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ATTITUDE AND WILLINGNESS TO WORK WITH ELDERLY
PEOPLE AMONG SOCIAL WORK AND COUNSELING
STUDENTS IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

Counseling and social work students have higher chances to work with elderly people once they complete their studies. **Purpose:** Therefore, the current study aimed to measure the attitude towards and willingness to work with the elderly among counseling and social work students in Malaysia. **Methods:** The study utilized 283 undergraduate students (60 males and 213 females with mean age of 24.5) from the counseling and social work programs as study participants. The Kogan's Attitudes Toward Older People Scale (KAOP) and the Willingness to Work with Elderly Scale (WWES) were employed as the study's instruments to measure the participants' attitude towards and willingness to work with the elderly respectively. **Result:** The study findings indicated that 75.2 percent of the participants exhibited a positive attitude towards working with the elderly. The study also established that there was a positive correlation between attitude towards and willingness to work with the elderly, with a more positive attitude being associated with willingness to work with the elderly. Furthermore, the study results indicated that the higher the age, the more positive attitude to work with the elderly, as older participants (above 25 years) showed more willingness to work with the elderly than younger participants (below 25 years). **Conclusions:** The study concludes that a positive attitude towards the elderly plays a significant role in students' lives, as they may work with the elderly upon completion of their studies, and a positive attitude towards the elderly can be developed in the social work and counseling students through their study curriculums.

Keywords:

Attitude; Counseling; Elderly People; Social Work; Willingness

Introduction

The increasing elderly population is a global phenomenon. This is especially true when one observes that the World Health Organization (WHO) now considers persons above 65 years to be in the senior citizens, or elderly person category (WHO, 2014). Malaysia has also experienced this rapid growth in the elderly population. Currently, the total number of elderly people in Malaysia is 3.5 million from a total population of 32.7 million, thus an increase from 10.30% in 2020 to 10.73% at present, and an anticipated rise to 23.5% by the year 2050 (Department of Statistic Malaysia, 2021). The increase in the elderly population in Malaysia can be attributed to factors such as a functional economy (Tobi, Fathi & Amaratunga, 2017), urban migration, improvements in the education and health care systems (Tey et al., 2016), resulting in increased life expectancy (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2021), and a decline in potential fertility (Park, 2018) among the Malaysian population. In short, Malaysians will be healthier and thus, live longer than in previous years resulting in elderly population increases and major changes to Malaysia's demographics.

As the elderly population in Malaysia is increasing, there is also an escalated demand for services offered to the elderly (Poi, Forsyth & Chan, 2004) such as care, education and promotion of a healthy lifestyle for the elderly citizenry amongst other services (Berkman, Gardner, Zodikoff & Harootyan, 2005). Because of the high demand in elderly care due to physical and mental health decline, health care workers play an important role in providing such services to older people (Boeckxstaens & De Graaf, 2011; Akil, Abdullah & Sipon, 2014). These health care service providers include social work and counseling students who are earmarked work with the elderly people upon completion of their studies, where they would be required to provide various services within their health profession including support care to the elderly (Mason & Sanders, 2004).

However, many studies established that students in the healthcare system, including social work and counseling students, prefer working with children and adults rather than the elderly (Anderson & Wiscott, 2004); working with old people or providing services to old folks homes is the students' least preferred choice of work (Weiss, Gal, Cnaan & Maglajlic, 2002). Sharing the same notion, Weiss et al., (2002) contend that first-year social work students are more likely to work in service groups that involve children and adults than in old people nursing homes. This is due to a negative attitude towards the elderly, which makes the students less interested in working with the elderly. Furthermore, other studies found that working with the elderly is not on the top list of students because they (students) generally look down upon elderly care services as a sub-standard and less prestigious job (Guo et al, 2021). Moreover, social work and counseling students tend to receive less training, knowledge and preparation in elderly care making them ill-suited to working with the elderly.

In spite of the above factors, there is evidence that a positive attitude towards the elderly increases a person's interest in working with elderly clients, a characteristic which some regard as the most important attribute of a good or capable counselor and/or social worker (Duyan, Tuncay, Odzemir & Duyan, 2015). Precisely, attitude towards the elderly is one of the key determinants of the quality of service provided to the elderly. Attitude towards elderly people is defined as, a positive or negative evaluation of the elderly population's status by the community (Hickey, Bragg, Rakowski & Hultsch, 1979). Positive attitudes to the elderly include acknowledging their experience and wisdom in life compared to the younger generation, and negative attitude includes ill-treating the elderly (Lu, Kao & Hsieh, 2010).

From such a viewpoint, attitude towards the elderly can become an enabler or constraint to adult care service provision.

Studies conducted in the Western countries show that the majority of students in counseling and social work fields have positive attitudes towards the elderly (Chonody, Webb, Ranzijn & Bryant, 2014; Heycox & Hughes, 2006; Sutton, 2013; Duyan et al., 2015), whilst a few studies established negative attitudes towards the elderly by the students (Anderson & Wiscott, 2004; Gellis, Sherman & Lawrence 2003). Several reasons have been outlined to explain the students' negative attitude towards the elderly. These include the perception that the elderly population is a burden (Gellis et al., 2003); the students' limited knowledge about the elderly (Lee, Wong & Loh, 2005); previous bad experience in dealing with the elderly (Carlson & Idvall, 2015); and the stereotyping of the aging population on social media platforms (North & Fiske, 2012).

In Malaysia, there are a few studies, which focus on attitudes towards the elderly. Most studies in the Malaysian context focus on attitude towards the elderly by medical and nursing students (Momtaz, Mousavi-Shirazi, Mollaei dan Delbari, 2019; Singh, Subramaniam, Rahman, Rusly and Ghazali, 2018; Damulak, Minhat & Rahman, 2015; Wan & Poi, 1997). These studies showed that half of the respondents had negative attitudes towards the elderly (Wan & Poi, 1997; Damulak et al., 2015). Other studies such as Singh et al., (2018); and Momtaz et al., (2017) established that the medical and nursing students in Malaysia have positive attitudes towards the elderly (Singh et al., 2018; Momtaz et al., 2019). However, to date, there is still no study on counseling and social work students' attitudes towards the elderly conducted in Malaysia.

Many variables have been found to affect attitudes towards the elderly, and these include gender, year of study, age, and contact with elderly people. Gender is one of the variables that is often studied when measuring attitudes towards the elderly. Previous studies such as Erdemir, Kav, Citak, Hanoglu, and Karahan (2011); Fraboni, Saltstone & Hughes, (1990); Kalavar, (2001); Rupp, Vondanovich and Crede, (2005); Beall, Baumhover, Simpson, and Pieroni (1991) found that female students have a more positive attitude towards the elderly than males. However, some studies have found that gender is not a factor regarding attitudes towards the elderly (Erol, Pinar, Gür, Ergün & Hayran, 2013; Cankurtaran et al., 2006). Furthermore, the period of study has also become one of the important indicators of a student's attitude towards the elderly. Longer periods of study are associated with a positive attitude towards the elderly (as one acquires a better understanding and more accurate information about the elderly) as compared to shorter periods of study (Damulak et al., 2015; Wan & Poi, 1997).

In addition, attitudes towards the elderly population are influenced by age factors. Many studies established that as an individual gets older, their positive attitude towards the elderly increases (Gellis, Sherman & Lawrence, 2003; Rupp, et al., 2005). For example, a study conducted by Soderhamn, Lindencrona & Gustavsson (2001) in Sweden found that age significantly affects attitudes towards the elderly, as individuals aged 25 years and below are more negative towards the elderly than individuals over 25 years. Another factor regarding attitude towards the elderly as articulated by Harwood, Hwestone, Paoloi, and Voci, (2005); and Sutton (2013) is contact with the elderly. These studies express that individuals who have a close relationship with the elderly for example their grandparents are more likely to be positive towards the elderly. This notion is based on the contact hypothesis introduced by Allport, Clark and Pettigrew (1954)

which highlights that a closer relationship with a minority group can reduce the prejudice of an individual towards that minority group. However, there are still no studies in Malaysia, which investigate the effects of these factors on attitudes towards the elderly. Therefore, there is a knowledge gap on the role of gender, years of study, age, and contact with the elderly towards attitudes to the elderly in the Malaysian context.

In addition, it is important to investigate attitudes towards the elderly and willingness to work with the elderly as many studies, especially in the Western context have correlated attitudes with willingness to work with elderly. For example, Sutton (2013) conducted a study with a sample of 266 counseling students, which established that attitudes toward the elderly had a significant positive relationship with interest in working with elderly clients. A related study on students majoring in psychology and counseling by Chonody et al., (2014) established that a positive attitude towards the elderly increases interest to work with the elderly. In Asia, specifically China (Bleijenberg, 2012), Turkey (Darling, Sendir, Atav & Buyukyilmaz, 2018), and Sri Lanka (Rathnayake, Athukorala & Siop, 2016), similar results have also been found among nursing students, where positive attitudes were associated with a higher willingness to work with the elderly population. However, in Malaysia, the relationship between attitudes towards the elderly and interest in working with the elderly is still unknown. Therefore, studies on the relationship between these two variables are needed within the Malaysian context.

As highlighted in the foregoing discussion, most previous research focused on attitudes of nursing and medical students towards the elderly. Therefore, there is little academic understanding of the counseling and social work students' attitudes towards the elderly people, especially in Malaysia. This is a situation that is not only surprising but also anomalous given the fact that these counseling and social work students have a higher chance of serving the elderly population in the future. Moreover, willingness to work with the elderly is also important to establish as it enables immediate implementation of interventions meant to reduce negative attitudes towards and increase willingness to work with the elderly. Therefore, this study has the following objectives; (i) to identify attitudes towards the elderly; (ii) to determine the differences in attitudes towards the elderly between different socio-demographic factors; and (iii) to establish the relationship between attitudes towards and willingness to work with elderly.

Methods

Sample

The sample of this study were undergraduate students (first year to fourth-year students) from the social work and counseling programs at a university in the northern part of Malaysia. Simple random sampling was utilized to select the study participants. The study distributed questionnaires to all the undergraduate students (715 students) from the social work and counseling programs online and got feedback from 274 respondents, hence data in this study were analyzed from the successfully returned 274 forms.

Instruments

The study used the Kogan Attitude towards Old Person Scale (KAOP) and the Willingness to Work with Elderly Scale (WWES) as study questionnaires. Experts in language translation translated both instruments from English to the Malay language. In these questionnaires was a requirement for participants to fill in their demographic information that is, gender, age,

program, year of study; and whether one has contact with elderly people. The instruments used in this study are explained below:

(i) Kogan Attitude towards Old Person Scale (KAOP).

The KAOP was developed by Kogan (1961) and consists of 34 statements about elderly people. These statements are divided into two; 17 negatives and 17 positive statements. The KAOP scale is a 6 point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree, and 6 = strongly agree. The reliability of this questionnaire was .66 to .85 (Kogan, 1961). According to Rathnayake et al. (2016) the variation of intensity of attitudes is obtained by arranging the range of scores into six equal categories namely very negative (score 34–67), negative (68–101), slightly negative (102–135), slightly positive (136–169), positive (170–203), and very positive (204–238).

(ii) Willingness to Work with Elderly Scale (WWES)

The Willingness to Work with Elderly Scale was developed by Mollaei, Momtaz, Shirazi & Delbari, (2019) to measure students' interest to work with elderly people. This questionnaire consists of 20 statements, on a 6 Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree, and 6 = strongly agree. The lowest and highest possible scores for willingness to work with the elderly are equal to 20 and 100, respectively (Mollaei et al., 2019).

Data Collection

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, where students conducted online classes from home, there were no students physically on the university campus throughout the current research. Therefore, data were collected by using online platforms. The google link for the research instruments in the current study was specifically created for this study. The link was then distributed to the cohort leaders from different levels of study (first year to the fourth year). These cohort leaders were then helped to distribute the link to all the respondents in the study using the WhatsApp Application. Before answering the questionnaires, a brief explanation about research ethics and confidentiality was provided in the given link. The participants were given two weeks to complete and submit the questionnaires. The cohort leaders constantly reminded the participants to complete the questionnaires so that the data would be ready within the required period. After two weeks, all the responses were collected from the Google Form link, and a few honorariums were issued to fortunate participants.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 21. Descriptive statistics such as percentage, mean and standard deviation were used to describe demographic information of the participants and to measure their attitude levels towards the elderly. Inferential statistics was also utilized in the current study. Pearson correlation coefficient was used to observe the association between attitudes towards the elderly and willingness to work with the elderly among the study participants. One-way ANOVA and independent t-test were used to assess the effects of the study's demographic factors on attitudes towards the elderly.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

A total of 274 undergraduate students from both the social work and counseling programs participated in this study. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 45 years old, and the average age of the sample was 24.5 years (SD = 1.45). The sample consisted of 61 males and

213 females. The participants in this study were from the Malay, Chinese and Indian races, where the majority, 263 thus (96%) of the participants were Malay, followed by four Chinese, thus (1.5%) and two Indians, thus (0.7%). The majority of respondents were from the first-year class 83 (30.3%), followed by the fourth year, 82 (29.9%), third-year, 58 (21.2%), and lastly, second-year, 51 (18.6%). On the course of study, the majority of the respondents were counseling undergraduate students, 172 (62.8%), while 102, (37.2%) were social work students. Regarding contact with the elderly, most of the respondents (n=262, 95.6%) had a relationship with the elderly above 60 years old, such as parents, grandparents, or family members, while 12 (4.4%) had no relationships with the elderly. Table 1 below shows the socio-demographic information of the study respondents.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Socio-demographic of the Respondents

Demographic characteristics	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	61	22.3
Female	213	77.7
Age		
18-25	262	95.6
26 and above	12	4.4
Ethnicity		
Malay	263	96.0
Chinese	4	1.5
Indian	2	0.7
Others	5	1.8
Academic Year		
First-year	83	30.3
Second-year	51	18.6
Third-year	58	21.2
Fourth-year	82	29.9
Program		
Counseling	172	62.8
Social Work	102	37.2
Close relationship With older people		
Yes	262	95.6
No	12	4.4

Attitudes towards Elderly People

A total of 206 respondents (75.2%) showed a positive attitude towards elderly people, with a minimum score of 102, and 68 respondents (24.8%) showed a negative attitude towards elderly people, with a minimum score of 34. This result implies that the majority of students from both the social work and counseling programs had a positive attitude toward elderly people. Table 2 below shows the levels of attitudes towards the elderly by the study respondents.

Table 2: Levels of Attitudes towards Elderly People

Attitude	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Positive	206	75.2
Negative	68	24.8

Attitudes towards Elderly by Socio-demographic Characteristics.

An independent sample t-test was performed to compare the attitudes towards the elderly by gender, years of study, age, and contact with older people. Study results showed that there was a significant difference in attitude scores between younger and the older age groups ($t = -2.704$, $p < .05$). Those in older age showed more positive attitudes towards the elderly ($M = 133.5$, $SD = 5.4$), compared to younger people ($M = 125.4$, $SD = 10.3$). However, there was no significant difference between gender ($t = .849$, $p > .05$), and no significant difference between those who had or who had no relationship with the elderly ($t = .166$, $p > .05$). A one-way ANOVA test was performed to compare the respondents' attitudes towards the elderly by academic year (first to fourth year). Study results showed that attitude towards the elderly was not significant for the academic year ($F = 2.273$, $p > .05$). Table 3 shows attitudes towards the elderly by socio-demographic characteristics.

Table 3: Attitudes to Elderly Score by Socio Demographic Characteristics

Demographic characteristics	KAOP score mean (SD)	t value or F value	Sig.
Gender			
Male	124.4 (9.7)		
Female	126.1 (10.4)	.849	.358
Age			
18-25	125.4 (10.3)		
26-45	133.5 (5.4)	-2.704	.007
Academic Year			
First-year	128.0 (9.8)		
Second-year	125.1 (9.2)	2.273	.080
Third-year	125.5 (10.3)		
Fourth-year	124.0 (11.1)		
Contact with elderly			
Yes	125.8 (10.2)	.166	.684
No	124.0 (10.5)		

Relationship between Attitudes and Willingness to Work with the Elderly

Study results showed that there was a positive significant relationship between attitudes toward elderly people and willingness to work with the elderly ($r = 0.351$, $p < .01$). However, the relationship between these variables was low. This means that the more the positive attitude towards the elderly, the more willingness to work with the elderly. Table 4 shows the relationship between attitudes and willingness to work with the elderly by the study respondents.

Table 4: Relationship between Attitudes towards and Willingness to Work with Elderly

Variable	Min	Standard Division (S.D)	(<i>r</i>)	Sig.
Attitudes towards elderly	88.8	15.3		
Willingness to work with elderly	125.8	10.3	0.351	.000

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the attitudes towards elderly people among social work and counseling students. This study was also interested in observing the differences in attitudes towards the elderly between the socio-demography factors in this study. The study also sought to establish the relationship between attitudes towards the elderly and willingness to work with the elderly.

Overall, the present study established that both social work and counseling students have a positive attitude towards older people, thus 75 percent of the respondents. These findings are consistent with previous studies that also established similar results among counseling and social work (Wang & Chonody 2013; Chonody et al., 2014; Hughes & Heycox, 2006; Sutton, 2013; Duyan et al., 2015) or medical (Wilson, Kurrle & Wilson, 2018) and nursing students (Darling et al., (2018) & Rathnayake et al., (2016). Professionals in healthcare were also established to have positive attitudes toward elderly people (Doherty, Mitchell & O’Niell 2011; Liu, While, Norman & Ye, 2012). These findings imply that those in the helping profession, such as counseling and social work students have goodwill and attitude towards the elderly people, despite the elderly's compromised physical and mental health (Dionigi, 2015). Such goodwill and attitude towards the elderly by the students can be attributed to their exposure to empathetic values during their study courses on how to handle and interact with elderly people. The goodwill and attitude towards the elderly by the students could be attributed to the social norms in the Malaysian community where the elderly are treated with respect and not discriminated against.

With regards to socio-demographic factors and attitudes towards the elderly, the present study established a significant difference between the younger and older students' will and attitude to work with the elderly, as students, 25 years of age and above showed more positive attitudes towards elderly people than individuals younger than the age of 25. Not peculiar to this study, studies such as Soderhamn et al., (2001) also showed that individuals 25 years and older had a more positive attitude towards elderly people than the younger individuals did. These results indicate that the older the individual, the more positive attitude developed towards the elderly (Gellis et al., 2003; Rupp et al., 2005). This change in attitude towards the elderly as one grows older could be pinned to the development of knowledge and appreciation for the elderly through experience and change in perception about aging. Hence, older students tend to relate and think positively about the elderly. Drake (1957) concurs that as individuals get older, they can develop positive attitudes through their experience in dealing with elderly people.

The study found that there was no significant difference in attitudes towards the elderly between males and females. This finding is also similar to results by previous studies such as

Erol et al., (2013) and Cankurtaran et al., (2006). Nevertheless, studies by Erdemir et.al., (2011); Mollaei et al., (2018); Fraboni et al., (1990); Kalavar (2001); Rupp et al., (2005); Beall et al., (1991) found that female students have higher positive attitudes towards the elderly compared to male students. Moreover, the results of this study showed that there was no significant difference in the attitude towards the elderly based on the year of study. The results of this study are contrary to the study conducted by Damulak et al. (2015); Wan and Poi (1997); and Lambrinou, Sourtzi, Kalokerinou and Lemonidou (2009) who showed that more years of study result in more positive attitudes towards older people, as senior students would have acquired better understanding and knowledge of the elderly people during their studies. So, the senior students think rationally about the importance of having a positive attitude towards the elderly. However, in the current study, the effects of year of study on attitudes towards elderly were not obtained probably because all the students have been exposed to aging and elderly courses in the first year introductory subjects, such as Introduction to Psychology, Developmental Psychology, and Human Learning.

Furthermore, the current study discovered that there was no significant difference in attitudes towards the elderly between students regarding contact with the elderly. In contrast, other studies (Harwood et al., 2005; Sutton, 2013; Hawkins, 1996; Tan, Hawkins, & Ryan, 2001; Tan, Zhang, & Fan, 2004; Funderburk, Damron-Rodriguez, Storms, & Solomon, 2006) established that individuals who have a good relationship with elderly people have more positive attitudes towards the elderly due to increased knowledge and exposure with the elderly (Poi, Forsyth, & Chan, 2004). These contrast findings are probably because most students have spent their years of study at college, so they do not interact or live with the elderly, even though they have a good relationship with elderly people. An example is from a previous study by Yap, Schwartz, Byrne, Simmons and Allen (2010) who established that the amount of time spent with the elderly was an important factor that improved attitudes toward the elderly, compared to close relationships with the elderly.

Finally, this current study found a significant positive association between attitude towards the elderly and interest to work with them. This finding is corroborated by other findings in the Western context (Sutton, 2013; Chonody et al., 2014), and Asian (Bleijenberg, 2012; Darling, et al., 2018; Rathnayake et al., 2016), who indicated that positive attitudes towards the elderly are more likely associated with higher interest to work with the elderly people, despite compromised mental and physical health among this population.

Though the study produced tangible empirical results, there were limitations to the study. Firstly, the current data is cross-sectional, which makes it impossible to identify directional links between the variables. The longitudinal studies are therefore, required to understand more about these relationships. Secondly, the instruments used in this study were translated from English to Malay language but were not fully validated in processes such as the psychometric assessment of the instruments. Therefore, some important information or intended constructs may not be captured in this study. Moreover, the present study included students from counseling and social work programs from one university in Malaysia therefore, the sample may not be an accurate representative of the entire Malaysian social work and counseling students.

Conclusion

The present study identified that the majority of counseling and social work students have a positive attitude towards elderly people, indicating that they have positive traits, and are ready to work with elderly people after graduation. Elderly people need more attention from the healthcare services compared to other age groups based on their condition. Therefore, it is compulsory for students from healthcare services, which include social work and counseling students to prepare themselves to work with the elderly.

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