

Original Article

Sociocultural aspects of the aged: A case study in Indonesia

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In the year 2020, the life expectancy in Indonesia will be 71.7 years and the proportion of older people will be between 10 and 11% or 30 million persons. Presently, older men are mostly married, while older women are mostly divorced. Older men are the heads of the household, while older women are spouses or parents in the household. Older women mostly do not have any formal education, while older men have primary and intermediate education. Older men are mostly literate, while older women are illiterate. Monthly income of older women is mostly below US\$5, while that of older men is above US\$10. The objective of the present study was to illustrate intracultural perception of older people in five ethnic groups in Indonesia: Batak, Java, Pendalungan (mixed Java and Madurese), Bali, and Buginese. The sociocultural and operation research technique was used in the study. A total of 300 informants participated in the study. They were divided into groups that consisted of 10 informants. The groups were differentiated based on family status, gender, and socioeconomic status. Semi-structure group discussions (SSGD) were limited to 1–1.5 h of discussion using two study instruments: ethnography flow chart and theme guide matrix. Themes discussed in the SSGD were (i) cultural ideas of ageing; (2) the needs of older people; and (iii) intracultural perception of themes such as older person health, communication, and socioeconomics. Perspectives of cultural perception given by informants showed that their conceptualized opinions were based mainly on their sociocultural, socioeconomic and sociogeographical backgrounds.

Key words: Ageing, ethnography, Indonesia, SCOR technique, sociocultural.

Introduction

Life expectancy of the population in Indonesia has steadily risen from 45.7 years in 1970 to 59.8 years in 1990. It is estimated that life expectancy will increase by 10 years within three decades. The aged population, in the case of Indonesia and other developing countries, (i.e. those 60 years and above), will increase in proportion of total population from 7.4% or 15.4 million in 1999 to between 10 and 11% or 30–40 million older people in 2020.

Presently there are six provinces in Indonesia in which the proportion of older people is above 7%, namely Yogyakarta (13.72%), East Java (10.54%), Bali (9.79%), Central Java (9.55%), West Sumatera (9.08%) and South Sulawesi (7.63%).¹ A proportion of the older population of 7% or above is considered to be an indication of an ageing society in developing countries. However, aged society in developed countries comprises 10% of the total population.

The profile of the older population in Indonesia according to 1997–1998 the Central Statistical Bureau is the following: (i) more elderly males (40%) are married compared to elderly females (20%); (ii) more elderly females (30%) are divorced compared to elderly males (10%) (they may be either divorced whose spouse has died or is still alive); (iii) more elderly males (40%) are heads of households compared to elderly females (20%); (iv) more elderly females (35%) are spouses or parents of heads of households compared to elderly males (5%); (v) more elderly females (40%) have no schooling compared to elderly males (15%); (vi) more elderly males (30%) have primary and secondary

education compared to elderly females (15%); (vii) more elderly males (35%) are literate compared to elderly females (20%); (viii) more elderly females (30%) are illiterate compared to elderly males (15%); (ix) more females (45%) earn wages of 50 000 rupiahs (US\$5) or less compared to elderly males (15%); and (x) more elderly males (30%) earn wages of 100 000 rupiahs (US\$10) or more compared to elderly females (10%).²

This is despite the fact that the male:female ratio is below 1, meaning that there are slightly more women than men in Indonesia. Indicators such as marital status, relationship to head of household, level of education, illiteracy, and monthly wages, all favour elderly men. Elderly women, especially in the rural areas, are usually very old, living mostly alone, neglected due to ignorance, living poorly on subsistence economy, and chronically ill with multiple degenerative diseases. These frail elderly should be the focus of social welfare assistance both by the public and private sector.

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The objective of the present case study is to illustrate intracultural perception of older people in five ethnic groups of Indonesia. These ethnic groups are the following: (i) Batak in Samosir island North Sumatra; (ii) Java in Kraton district of Yogyakarta; (iii) Pentalungan or mixed Java–Madurese in Situbondo of East Java; (iv) Balinese in Buleleng of north Bali; and (v) Buginese in Wajo of South Sulawesi.

Methods

The sociocultural and operation research (SCOR) technique was used in the present study.³ Six groups consisting of 10 informants each were then divided according to the following: (i) whether they were older people or adult children serving as informal caregiver; (ii) gender; and (iii) socioeconomic status.

Older persons met twice and discussed local ethnography and programme needs. Themes related to ethnography consisted of kinship, inheritance, marriage system, and family responsibility. Themes related to programme needs consisted of economy, health, social, security and religion or mental spiritual.

Semi-structured group discussion (SSGD) consisted of a 1–1.5-h meeting in which their discussion was based on two qualitative research instruments, namely (i) ethnographic flow chart and (ii) theme discussion guide matrix. The ethnographic flow chart was used interactively between the facilitator and elderly or adult children so that the ultimate results of the SSGD discussion was based on consensus among discussion group participants. In contrast, the theme discussion matrix provided a guide or list of important discussion items to be addressed by SSGD discussion group participants.

Results

Cultural ideas on ageing based on ethnography flow chart

Most daughters provided additional assistance and care for their parents compared to sons (Batak). However, parents felt ashamed of accepting it.

The eldest son is economically responsible for his older parents, and daughters are in charge of caregiving, especially those living nearby (Java and Bali).

Responsibility for taking care of parents is given to employed children, especially those living with parents (Buginese).

Traditionally, there is a clear-cut division between the function of male and female children. Sons are responsible for financially supporting their elder parents, while daughters are responsible for caregiving to the elderly parents. The assumption is that the eldest son will be the most financially established, but this is not always the case. Although the responsibility for caregiving to the elderly parents will be given to the youngest daughter who is usually not yet married, this is not always the case, and sometimes unmarried older daughters still living with the parents are given this responsibility of care.

Older person needs based on theme discussion guide matrix

Older people generally seek medical assistance from the local health provider (Batak). Older people did not receive special public services such as discounts, transportation, or health services.

Drug availability for older people was sufficient (Java and Bali). However, special discounts were not applied universally for older patients.

Family care is the basis for treatment of illness in the family (Buginese).

In more rural areas such as south Sulawesi, treatment of illness begins at home. These illnesses are usually minor; however, the local health provider treats more serious ones. In fact, all areas used the local health facilities in cases of illness suffered by the elderly. What is of real concern is that the rural elderly, due to lack of information and not being empowered, are often unable to access public facilities given to senior citizens such as discounts especially related to transportation.

Intracultural perception on older person health

These key messages have been translated from the local dialect: (i) health maintenance is better than disease alleviation (Batak); (ii) be healthy, eat good food, and check your health regularly; (iii) be patient and tolerant to others, be a complete person (Java and Bali); and (iv) maintain your health to prevent illness (Buginese).

All cultures stated that prevention is better than treatment. In the case of Java and Bali, being able to maintain a sound mind enables them to be a more complete and wiser person. The elderly, by being more optimistic and productive according to our informants, would enable them to be healthier and able to prevent stress, depression or even dementia.

Intra-cultural perception of communication in older people

These key messages have been translated from the local dialect: (i) maintaining good relationship with your neighbours and community is more advantageous (Batak); (ii) frequent conversation with others makes us (older people) feel happy and have a clear conscience (Java and Bali); (iii) activity in traditional arts makes us (older people) feel younger and comfortable (Buginese).

All cultures advocate maintaining a good relationship with neighbours and the surrounding community. Frequent communication is necessary for older people, especially with their peers and younger generations such as grandchildren and children. This activity enables them to maintain a degree of concentration and prevents them from being demented. Interactive dialogue between older people and the younger generation is important in bridging the gap between generations and providing a forum for better understanding of problems faced by both parties related to communication, idealism, and sharing of immediate resources. These initiatives should be institutionalized in societal efforts to promote a society for all age groups.

Intracultural perception on older person socioeconomics

These key messages have been translated from the local dialect: (i) always live productive lives in order to support the family economy (Batak); (ii) be independent, active, and creative; (iii) be a family facilitator, advisor, and motivator; (iv) be active and productive or serve the community (Java and Bali); (v) always fulfil your older parents' needs even though you're far away (Buginese).

All culture advocates the concept of empowerment of the elderly through independence and productivity. In the case of the rural elderly, they are often the main bread earners, not only in supporting themselves but also the extended family. In Java the concept of independence and productivity in the elderly is through being active and creative, especially in the family and community. Functions such as facilitating, advising and motivating are all considered to be the responsibility of the elderly parents. In contrast, for sea-faring children, especially in a maritime community such as the Buginese, a child should never forget their elderly parents' welfare even if they are far away.

Conclusion

Perspectives of cultural perception given by older people and adult children showed that their conceptualized opinions were based on sociocultural, socioeconomic and socio-geographical backgrounds.

In all cultures there are definite family roles and responsibilities for the elderly parents, sons and daughters. Health-seeking behaviour begins in the immediate family followed by the local health provider. Communication within the family and immediate community is of the utmost importance for the elderly as regards maintaining their independence and productivity.

Finally, in this global era with limitless boundaries, there will be great demand for rapid sociocultural appraisal in identifying peoples' needs, especially in diverse communities of largely populated and large geographical countries such as Indonesia.

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