

ATTITUDES TOWARDS ELDER MALTREATMENT AMONG MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Maltreatment of older person is a global problem affecting millions of older people worldwide including Malaysia. The existing literature shows that society members who holds negative attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices towards older adults as contributing factors to the maltreatment of older people. With ageing populations rapidly increase, this form of ageism is becoming a pronounced social issue that will affect societies throughout the world in the coming decades. Looking into this unhealthy trend of ageism, which may interrupt the implementation of the elderly policy; it seems that there is a need to embark in a study on a certain population of our society in Malaysia especially on the younger generation. Hence, the objective of this study was to determine the attitudes towards elder maltreatment among undergraduate law students in public universities in Malaysia. Data were collected using self-administered questionnaires which consisted of background profile and 12 items scale on attitudes towards elder maltreatment. Descriptive analysis showed that out of 513 respondents, three fourth were female (74.7%) and 130 (25.3%) were male students. The mean age of the respondents were 22 (SD = 1.834). More than half of them had participated in activities related to the elderly (63.0%), while another 190 of them (37.0%) reported as never attended any activities related to the elderly. Finally, two thirds of the respondents (63.9%) reported to have higher positive attitude against elder maltreatment, while another one third (36.1%) has low positive attitude against elder maltreatment. Findings of this study suggest that there is a need to increase awareness among the younger generations especially among lawyers-to-be on the issues of elder maltreatment as they are generally expected to be part of the joint forces to protect the older person against maltreatment. It is recommended for future research to use wider samples from different population including different programs and courses in an attempt to get a better understanding on the attitude towards elder maltreatment among younger generations in Malaysia.

Key words: Attitude, elder maltreatment and university students.

INTRODUCTION

Maltreatment of older people (or commonly termed as elder abuse) is a global problem, affecting millions of older people worldwide. It was reported that elder abuse caused 2500 deaths a year in Europe (WHO, 2011). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), elder abuse is defined as “a single, or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person” (WHO, 2002a). This definition encompasses harms towards the elderly by people they know or with whom they have a relationship, such as a spouse, partner or family member, a friend or neighbour, or those they rely on for services (Action on Elder Abuse, 1995).

According to the National Centre on Elder Abuse (NCEA, 2008), elder abuse is a term referring to any knowing, intentional, or negligent act by a caregiver or any other person that causes harm or a serious risk of harm to a vulnerable adult. In form, elder abuse may be intentional (active) or unintentional (passive) (Wolf, 1997). Physical abuse is only one among many subtypes of elder abuse, others being psychological abuse, financial abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. Although these subtypes are discrete entities, they are often closely related and interdependent. Most researchers referred to elder abuse as physical abuse, psychological or emotional abuse, financial abuse (or financial exploitation), sexual abuse, and neglect (Cooper, Selwood & Livingston, 2008; Lachs & Pillemer, 2004). Studies conducted have shown that neglect was the most common form of abuse, followed by psychological abuse, financial exploitation, physical abuse, abandonment, and sexual abuse (Sherman, Rosenblatt & Antonucci, 2008).

Meanwhile, according to Tengku Aizan, Husna & Siti Farra Zillah (2012), elder maltreatment is seen as an emerging issue in Malaysia as the country is experiencing rapid population ageing. According to the Malaysian Population and Family Survey by the National Population and Family Development Board (2011), one of three Malaysian elderly aged 60 and above has been abandoned and did not receive any financial support from their children. This is supported from a recent finding that some professionals did not pay financial support to their parents (Rojanah, Muslihah & Sa'odah, 2015). Shockingly, psychological abuse of the elderly appears to be much more prevalent in Asian countries including Malaysia (Rajini, Wan & Noran, 2013); a country where filial piety is very important. This scenario indicated that the traditional cultural expectations of respecting and caring for elderly particularly in Malaysia has slowly been threatened and diminished.

Malaysians older population of 60 years and more have increased from 1.5 million in 2000 to 2.0 million in 2009 and are estimated to reach 3.4 million by the year of 2020. Therefore, Malaysian government has reviewed its National Policy for Older Person in 2011 together with Plan of Action for Older Person (MWFCD, 2012) to acknowledge the older person as citizens with

varied background and experiences that have the right to enjoy a comfortable and respected life and contribute to the development of the nation. This policy shows the higher commitment to create a conducive environment for older person who are independent, with dignity, high sense of self-worth and respect by optimizing their self-potential through a healthy, positive, active, productive, and supportive ageing to lead a well-being life (MWFCD, 2012).

ATTITUDES TOWARDS ELDER MALTREATMENT

Attitude has been defined as either a positive or negative appraisal of a person, place, thing or event based on the beliefs and values of the individual (Matarese et al 2013). Attitudes also have an evaluative component, and there is an enormous body of evidence that points to the consequences of what attitude can have on future behaviours. A study done by Damulak and others (2015) among nursing and medicine students found some disturbing finding where more than half of them have negative attitudes towards older people. These negative attitude towards elderly may results in abuse, negligence, and low quality of care (Vefikulucay-Yilmaz & Terzioğlu, 2011; Akdemir, Gorgulu, & Cinar, 2008; Akdemir, Gorgulu, & Cinar, 2007).

However, the focus of attention in this paper is on the attitude towards elder maltreatment. This is because the concept is critical in determine how the society react with ageing phenomena such as on the issue of elder maltreatment. Literature search found limited studies have been conducted on the attitudes towards elder maltreatment. In a study carried out among rural adults in northern India, there was a positive attitude from almost all respondents regarding negligence of the elderly (Srinivasan & Gupta, 2015). While another study done by Dedeli and others (2013) found that participants believe that elderly abuse and neglect is a social problem and they have professional and individual responsibilities to prevent it. However, both studies have been done among middle-age adults and professional groups.

As Malaysia is at an early stage of having an aged population, there have been relatively few studies conducted on geriatrics and gerontology. Literature search had not shown any studies conducted on the attitudes towards elder maltreatment especially among law students in Malaysia. Previous studies have been concerned with attitudes of health care related students while attitudes of others especially among students in the helping professions such as law students have not been focused upon. On the other hand, among the disciplines, professionals such as lawyers played an important role in civil rights movements. Lawyers help to raise awareness of rights violations and instigating litigation aimed at inciting systemic reform especially among issues related to elder rights (Kohn, 2010). Hence, it is important to examine the attitudes of those lawyers-to-be on the issues of elder maltreatment.

Additionally, in the 21st century, young adult is seen as increasingly taking responsibility and role as main caregiver to their family members especially older parents (Baldwin, Pope, & Marks, 2017; Nurhilmayani, 2015; Siti Hajar et al, 2014). However, these young caregivers (ages 18 to 40) are remain under-researched although they are more risky as most of them are still pursuing their study, in the early phase of family formation through marriage and childbirth and entering a phase of career development (Levine et al., 2005; Aquilino & Supple, 1991; Bumpass, 1990). As such, it is really important to assess their attitudes towards elderly particularly in maltreatment issue because they are also having a role as adult children who will take care of their older parents.

The existing literature shows that society members holds negative attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices towards older adults (Nelson, 2016, Ray, Sharp, & Abrams, 2006; Nelson, 2005; Yip, 2010; Yusof & Zulkifli, 2014). This is considered as one form of ageism. Ageism is referred to as “a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old” (Butler, 1975). With ageing populations rapidly increase, this form of ageism is becoming a pronounced social issue that will affect societies throughout the world in the coming decades and particularly in Malaysia. Looking into this unhealthy trend of ageism, which may interrupt the implementation of the elderly policy; it seems that there is a need to embark in a study on a certain population of our society in Malaysia especially on the younger generation. Hence, the objective of this study was to determine the attitudes towards elder maltreatment among undergraduate law students in public universities in Malaysia. The next section of this paper will present the methodology used in this study, while the following sections will discuss the results and discussions, conclusion, implications, limitations and recommendations in the final section.

METHODS

The study design was descriptive and cross sectional. The target population for the study was third year and final year undergraduate students who enrolled in law courses in seven public universities in Malaysia. This study employed quota sampling technique to select the respondents. According to the statistics provided by the Ministry of Higher Education (2017), based on the academic year of 2016, the number of law students' enrolment in the public university was 6,106. Therefore, to determine the sample size, a sampling formula and table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) was used in this study. Based on the number of population, the minimum sample size required in this study was 364. However, after calculating for a 10% of a drop-out rate, a completion of 400 respondents was required to achieve a degree of confidence (Kadam & Bhalerao, 2010).

Prior to the data collection, the study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects University Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM) [FEM-P158 2017] to make sure the study is a good research practice and conduct which can include intellectual honesty, accuracy, fairness, intellectual property, and protection of human subjects involved in the research. Permission was also sought from each respective faculty to ensure participation from the respondents. The students' participation in this study was voluntary and the process did not involve any risk on the part of the respondents, be it physical or psychological. Informed written consent was obtained from the respondents after explaining the purpose of the study. The

questionnaires were self-administered in Malay and English Languages. Approximately 20 to 30 minutes were required to complete the questionnaires for each respondent. Tokens were given to all respondents as appreciation for their involvement. The questionnaire contained background profiles including age, gender, ethnicity, religion, current year of study and questions regarding their participation in any elderly-related activities. Attitudes towards elder maltreatment were measured using 12-items that were adapted from a study by Srinivasan and Gupta (2015). The 6-point Likert scale items included the attitude of blaming the elderly for their abuse (7-items) and attitude of social responsibility towards elder abuse (5-items). The scale's Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient for 12-items was .76. According to Chua (2006b), the value of Cronbach alpha that above .65 was considered as sufficient for consistencies.

The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 21 was used to analyze the data. The background profiles were described using frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation. Likert scale (6 point) ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree were grouped into two major categories in order to describe the frequency and percentage of agreement and disagreement to each of the items of attitudes scale. The cut off point for the scale was based on mean score. Higher score indicated more positive attitude against elder maltreatment, while lower score indicated less positive attitude against elder maltreatment.

RESULTS

Background characteristics of the respondents were described in Table 1. Out of 513 respondents, majority (75.7%) was 22 years old and below. The mean age of the respondents were 22 (SD = 1.834) with minimum age of 19 and maximum age of 41. Three fourth were female (74.7%) and 130 (25.3%) were male students. While for ethnicity, majority of the respondents (73.3%) were Malay, followed by Chinese (18.9%), Indian (4.1%) and others (3.7%). More than half of the respondents (58.3%) were third year students, while the rest (41.7%) was final year students.

Table 1: Background of the respondents (N = 513)

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean (SD)
Age			22 (1.834)
< 22	387	75.7	
> 23	126	24.5	
Gender			
Male	130	25.3	
Female	383	74.7	
Ethnic			
Malay	376	73.3	
Chinese	97	18.9	
Indian	21	4.1	
Others	19	3.7	
Year of study			3.42(.494)
3	299	58.3	
4	214	41.7	

Table 2 illustrated the respondents' participation in any activities related to the elderly. Descriptive analysis shows that more than half of them had participated in activities related to the elderly (63.0%), while another 190 of them (37.0%) reported as never attended any activities related to the elderly.

Table 2: Participation in any activities related to elderly among respondents (N = 513)

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	323	63.0
No	190	37.0

Table 3 shows that two thirds of the respondents (63.9%) reported to have higher positive attitude against elder maltreatment, while another one third (36.1%) has low positive attitude against elder maltreatment. The mean of total score was 20 (SD = 2.235).

Table 3: Level of attitude towards elder maltreatment of the respondents (N = 513)

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low	185	36.1
High	328	63.9

Table 4 reported the mean scores for every item of the scale on the attitudes of the respondents towards elder maltreatment. As shown in Table 4, item numbers 11 reported to have higher mean score (M = 1.98; SD = .151). This indicates that majority of the respondents (97.7%) agreed on the statement that “elder abuse is a criminal act”, while only 2.3% believed that elder abuse was not a criminal act. The lowest mean score was for item number 5, whereby more than two-thirds of the respondents (76.0%) did not agree with the statement that “if the elderly and the young lived separately, there would be no violence.” The frequency results also shows that more than half of the respondents agreed on item number 1 until item number 4. These four items assessed the elderly behaviour that leads to abuse and neglect such as complaining, nagging and provoking. For item number 5 to item number 7, those were related to the settings where abuse can occur. Two-thirds of the respondents disagreed that abuse can only occurred at home or while the elderly were with their children. Additionally, the frequency results also show that for item number 8 and item number 11, majority of the respondents agreed on the statement that “elder abuse is a social problem” and “it can be considered as criminal act.” Lastly, for item number 9 and item number 10 of the scale, it was reported that majority of the respondents agreed on the statement “preventing elder abuse as one of their responsibilities and also as professional liabilities as a lawyer-to-be.”

Table 4: Attitudes towards elder maltreatment (N = 513)

	Items	Agree Frequency n (%)	Disagree Frequency n (%)	Mean (SD)
1	The elderly often complain and nag, which leads to abusive behaviour.	295 (57.5)	218 (42.5)	1.58 (.495)
2	The elderly are demanding, which leads to violent behaviour of the people in their household.	313 (61.0)	200 (39.0)	1.61 (.488)
3	The behaviour of the elderly provokes aggressive behaviour in young people which leads to abuse.	318 (62.0)	195 (38.0)	1.62 (.486)
4	The elderly would be less exposed to violence if they had more understanding of the problems of their adult children.	337 (65.7)	176 (34.3)	1.66 (.475)
5	If the elderly and the young lived separately, there would be no violence.	123 (24.0)	390 (76.0)	1.24 (.427)
6	The elderly would experience less violence if they didn't live with their children.	144 (28.1)	369 (71.9)	1.28 (.450)
7	If the elderly lived in a nursing home with their peers, less family violence would occur.	196 (38.2)	317 (61.8)	1.38 (.486)
8	Elder abuse and neglect is a social problem.	482 (94.0)	31 (6.0)	1.94 (.239)
9	Preventing to elderly abuse and neglect I think I have responsibilities.	500 (97.5)	13 (2.5)	1.97 (.157)
10	Preventing to elderly abuse and neglect I think I have professional liabilities.	459 (89.5)	54 (10.5)	1.89 (.307)
11	Elder abuse is a criminal act.	501 (97.7)	12 (2.3)	1.98 (.151)

	Items	Agree Frequency n (%)	Disagree Frequency n (%)	Mean (SD)
12	When I witnessed to elderly abuse and neglect, reporting is my individual responsibility.	498 (97.1)	15 (2.9)	1.97 (.169)

DISCUSSION

This paper focuses on the attitudes towards elder maltreatment among undergraduate law students in the Malaysian public universities. The present study found that there was a positive attitude from most of the students regarding the issues of elder maltreatment. According to Chountoumadi and Pateraki (1997), attitude expresses the perception of a person towards a human being, an object or a condition, which is developed by the person's experiences and defines his or her reactions. This finding is in line with previous studies which also reported the same from almost all the respondents involved in the studies (Srinivasan & Gupta, 2015; Dedeli, Yildiz & Kiyancicek, 2013). In a study carried out among rural adults in northern India, it was found that there was a positive attitude from almost all respondents regarding negligence towards the elderly (Srinivasan & Gupta, 2015). Hence, this finding shed some light where this positive attitude reflected that the respondents are aware and condemned the acts or behaviour of elder maltreatment.

A potential explanation regarding positive attitude among the respondents is perhaps on the exposure and participation of the students with activities related to the elderly. Past research has shown that gaining education related to ageing will increase empathy and enhance attitudes towards older adults (Levy, 2016; Wu, 2011; Wells, Foreman, Gething, & Petralia, 2004). For example, Bergman and others (2014) found that experiential learning such as service learning, internship, and field placement can lead to lower ageism. In addition, as proven by past studies, the individual knowledge, observations and experience will help them to form attitude (Hess, 2006; Schwarz, 2007; Thorpe, Pearson, Schluter, Spittlehouse, & Joyce, 2014). The present study found that more than half of the respondents had experienced with the elderly through their participation in elderly-related activities. Recently, many university students have involved with community projects that targeted the older populations particularly through university's approach. An example can be seen in University Putra Malaysia (UPM) where community services become part of the curriculum or subject requirement. Students are active in community and volunteer services. A course called 'Kursus Bakti Siswa' which allows students to offer community services is a compulsory subject for all students in order to graduate. 'Kursus Bakti Siswa' offers both holistic skills that are capable of instilling human capital values among students and soft skills that guide them on how to carry out community-oriented activities (UPM).

On top of that, initiatives were also made from the academicians to conduct knowledge transfer programs which allow students' involvement also in community linkages. For example, students from Faculty of Human Ecology, UPM were involved with the community in Pulau Redang, Kuala Terengganu through project namely Jelajah Siswa Kembara Insan (JESKI) for three consecutive years (2014-2016) and one of the main objective was to create awareness and caring individuals towards the elderly in Pulau Redang (Faculty of Human Ecology, 2017). Students from University of Science Malaysia (USM) also involved with the elderly community such as through a program called Titian Budi Semarak Kasih in Pulau Pinang (Utusan Online, 2016). There was also a program that has been done in old folks home by students from Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM) at Red Spot Home Care (Zaini, 2016). These community programs are focusing to boost positive social interactions among younger generations and older people in order to make them feel engaged.

However, the present study also found that there are still a number of respondents reported to have lower positive attitude against elder abuse. Past study emphasized that one of the factors associated with such attitude was low filial responsibility (Damulak, Minhat & Rahman, 2015). Filial responsibility is defined as a social or cultural norm regarding the behavior of children to take care of older parents. It can be considered as an individual attitude or belief which is related to the obligation that potentially motivates caregiving behaviors (Chappell & Funk, 2011; Gans & Silverstein, 2006). Why this situation is happening in our society that strongly values the tradition of filial obligation and family support toward aged members? Ageing is an inevitable biological process for every living person. Regrettably, society members that holds negative attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices towards older adults is considered as one form of ageism (Nelson, 2016, Ray, Sharp, & Abrams, 2006; Nelson, 2005). With ageing populations rapidly increase, this form of ageism is becoming a pronounced social issue that will affect societies throughout the world in the coming decades.

Additionally, this study also highlights that majority of the respondents agreed that elder abuse and neglect as a criminal act and also a social problem. They also agreed that it is their responsibility to prevent the act of abuse. This finding is consistent with a previous study which reported that majority of the adult respondents (95%) agreed that elder abuse and neglect are social problem. All respondents (100%) agreed that they have responsibility of preventing elder abuse and negligence (Srinivasan & Gupta, 2015). Since the issue of elder maltreatment has been recognized as a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon, these responses suggest that there is intolerance among the students on the issues related to elder maltreatment.

CONCLUSION

In general, most of the respondents in this study sample i.e. the university students display positive attitude regarding the issues of elder maltreatment, although there are still a number of them reported to have lower attitude on that issue. Study impliedly

reveals that continues efforts are needed to increase awareness among the younger generations especially among lawyers-to-be on the issues of elder maltreatment as they are generally expected to be part of the joint forces to protect the older person against maltreatment. Hence, public education and awareness can be seen as powerful tools to bring changes in the attitudes of our society especially the younger generations. Our Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 also emphasizes that every graduate should have the relevant disciplinary knowledge and skills (ilmu), ethics and morality (akhlak), as well as the appropriate behaviours, mindsets, cultural, and civilisational literacy (beradab) to advance them to a high level of personal well-being. They will become global citizens with a strong Malaysian identity, ready and willing to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, society, nation, and global community (Ministry of Education, 2015). As such, initiative should be made in the university settings through specific courses and voluntarism programs to continuously encourage for the establishment of enabling environments towards development of caring society in facing the ageing phenomena.

It is important to note that the limitation of this study is that the sample was taken from undergraduates law students among Malaysian public university only, thus the results of this study may not be generalized to represent the whole undergraduates students in Malaysia. Future research using wider samples from different population including different programs and courses should be conducted in order to get a full picture of attitudes towards elder maltreatment among younger generations in Malaysia. Also, the respondents for this study were identified through non-random sampling methods, i.e. quota samplings, which limit the findings of this study to only the particular sample of the study. Therefore, future studies are recommended to maximize random assignment during data collection, so as to ensure the generalization of results to the general population of the young persons.

Since the present study is a descriptive research, the result should be interpreted cautiously due to its design that is generally employed to describe variables like background factors and attitude towards elder maltreatment among respondents. In assessing attitude towards elder maltreatment among young generations, different other variables need to be taken into consideration in future research. The current study was also based on self-report survey by the respondents. The self-report method has some limitations which might affect the reliability of the measurements. The students' responses might also be biased because of defensive or social desirability mechanisms.

Above all, this study has emphasized the importance of inculcating positive attitudes among younger generations towards the elderly and encourages them to work together in preventing elder maltreatment. The aforesaid efforts will support the smooth implementation of the Malaysia Elderly Policy and in the long run it will improve the well-being of the older persons.

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