point scale from "mostly disappointed" to "mostly satisfied" (Vaughan, Kashner, Stock and Richards, 1985). Campbell et al., (1976) and Douthitt, Macdonald and Mullis, (1992), use a question "How do you feel about your life as a whole?" with a seven-point scale (7 = delighted; 1 = terrible). This self-reported assessments on overall life satisfaction is called avowed happiness scale (Bradburn, 1969; Connidis and McMullin, 1993).

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In the second approach, subjective well-being is assessed by using multiple-item scale. The level of subjective well-being of individuals can be assessed through summing up all the scores. Up to date, there was various scales created to assess subjective well-being. Among others are Andrews and Withey Delighted-Terrible Scale (D-TS) (Douthitt, Macdonald and Mullis, 1992), the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D) (Radloff, 1977), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larson, and Griffin, 1985). Through these scale, subjective well-being is assessed by using multiple-item representing satisfaction of various indicators or domains of life. Medley and Cutler (Vaughan, Kashner, Stock and Richards, 1985), for instance, use satisfaction with such domains as family life, health, standard of living, and occupation to predict global subjective well-being.

While research on subjective well-being has been well developed and documented in Europe and other developed countries, including Japan and Australia, they are yet to develop in Malaysia. Despite a large number of studies to explore the daily life of older people in Malaysia in recent years, the nature of subjective well-being of this category of population is still relatively unexamined. An empirical research on the well-being of the elderly people in Malaysia has not been yet established and thus, many questions about the subjective well-being of the elderly remain unanswered. This paper aims to analyze the subjective well-being of the elderly in rural Kelantan, Malaysia. The older population in this article is defined as persons aged 60 years and above. The paper is organized into four sections. After discussing an introduction in the first section, the second section is about material and method employed in this study. The third section provides results and discussion. A brief conclusion presents in the last section.

Material and Method

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the level of subjective well-being of the older persons in the state of Kelantan, Malaysia. The data reported in this paper is part of a larger study conducted on the rural elderly to

explore the factors effecting the well-being of the elderly in the late 1998 and early 1999. Several field visits conducted between 2000 to 2005, and between 2006 to 2010 to explore the continuity and changes on the subject.

Design

This study used a mixed method design, that is a combination of the sociological method of face-to-face interviews, and anthropological method of participant-observation. The study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data. We explain objective by using quantitative approach, and at the same time qualitative data gathered from key informants used to enrich the explanation. Data for the qualitative analysis are derived from unstructured interviews, information from key informants, and field observation. Major data for the quantitative analysis are derived from face-to-face interviews. Data were collected during 90-minute structured interviews conducted in respondents' home. The interview schedule, containing both closed-ended and open-ended questions, covered a wide range of questions regarding socio-demographic and economic, marriage, family background, health and participation in economic activities. Relevant to this paper are data on the subjective well-being.

Population and Sample

Population from which samples of the study were drawn, was the older people aged 60 years and above numbered 1 067 living in rural Muslim community areas in the district of Limbongan, Kelantan, Malaysia. This area was chosen because of its wealth of cultural identity and religious strength of its community. More than 90 percent of Kelantan populations are Malays. Chinese, Indians and Other ethnic groups are not significant in number. The majority of the people in the state, regardless of their ethnic groups, falls below the national poverty level, and are almost wholly dependent on subsistence farming and informal sector. A total of 214 older population were selected as respondents using simple random sampling technique from sampling frame. In addition to this, the study also involve in depth interviews with 10 selected elderly people who can provide

information in regard to their experience and daily activities relevant to the study subject.

Measurement

The seven socio-demographic profile were measured in the following manner: The sex of each respondent was coded as a dummy variable, with a score of 0 if the respondent was female, and 1 if the respondent was male; the age of respondent was coded as actual age, the marital status was coded as (1) never married, (2) currently married, (3) divorced, and (4) widowed. Length of marriage was coded as (1) new if the respondents reported being marriage up to 29 years. If the respondents were married for 30 years and over, their status was recorded as (2) long. Number of children also was coded as dummy variables, with a score of 0 if the respondent did not own children, and 1 if the respondent owned children; the educational attainment was measured as (1) never attended school, (2) primary level, (3) lower secondary level, (4) upper secondary level, and (5) tertiary level; the employment status of each respondent was coded as a dummy variable, with a score of 0 if the respondent was not employed, and 1 if the respondent was employed. Subjective well-being was measured based on 5 point Likert scale (1 = not satisfied at all; 2 = not satisfied; 3 = not sure, 4 = satisfied, 5 = very satisfied).

Results and Discussion

Socio demographic profile

Majority of the respondent was the elderly man. The average age of respondents was 68 years, while median and mode of age was 67 and 60 years respectively. Age of the oldest respondent was 95. When the age of the respondents is categorized to four category, that is early old (60-64 years), middle old (65-69 years), old-old (70-74 years), and oldest old (75 years +). 40% of the respondent was in 60-64 years category. In terms of marital status, three respondents was never married. The respondents currently married was 143, four respondents were divorced, and 64 respondents were death of their spouse. In the category never married, there was two elderly male, and one elderly female. Male

respondents who currently married outnumber female respondents (112 male compared to only 31 female respondents).

The majority of male still have spouse. In terms of academic background, the level of education of the respondents was low, reflected the level of academic among the Malaysian as a whole before Malaysia gained independence from British in the past several decades (1957). More than half of them was never attend formal school (58%). One-third has an elementary school level. At that time not many people, especially in rural areas, has the opportunity to attend formal school.

Level of Subjective Well-Being

From the observation in the community, one can reveal that the majority of respondents has a moderate level of subjective well-being. To measure the subjective well-being of the elderly, the study used one direct question: 'taking all things together, would you pleased tell us your overall life satisfaction? Would you say you are 1 = not satisfied at all; 2 = not satisfied; 3 = not sure, 4 = satisfied, 5 = very satisfied?'

It appears that most of the elderly perceive their living conditions as moderate (68.2%) (Table 1). The well-being in the real sense is related to the perception associated with the evaluation of human living conditions. One might be at a high level of his subjective well-being, even though at times of rough and difficulty, while others might be at low subjective well-being despite having a large income. A question arises, why an elderly with low income feel that his level of subjective well-being as high? Even with low income, elderly is grateful for his or her lives, and feel quite happy and contented with what he or she has. Whilst there is also a high-income elderly, but his perception of subjective well-being as less satisfactory.

From the observations on the lives of the elderly in the community, especially the elderly with materialistic thinking, and more inclined to worldly affairs, they usually never feel enough of what they have or get. Although they are not having difficulty in terms of material gaining and income, they

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keep saying that they are poor or needy. This is different when a similar question being asked to religious elderly. They are usually more trustful, and accepted for what they have even though they are poor in material aspects. They do not feel any difficulty with their poverty condition. "I feel happy with what I have. It is the will of God who provide everything ", add one elderly. One informant said: "To achieve well-being in the true sense, a sense of just, happy, sincere and grateful, become important aspects. When the heart was satisfied with life there, the soul will be calm and feelings will be grateful and feeling of well being will be increased. In Islamic literature, the well-being concept is related to the fulfillment of human needs and requirements. Since people are social beings by nature, and created in the form of body and soul, then their social, physical and spiritual needs, should be united to improve the well-being ", said one informant

Subjective Well-Being According to Profiles

The level of subjective well-being based on certain characteristics is presented in Table 2. Several important facts are revealed by these data. First, the majority of the elderly has a moderate level of subjective well-being. Secondly, the analysis is based on gender which indicates that female elderly are more satisfied with their daily life. In terms of age, the young old are happier with their current life as compared to other categories. This is due to the level of health condition where they are more exposed to the preventive services provided by the government and NGO's as compared to the other elderly. The elderly who were currently married are also more satisfied with their life.

Analysis of subjective well-being according to the marital status, the table clearly indicate that the elderly who are married has a high level of subjective well-being. This is due to the fact the males has a tendency to marry wife who are much younger than themselves, and thus the latter can serve them and provide them with health care supports. This is a common tendency. Analysis based on education and employment status shows that the level of high subjective well-being also

include those elderly who went to school, working, and have an exposure to the education system. They seem to be more satisfied with their life as compared to elderly who do not attend formal education.

Conclusion

The main objectives of this paper was to analyze the level of subjective well-being of older citizens in rural Muslim community in

Kelantan, Malaysia. In terms of the socio demographic profile, the data showed that the majority of the respondents was males, do not attend any formal school, married and has children. Data showed that the majority of the elderly has a moderate level of subjective well-being. Despite their varying of experiences related to subjective well-being, majority of the respondents were grateful for their lives, felt happy and satisfied with what they had.

Table-1 Distribution of Level of Subjective Well-Being

Level of Subjective Well-Being	Total	Percentage
Low	50	23.4
Moderate	146	68.2
High	18	8.4
Total	214	100.0

Table-2 Level of Subjective Well-Being According to Profiles

Demographic profil	Subjective Well-Being		
	Low	Moderate	High
Gender			
Male	28.9	61.4	9.6
Female	29.0	57.3	13.7
Age			
60-64	14.6	65.9	19.5
65-69	27.9	65.1	7.0
70-74	42.2	46.7	11.1
75 years and +	43.2	52.3	7.7
Marital Status			
Married	25.5	58.2	16.3
Divorced	30.2	65.1	4.8
Widow/Widower	57.1	42.9	-
Single	100.0	-	-
Lenght of Marriage			
New	35.4	59.8	4.9
Long	25.0	58.3	16.7
Children			
Yes	28.4	59.8	11.8
No	40.0	40.0	20.0
Education			
Yes	16.1	63.2	20.7
No	37.8	55.9	6.3

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Working			
Yes	22.7	58.0	19.3
No	33.3	59.5	7.1

Total	23.4	68.2	8.4

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