

GERONTOLOGY COUNSELING COMPETENCY FOR COUNSELORS IN MALAYSIA: ADDRESSING THE AGING POPULATION'S MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

The aging population in Malaysia faces unique mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, loneliness, and social isolation. To improve the mental health and overall quality of life of Malaysian older adults, it is essential to identify the need and develop the necessary competencies for counselors working with older adults. This review article includes the increasing prevalence of mental disorders among older adults in Malaysia and emphasizes the need for enhanced access to effective mental health care and the gerontology counseling competencies required to address the mental health needs of the aging population. It also highlights the importance of incorporating gerontology counseling courses into the curricula of public universities, establishing competency standards, and fostering collaboration among counselors, healthcare professionals, and policymakers to improve the mental well-being and overall quality of life for older adults in Malaysia, which aligns with the National Policy of Older Persons (2011). The methodology involved conducting a literature search, screening and selecting relevant studies, and synthesizing the findings.

Keywords: Gerontology counseling, counseling competency, counseling older adults, older adults, mental health needs

ABSTRAK

Populasi warga emas di Malaysia menghadapi cabaran kesihatan mental yang unik, termasuk kemurungan, kebimbangan, kesunyian, dan pengasingan sosial. Untuk meningkatkan kesihatan mental dan kualiti hidup keseluruhan warga emas Malaysia, adalah penting untuk mengenal pasti keperluan dan membangunkan kompetensi yang diperlukan bagi kaunselor yang bekerja dengan warga emas. Artikel ulasan ini merangkumi peningkatan prevalensi gangguan mental di kalangan warga emas di Malaysia dan menekankan keperluan untuk meningkatkan akses kepada penjagaan kesihatan mental yang berkesan, dan kompetensi kaunseling gerontologi yang diperlukan untuk menangani keperluan kesihatan mental populasi warga emas. Ia juga menekankan kepentingan memasukkan kursus kaunseling gerontologi dalam kurikulum universiti awam, menetapkan piawaian kompetensi, dan mendorong kerjasama antara kaunselor, profesional kesihatan, dan pembuat dasar untuk meningkatkan kesejahteraan mental dan kualiti hidup keseluruhan warga emas di Malaysia agar selari dengan Dasar Warga Emas Negara (2011). Metodologi kajian melibatkan pencarian literatur, penyaringan dan pemilihan kajian yang relevan, serta sintesis dapatan.

Kata kunci: Kaunseling gerontologi, kompetensi kaunseling, kaunseling warga emas, warga emas, keperluan kesihatan mental

INTRODUCTION

The proportion of older adults in Malaysia aged 60 and above would increase dramatically to 14.5% of the total population by 2040 (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2016). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), aging is a worldwide issue that affects the population, including Malaysia, as a health concern and contributes to a progressive decline in physical and mental function, an increased risk of disease, and mortality. Critical concerns for older adults mental health issues include depression, anxiety, loneliness, and social isolation (Lee et al., 2020).

Older adults are susceptible to both physical and mental health problems (Ashaari et al., 2022), and the rising prevalence of mental disorders indicates the need for enhanced access to provide effective mental health care (Raaj et al., 2021). To improve quality of life, older adults must be assisted in their active aging by having access to health, self-participation, and safety (Ai Jing & Mohd Noor, 2022). Active aging at the individual level entails the pursuit of well-being through active engagement in activities that are in line with personal goals, functional capacities, and available opportunities (Rantanen et al., 2019).

The aging population in Malaysia presents unique mental health challenges that necessitate specialized competencies. This paper aims to fill a gap in the literature by examining the gerontology counseling competencies required to serve the mental health needs of older adults in Malaysia effectively. By identifying the need for these competencies, this research can inform the development of training programs and guidelines to promote the professional growth and competency of counselors working with older adults and have the potential to improve the mental health and overall quality of life of Malaysian senior citizens.

METHODOLOGY

We used search engines like Google Scholar and Semantic Scholar to look for journal articles published between 2000 and the present that addressed our study subject. By employing specific keywords such as gerontology counseling, counseling competency, counseling older adults, and mental health needs of older adults, we aimed to gather the most current research and knowledge in this field. This timeframe allowed us to gain insights into evolving counseling practices and the changing needs of older adults.

Through our approach, we aimed to contribute to the advancement of gerontology counseling competency for counselors, specifically addressing the mental health needs of Malaysia's aging population. Additionally, we explored reliable websites dedicated to gerontology counseling, counseling competency, and the mental health needs of older adults. These sources, including government reports, professional organizations' publications, and clinical guidelines, provided diverse resources and perspectives, enhancing the comprehensiveness of our findings. By integrating these multidimensional sources, our goal was to consider practical applications and offer relevant recommendations to improve gerontology counseling practice in Malaysia.

DEFINITION OF GERONTOLOGY

Based on the APA Dictionary of Psychology (n.d.), gerontology is the scientific interdisciplinary study of old age and the aging process. The study of gerontology examines the physical, psychological, and social aspects of aging, as well as the effects of aging on individuals and society (Onyenemezu & Olumati, 2013; Olajide & Ayantanji, 2016).

The field of gerontology acknowledges the valuable contributions that elderly or retired individuals can still make to society. In addition, gerontology transcends traditional age-focused professions and necessitates experts in a variety of disciplines with knowledge of aging-related issues (Abbott, 2021). The growth of multidisciplinary recent developments in gerontology, such as the emergence of interdisciplinary theories of aging and the consensus on longitudinal research methodologies, indicate that it is becoming a separate discipline rather than a subset of another established field (Alkema & Alley, 2006).

AGING POPULATION IN MALAYSIA

The Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development (2020) has forecast that Malaysia will become an elderly state by 2030, when 15% of the population will consist of people aged 60 or older. Despite the fact that other countries have their own definitions of age onsets, Malaysia defined older adults as those aged 60 and older, based on the World Assembly on Aging in Viena in 1982 (Muhhamad & Abbas, 2012). Table 1 shows the projected population of older adults (60 years and older).

Table 1: Projected population of older adults (60 years and older)

Year	Projected population of older adults (60 years and older)	Percentage of the total population
2021	3.4 million	10.6%
2025	4.8 million	16.0%
2040	6.3 million	8.4%

Source: World Bank (2021); Department of Statistics, Malaysia (2016).

From Table 1, there will be more older adults in Malaysia compared to years before, which will increase from 10.6% in 2021 to 16.0%, or 3.4 million to 4.8 million, in 2025. Even though there will be a predicted drop in growth percentage in 2040, the number is still high at 6.3 million, due to the increase in life expectancy and the decrease in reproduction rates. As a consequence, there will be a challenge to the healthcare system because of the greater need for services such as long-term care for older adults.

A steady decline in fertility and an increase in life expectancy at birth from 71 in 1990 to 76 in 2020 in Malaysia exacerbate the aging trend (World Bank, 2021). Consequently, Malaysia's aging population faces numerous challenges, including healthcare, social welfare, and financial security, placing significant strain on the healthcare system's capability to meet the rising demand for services (United Nations, 2020). Unfortunately, the elderly population in Malaysia encounters various obstacles that hinder their ability to age successfully, resulting in a lower quality of life (Zainuddin et al., 2020). These challenges encompass financial, social, and institutional constraints. Moreover, the growing demand for elderly care presents difficulties for healthcare systems, necessitating preventive measures in policies to ensure sustainable care that promotes healthy aging (Safian et al., 2021). Table 2 depicts the fertility rate and life expectancy birth at birth in Malaysia.

Table 2: Fertility rate and life expectancy at birth in Malaysia

Year	Fertility rate	Life expectancy at birth
1990	3.3	71
2020	2.0	76

Source: World Bank (2021).

According to Table 2 above, Malaysia's population fertility rate has been continually decreasing since 1990, from 3.3% to 2.0% in 2020, thereby increasing the country's life expectancy at birth. The trend in the fertility rate and life expectancy at birth is expected to pose several issues, such as social welfare, healthcare, and financial security, and thus can have a substantial impact on the quality of life of the elderly population. Preventive measures in policies are therefore needed to ensure sustainable care that promotes healthy aging.

There are a variety of challenges in the lives of older adults as they get older that may have an effect on both their physical and mental health. These challenges can include a reduction in physical and mental capabilities, a sense of loneliness, and isolation (Lee et al., 2020). Two chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and hypertension, were found in 34.7% and 72.6% of older adults aged 60 and above, respectively, that can have a major impact on an individual's overall health and quality of life (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2019). Table 3 shows the stressful situation and chronic illness among older adults in Malaysia.

Table 3: Stressful situations and chronic illnessess of older adults

Characteristic	Percentage of older adults aged 60 and above
Have diabetes	34.7%
Have hypertension	72.6%
Feel lonely	25.2%
Feel isolated	19.7%
Have difficulty performing daily activities	42.1%

Source: Ministry of Health Malaysia (2019).

Table 3 shows that Malaysia’s older adults are more likely to suffer from illness and poor emotional and social well-being. According to Lee et al. (2020), mental health disorders like depression, anxiety, loneliness, and social isolation are frequent problems that older adults encounter.

With the high prevalence of depressive disorders, up to one-third of older adults exhibit depressive symptoms, which is particularly troubling (Wilkinson & Tempest, 2018). Kok and Reynolds (2017) further assert that the occurrence of depression among older adults aged 55 and above stands at 2%, and this percentage tends to increase with advancing age. However, there is a concerning trend among the healthcare community, where many professionals seem to prioritize the physical well-being of older adults while ignoring their mental health concerns (Kenbubpha et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to address these concerns in order to improve the quality of life for older adults in Malaysia.

A part of illness and emotional and social well-being, dementia and anxiety present common challenges for Malaysia's elderly population, posing difficulties for both formal and informal caregiving systems. Elias (2018) highlights that around 38% of senior citizens residing in long-term care facilities in Malaysia experience anxiety. Additionally, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) estimates that the prevalence of dementia among individuals aged 60 and above is 8.5% in Malaysia, equating to more than 260,000 individuals in need of ongoing assistance with daily activities. Table 4 shows the Prevalence of mental health issue of older adults in Malaysia.

Table 4: The prevalence of mental health issues in older adults

Mental Health Issues in older adults	Prevalence in Malaysia (aged 55 and above)
Depression	Up to one-third of older adults exhibit depressive symptoms
Anxiety	38% of senior citizens living in long-term care facilities in Malaysia experience anxiety
Dementia	8.5% of those 60 and older

Source: WHO (2022); Elias (2018).

As can be seen in Table 4, depression, dementia, and anxiety are the most common mental health issues faced by Malaysia’s elderly population. Therefore, these issues need to be adequately addressed, failing which they could pose significant challenges for both the formal and informal caregiving systems. It is important to note that caregivers frequently experience stress due to the ongoing emotional and physical strain of caregiving (Ong et al., 2018). Hence, it is imperative to provide the necessary support to older adults.

The management of deteriorating physical and mental health in older adults relies heavily on social support and the establishment of supportive communities. As posited by Ashaari et al. (2022), older adults who have a strong social support network are more likely to have better mental health outcomes. In light of these challenges, Curran et al. (2020) propose a comprehensive policy agenda for promoting the social well-being of aging population, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of the needs of older adults. This agenda would almost certainly include initiatives and programs to support caregivers, enhance healthcare access, and create a friendly environment for Malaysia’s elderly population.

GERONTOLOGY COUNSELING IN MALAYSIA

There are several public universities in Malaysia that provide gerontology and geriatrics programs, including Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and Universiti Putra Malaysia. It is worth mentioning that these programs primarily focus on the health science and medicine of older adults. However, it is crucial to recognize that there is a lack of dedicated and specialized programs in gerontology counseling, indicating the necessity for further development and the establishment of courses or programs specifically addressing the counseling needs of older adults in Malaysia.

The absence of gerontological counseling courses in Malaysian public universities restricts the ability of counselors to work with elderly clients and address the needs of an aging population (Adnan et al., 2020). Adnan et al. (2020) highlight that counseling programs in Malaysia primarily focus on areas such as family, marriage, and children, with limited attention given to the field of gerontology.

Adnan et al. (2020) propose including gerontology counseling in the curricula of Malaysian public universities to bridge this gap and provide complete counseling services to the aging population. Universities can provide future professionals with the skills and knowledge they need to manage the unique psychological and emotional issues that older adults confront by adding gerontology counseling courses. This would help to improve the general well-being and quality of life of Malaysia's older population.

In order to successfully address the specific needs of older adults and promote sustainable care and health aging strategies, collaboration between counselors and other professionals is essential (Safian et al., 2021). This is very important because the prevalence of unmet health care needs among older adults in Malaysia is reported to be lower than in other countries, standing at 6.6% (Shah et al., 2021). Limited knowledge about healthcare and economic hardships are cited as key reasons for these unmet needs, which therefore require the intervention of professionals such as counselors.

To provide older adults with effective gerontology counseling services, it is necessary to overcome obstacles such as lack of awareness and knowledge, poor family relationships, and low household incomes (Zainuddin et al., 2020). Compared to other age groups, older adults need more care and attention from health care services (Faudzi & Ishak, 2022). Given the counseling profession's dedication to diversity, social justice, and advocacy, it becomes essential to gain a comprehensive understanding of the wide-ranging impact of ageism (Fullen, 2018). By actively combating ageism in areas such as public policy, research, teaching, and direct client services, counseling professionals have the opportunity to mitigate the harmful effects of ageism and foster more positive perceptions of the aging process.

To effectively support the elderly population in Malaysia, it is essential to develop a comprehensive strategy. This strategy should encompass the provision of effective gerontology counseling services, a specialized curriculum for a gerontology counseling academic program, and the implementation of policies that address the variety of challenges faced by older adults. Counselors, healthcare professionals, and policymakers, therefore, must collaborate to ensure the well-being and quality of life of older adults. By working together, these stakeholders may build a supportive and inclusive environment that addresses the special needs of older adults and promotes their overall health and well-being.

GERONTOLOGY COUNSELING COMPETENCY

Research suggests that counselors who have experience working with older adults exhibit a greater interest in pursuing aging-specific continuing education and report higher perceived competence in this area (Schmidt & Steffen, 2022). Schmidt et al. (2022) emphasize the need for more efforts to increase competency for generalists providing care for older adults. This highlights the need to incorporate geriatrics into professional development programs and ensure practitioners have the necessary training and resources.

Gerontology counseling is a specialized field that focuses on supporting older individuals and their families in maintaining physical and mental well-being, navigating challenges, and improving overall quality of life (Dev & Narayan, 2021). It involves interventions, consultations, addressing professional issues, and continuing education and training to cater to the specific needs of older adults (APA, 2014; Bar-Tur, 2021).

The demand for competency assessments in gerontology counseling highlights the importance of practitioners possessing the necessary skills and competencies. The absence of evidence-based guidelines for these assessments can have detrimental effects on older adults, their families, and society (Cohen et al., 2018). Many generalist practitioners provide mental health care for older adults, but they may face difficulties in addressing cognitive complaints and depressive symptoms (Segal et al., 2020). Thus, specialized training in geriatric mental health care is necessary (Blando, 2014) to effectively work with older adults. Schmidt et al. (2022), who emphasize the importance of more efforts to increase competency for generalists providing care for older adults, further emphasize this need for enhanced competency.

Interventions and support systems designed to address age-specific stressors and concerns are effective in fostering the mental health and well-being of older adults (Lee et al., 2020). Additionally, promoting positive attitudes towards aging, good health, happiness, and physical activity contributes to successful aging and benefits society as a whole (Cheng et al., 2021). To facilitate these outcomes, it is crucial for federal and provincial policies to support the development of educational accreditation programs in gerontology. These programs could define the essential competencies required for providing mental health care to older adults and integrate existing regulatory frameworks (Boscart et al., 2017).

Psychologists and practitioners, regardless of their specialization, should possess essential skills in geropsychology to effectively cater to the diverse older adult population. This includes a comprehensive understanding of age-related changes, social and cultural influences, as well as evidence-based interventions specifically tailored to the aging population (Moye et al., 2019).

Hinrichsen et al. (2018) have come up with key elements to help psychologists and other professionals who are new to gerontology counselling. These include attitudes towards older adults, a deep understanding of adult development and ageing, a strong foundation in clinical practices for older adults, proficiency in assessment skills, the use of appropriate interventions, the provision of consultation, and other services. These elements serve as a framework for novice practitioners to successfully work with older adults.

In order to deliver high-quality counseling services to clients from diverse cultural backgrounds, it is crucial for counselors to acquire competence in multicultural counseling (Amat et al., 2020). Gerontology counseling, which addresses the specific needs of older adults, is inherently linked to multicultural counseling as it involves working with individuals from various cultural backgrounds (Vasquez & Johnson, 2022). The development of cultural competence is essential for counselors, as it empowers them to effectively navigate potential misunderstandings and communication challenges that may arise when working with clients from different cultures (Gopalkrishnan, 2019).

In summary, counselors and practitioners should possess essential skills in gerontology and cultural competence to effectively serve the diverse older adult population. This includes understanding age-related changes, providing tailored interventions, and addressing the specific needs of older adults. Efforts to increase competency for generalists in gerontology counseling are crucial, along with incorporating geriatrics into professional development programs. Interventions and support systems that target age-specific stressors contribute to the well-being of older adults, and policies should support the development of educational accreditation programs in gerontology. Overall, a strong foundation in gerontology and cultural competence is necessary to provide high-quality counseling services to older adults.

RECOMMENDATION

To enhance support and care for the aging population in Malaysia, several key recommendations can be implemented. Firstly, it is highly recommended to include gerontology counseling courses within the curricula of Malaysian public universities (Adnan et al., 2020). This initiative would equip future counselors with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively address the unique needs and challenges faced by older adults. By integrating gerontology counseling into the education system, professionals can be better prepared to provide comprehensive counseling services to the aging population.

In addition to curriculum development, it is crucial for Malaysia to establish comprehensive competency standards for gerontology counseling or a gerontological counseling competency model (Lai & Tey, 2021). These standards should be developed in line with the local culture and values of Malaysian elderly individuals. By adopting such standards, counselors can ensure that their practice is guided by evidence-based approaches and tailored to the specific needs of older adults.

The active involvement of gerontological counselors through professional associations, such as the Malaysian Association of Counselors, also known as PERKAMA International, can play a significant role in promoting interest and expertise in the field of elderly care (Adnan et al., 2020). Collaboration within the counseling community and the engagement of novice counselors can lead to the development of a robust network of professionals dedicated to serving the aging population.

Moreover, the Malaysian Board of Counselors can contribute to promoting active aging and the well-being of older individuals by establishing guidelines and regulations that prioritize the needs of older adults (Adnan et al., 2020). By developing competency standards, the board can ensure that gerontology counseling services are provided ethically and effectively, resulting in a higher quality of care for older adults.

The implementation of these recommendations can lead to significant improvements in the well-being and quality of life of the aging population in Malaysia. The integration of gerontology counseling courses, the establishment of competency standards, and the active involvement of professional associations and regulatory bodies can contribute to a comprehensive and holistic approach to gerontology counseling. Through these efforts, counselors can effectively address the unique needs and challenges faced by older adults, promote active aging, and advocate for a society that values and respects older adults.

CONCLUSION

This review article highlights the importance of gerontology counseling competency for counselors in Malaysia in addressing the mental health needs of the aging population. The growing number of older adults in Malaysia necessitates specialized mental health services that cater to their unique requirements. Having gerontology counseling competency enables counselors to understand and address issues related to the life circumstances, social relationships, cognitive decline, and physical limitations of older adult clients.

To enhance the quality of mental health services for the aging population, it is recommended that gerontology counseling competency be integrated into the skillset of counselors in Malaysia. This integration should align with the National Policy for Older Persons (2011), which aims to ensure the mental well-being of the aging population. Incorporating gerontology counseling courses into Malaysia's public universities' curricula and creating competency standards are two ways to achieve this. By doing so, counselors can acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively serve older adults.

In conclusion, by incorporating gerontology counseling competency into counseling practice, Malaysia can better address the mental health needs of the aging population. Ongoing professional development and training in gerontology counseling are crucial for counselors to stay updated with the latest research and practices, enabling them to deliver quality services to older adults. By ensuring the availability of competent and skilled counselors, they can promote the well-being and improve the overall quality of life for the aging population in Malaysia through their practices.

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