

## Modes of Social Relationships of Older Persons with Their Neighbors

<sup>1</sup>W.A. Wan-Ibrahim and <sup>2</sup>I. Zainab

<sup>1</sup>School of Social Development, Universiti Utara Malaysia,  
06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,  
43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

**Abstract:** One of the most obvious demographic changes in Malaysia in this century is an increase in the number and proportion of older persons. This increasing, known as the aging of population, has become a trend not only in developed countries but in developing ones as well. The purpose of this article is to analyze the modes of social relationships of the older population in rural Kelantan with their neighbors. By using a combination of sociological and anthropological method, a total of 214 older persons aged 60 years and above in rural Kelantan were selected. Data gathered through face-to-face interviews and participant-observation was analyzed using descriptive approach. As all respondents in the study area live in an agricultural area which comprised of several houses and have neighbors nearby. Results of the study reveal that there are three common modes of social relationships among the elderly respondents, namely, telephone, visit and face to face relationships in certain places such as at gathering centers, night markets, or at certain parties. Respondents believed that neighbors are the main source of relationship in their lives.

**Key words:** Relationships • Elderly • Population aging • Fertility

### INTRODUCTION

As human beings are social creatures, all human beings cannot live in isolated. Thus, social relationship is particularly important to well-being. Especially when age-related losses accumulate, personal relationship can become critical to an older adult's adaptation and well-being [1]. Extended loss of social contact typically leads to feeling of emptiness, depression and unhappiness [1]. When a person ages, he started to encounter physiological, social and psychological changes and most older persons find their family an important source of support in later life. Although social support can be provided by many parties, most social support derives from family and friends and the provision of support is possible only within personal or social relationships [1]. Thus, social relationship is, therefore very important to all human beings.

The older person in this article is defined as persons aged 60 years and above. There are two concepts related to the older persons need to be discussed, namely

population aging and individual aging. Population aging refers to the increasing proportion of older population (age 60 and above) and at the same time decreasing proportion of infants and children (0-14 years) [2]. The increasing proportion of older age category in the total population is due to the declining in birthrate and a rise in life expectancy. The decreasing numbers of births and longer life expectancy which resulting in the growing number of older population creates the so-called the aging of population. Individual aging, on the other hand, refers to the aging happens to all people, starting from infancy to the moment of death [3]. It is related to the process of human development. The life-span perspective divides human development into two phases: an early phase as childhood and adolescence and a later phase as young adult, middle age and old age [4]. Thus, every individual will be experienced the process of aging and will be passing through stages as infancy, children, adolescents, adults and finally, old age. People in old age are often referred to as older people.

**Corresponding Author:** W.A. Wan-Ibrahim, School of Social Development,  
Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia.

Demographic aging is now seen as a global phenomenon. Although this demographic aging varies widely according to geographic regions, all nations are now experiencing the growing number of older population. What are different are only the speed and the extent of population aging [5]. There are countries that have experiencing the fast growing of older population and are already entered the status of aging society, while others are very slow and still have a very low proportion of older persons. These all are depending on the level of demographic transition in those countries.

Demographic transition is a term used to explain the level of mortality and fertility transition from higher to lower levels. The level of demographic transition varies from country to country depending on the level of social and economic conditions, or the level of modernization of a country. Modernization which started some decades ago, in the middle and the second half of the XX century [6] has created demographic transition. Decreasing in fertility rates means a small number of younger age group will enter into a population. Improvements in medicine and health facilities, sanitation and education that reduced the mortality rates, among infants and the young and at older ages have made it possible for people to live longer and healthier lives [7]. Because all countries in the world are experiencing demographic aging, now the world is said to have a rich of older persons [8].

Researchers have documented much about the life of older persons in Malaysia. Despite there have been a large number of studies to explore the daily life of older people, the nature of social relationships of this category of population are still relatively unexamined. Very sparse information is available about the social relationships of older people. In an attempt to fill the gap, therefore, the aim of this article is to analyze the modes of social relationships of rural elderly with their neighbors.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This article presents the findings of a survey on social relationships of older rural population in Malaysia with their neighbors. This study using a mixed-methods research approach which is a combination of the sociological method of face-to-face interviews and the anthropological method of participant-observation. The data reported in this paper is part of a larger study conducted on the rural elderly to explore the factors affecting the well-being of these elderly in the state of Kelantan, Malaysia.

From that study, a wide range of data has been collected. Relevant to this paper are variables related to social relationships of the elderly with their spouse, children and other family members, including neighbors and friends. Population from which samples of the study were drawn, was older people aged 60 years and above numbered 1 067 living in rural areas in the district of Limbongan, Kelantan, Malaysia. Out of this number, 20% of them, which is a total of 214 older population are selected as respondents using simple random sampling technique. The study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data. Major data for the quantitative analysis are derived from face-to-face interviews. Data were collected during 90-minute structured interviews conducted in respondents home by four professional interviewers. Data for qualitative analysis are derived from unstructured interviews, information from key informants and field observation.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Socio Demographic Profiles:** As in any other community elsewhere, due to the fact that the life expectancy of older women is higher, the majority of the elderly population is women, but in this study the majority of the respondent is man. The average age of respondents was 68 years, while median and mod of age was 67 and 60 years respectively. The age of oldest respondent was 95. When this age is categorized into four categories, that is 60-64 years, 65-69 years, 70-74 years and 75 years+, 40% of the respondent was in 60-64 years category. The number of respondents in other three categories was quite similar, around 20%. In terms of marital status, three respondents were never married. The respondents who currently married were 143, four divorced and 64 respondents were widow/widower. In the never married category, 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 higher number of male respondents who currently married and the higher number of female respondents who currently divorced was related to the fact that the higher tendency the elderly male to be remarried after the death of their spouse.

The educational level of the respondents was quite low, reflected the level of academic achievements among the Malaysians as a whole before Malaysia gained independence from British in the past several decades. At that time not many people, especially in rural areas, has the opportunity to attend formal school. More than half of

them were never attend formal school (58%). Around one-third has an elementary school level. The elderly woman who did not attend formal school was higher than the elderly man.

**Modes of Social Relationships of Older Persons with Neighbors:** As human beings are social creatures, as described above, relationships are critically important and extended loss of social contact typically leads to unhappiness [1]. According to activity theory, it is necessary for older persons to maintain or develop substantial levels of social, physical and mentally activity if the aging experience is to be successful [9]. Villagers in study area, or in Kelantan in general, as well as villagers elsewhere, many of which live in a small village which may be either grouping of several houses in an agricultural area, along the river or road, or consisting of two or three houses isolated from other villages. Therefore, there are people who do not have neighbors, but if they have, the number of neighbor's house is not so much. This situation is also a general phenomenon in the study area. Many older persons live in a house situated near or surrounded by three or four houses. When asked about how many of these neighbors that they can depend on if they are having problems, an average was an older adult has two neighbors they can depend on. Respondents believe the neighbors are the main source of relationship in their lives.

Relationship with neighbors in this article is restricted to relationship with neighbors. Of the 214 respondents interviewed, 210 of them have neighbors nearby, while four did not have neighbor as their houses are isolated. Thus the relationship between older persons with their neighbors in this article is only involves of these 210 older persons. There are three common forms of relationships among respondents, namely, (1) by telephone conversation, (2) visit and (3) face to face relationships.

**Telephone Conversation:** Telephone is one of the medium of communication that provides a link between persons which are separated by geographical distance. Through telephone, persons who live far away can have a conversation without face-to-face contact. Nowadays, telephone is no more a luxury item. Even for those who live in remote areas, telephone is not a strange item. At the time of the survey not many older persons having telephone at home. Of the 214 respondents, there were 78 of them have telephone at home. For these older persons, telephone was one way to interact with their neighbors.

One of the respondents said as they have telephone, they can have relationships with neighbors through telephone. Since not all older people have this facility, this usage is not widely used to interact. Observations show that not many respondents in the study area have telephone because of the low level of income. Observations also show that the majority of the population in the study area also does not have telephone at home. Study area is situated in rural areas and the majority of the population living below than the poverty line. Although Malaysia has experienced rapid economic growth in recent years, the number of older rural people, particularly in study areas, living in poverty is still visible. For these people, what is more important is basic need. Telephone is still considered as a luxury item.

**Visits:** Visiting are important for getting and exchange of certain kind of help between older persons and their neighbors. This is due to the fact that there are types of help could not be given in the absence of face-to-face contact. Very often at a village level, visit becomes an important mode of interaction. Most of older persons in study area are not socially isolated. This is due to the fact that some of the respondents have neighbors living nearby. From the observation, houses of some of the elderly respondents are grouped together into clusters consisting of two or three houses. Family members continue to be involved in older person's social relationships, results in interaction between the elderly with their neighbors as well as with other community members through visit become a common practice.

It has been expected that neighbors provide time, goods and whatever necessary including instrumental and emotional support for neighbors in need. In gerontology, neighbor is one of the important elements in informal support. Community member who never interact with others is not accepted by other community members. On a whole, all of the neighbors visited older persons during three week before the study. All respondents also visited their neighbors during the time frame. When asked to the respondents whether they also visit their neighbors, all older persons reported they visit their neighbors prior the study. Thus, visiting among respondents and their neighbors is a common form of relationships among the elderly respondents in the community.

**Face-to-Face Relationships:** Apart from phone and visit, the older persons also had a relationship among themselves at informal meeting centers through face-to-

face relationship. Every individual is normally quite often engaged in face-to-face relationship. Almost in every village in the study area there are informal meeting centers. Such centers may be located in mosques or *surau*, coffee shops or grocery stores, or anywhere else that fit for them together. Very often the most popular informal meeting centers are coffee shops, or for the more Islamic older persons, they gathered at the mosque. During the study, nearly every time there are three or four older people gathered themselves at these meeting places.

The older persons may also meet their neighbors and friends when they attend any gatherings, such as holding dinner, *tahlil*, death, visiting the sick or other activities that may be held by community members. When attending this event, they are meeting their friends. They can meet their friends who live far away. It is at this time they can get information about their friends who live somewhere else who do not come to the particular party. As a token of the respondents remember their friends who do not come to the particular party, they usually will send greetings to such friends.

The place of face-to-face relationship is quite different between the personal and social backgrounds of the older persons. The more religious elderly are likely to use mosques or *surau* as their meeting places. It is not difficult to find *surau* in study area. Any religious activities are normally is conducted in these places. Religious classes for the villagers, celebration the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, among other activities, are conducted in these places. Mosque in study area, or in Malay community in general, besides to be used for prayer five times a day, it is also used for the Friday prayer, whilst *surau* generally will not be used for Friday prayer.

In a broad sense, the older persons in the study area can be divided into two groupings; the more religious elderly and the layman elderly. The more religious elderly men normally use mosques or *surau* as their meeting places, while the laymen elderly men are likely to choose coffee shops, grocery stores, or anywhere else that fit for them together. Most respondents are not actively participated in economic activities anymore, thus they are using these places to be engaged in face-to-face social relationships.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article is to analyze the mode of social relationships of the older population in rural Kelantan with their neighbors. As human beings are social creatures, social relationship is particularly

important to well-being. Loss of social relationship typically leads to feeling of unhappiness. In most cases the provision of support is possible only within personal or social relationships. Result of the study revealed that all respondents in the study area live in an agricultural area which comprised of several houses and have neighbors nearby. Result also showed that there were three common forms of social relationships among the elderly respondents, namely, telephone, visit and face to face in certain places such as at gathering centers, night markets, or at certain parties. All the neighbors came to visit the respondents and likewise the respondents. Face-to-face relationship is also an important mode of relationship at the village level. Respondents believed neighbors are important and they are the main source of relationship in their lives.

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