

Empowering The Older People Through Research: A Methodological Argument¹

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Abstract

Basically, research is one of the ways to discover new knowledge about a social phenomenon. In research, the methodology to unveil and understand the phenomenon as the subject matter under scrutiny is important. Similarly, the unit of analysis and parameter investigated would determine the extent of the research. Of late, the issue of older person has becoming the central focus of many researchers in this country. They are the unit of analysis in research. As a unit of analysis in its social environment, the elderly people is open to be manipulated purely as data provider by researcher in his/her endeavour to discover new body of knowledge. As such, older people is an object. This paper, however, tries to suggest that there is a methodology that can change the status of the older people in research. What are the techniques used that could empower the older people during the research process is also discussed. The discussion is mainly based on the philosophical and ideological stand of a qualitative approach to study older people which is in line with the idea of empowering them as stipulated in the National Policy of the Elderly of the country.

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Introduction

This article is not a review of literature on social gerontology in Malaysia. It is rather a discourse on research about older people and its methodological issue. The article is divided into four sections, firstly about the value of research in the discipline of social gerontology as a new field in Malaysia; secondly, the relation between research about older people and Malaysian National Policy for the Elderly, and thirdly the research parameters. The discourse is basically based on various research projects under the Malaysia Intensification of Research in Priority Areas (IRPA). Most of these research projects are carried out by Institute of Gerontology, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Malaysia National University (UKM). Lastly, this article tries to discuss the methodological issue in researching the older people. Basic questions such as how researcher perceives the older people, the approach and techniques used to gather information are among the methodological issues discussed. The main question: Are the older people being empowered in the research process or after the research process?

What are the values in social gerontology studies/ research in Malaysian context?

Social gerontology as a discipline is quite new in Malaysia. The development of the discipline and particularly the research topics are in line with the demographic trends in the country. There was an annually increment in percentage of older people from 5.7% in 1980 to almost 6% in 1999, and 6.1% in the year 2000. In many western countries, however, such as Europe, Canada, United State of America and Scandinavia countries, this phenomenon is not new. Even in some part of Far East countries such as Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong have been dealing with the aging issue for quite some times. This is proven through writings from the respective countries published in leading journals such as *The Journal of Applied Gerontology*, *The Gerontologist*, *Ageing and Human Development*, *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, *Journal of Marriage and The Family* in the year 1980's and 1990's.

Of late, writings on older people are profoundly based on research. Basically, research can be divided into two types. They are basic research and action or applied research. Both have its own merits. At present, in the country, many research on older people are basic research. Basic research provides general knowledge, insight and information about the older people, which may include study on their needs, problems, health, behavior, welfare, support, housing, economic security, living arrangement and so forth. The broad and depth of such studies depends very much on the approaches and methods used, which can be broadly categorized as quantitative or qualitative study. The value of such research is important in understanding the social realities among the older people with respect to their needs or problems. Findings from basic research can later be utilized in policy making, programme development and activities.

In Malaysia, it is noted that the research work in social gerontology starts to develop rapidly after the government officiated the National Elderly Policy (NEP) in the year 1995. However, before 1995, there were also writings and semi-academic studies on the older people in Malaysia. Paul Chen in 1986 has written the health aspect of the elderly. In 1989, six years before the NEP, Masitah and Nazileh have discussed the socio-economic impact on the country populated by the elderly. Sallehuddin (1996) examined on the economic aspect of the older people that focused on the issue of welfare, pension and social security. Contemporary issues such as the role of the state and non-governmental organization on providing care, welfare and assistance to the elderly, change in the family structure and its impact on care for the elderly, and involvement of the elderly in the community life have been discussed by Hamid, Chang and Tey (1989), Roziah (1995), Aizan (1995) and Asnarulkhadi and Aizan (2004). The type of problems and needs among the elderly in rural and urban area was also studied by Aizan, Asnarulkhadi and Mazlawati (2000). Using the secondary data, a group of writers from UKM has highlighted some pertinent issues faced by the older person in Malaysia that covers health, social security, economic, nutrition (Abdul Aziz et.al. 2000).

Basically, many exploratory research using secondary data including official government documents and records or survey data (primary data) gathered from the older people (sample) helps to enrich the body of knowledge about Malaysian older people. It covers various aspect such as economic, health, welfare, social security, and demographic trend. This 'cumulative knowledge' become the basic knowledge for researchers to inquiry and unveils new issue, problems and challenges faced by them. Basic research enables researchers to build up general ideas, hypothetical statement, or hunches to be studied or to be proved further by future research. This is among the merit that the basic research has on studying the older people regardless the type of approach used. It may be a content analysis, historical analysis, trend analysis, or quantitative approach. On the other hand, action-research has more focus on the issues or problems faced by the respondents (i.e. the older people), followed by an action to find ways to solve the problems with their involvement. This means that action-research does not merely involves a process of gathering data to discover fact, like basic research, but used the facts and information as a tacit knowledge to solve the problems encountered by the older people, which eventually helps to change their conditions, status and pride. With regards to that the researched (respondents) are directly involved in the research process. They are not solely the unit of analysis or the "object" of research. Instead, the respondents have the role to effect change by actively participating in the research process. Thus, in action research, they are the "subject" in the research activity. It is through actively involved in the data gathering process that the subject recognizes and understands about their problems. Subsequently this helps to develop their awareness and willingness to effect change or to influence change to improve their lives. This form of research, however, is not yet popular in the country as far as the older people is concerned.

Research, Older People and National Elderly Policy

Of late, in Malaysia, study on older people is becoming a trend, and this is portrayed through paper presentations in seminars, posters presentation, dialogues or round-table discussion at various level government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and so forth. It symbolizes that the older people has become the focus of public concern, and researchers. The research focus on this cohort age group by local researchers epitomize the awareness of the local academia that the older people is part of the community members which need attention. The inclusion of the older people in the community or society at large is deliberately pronounced by the government in the Ninth Malaysia Plan. The concern given to the older people by the public shows that they are not being marginalized or being excluded from the mainstream society. However, in our excitement to study them, it is also important to note that they are just like the youth and adolescent, an age cohort group. The enormous increase in the number of this group in the country is not an extra ordinary phenomenon. The concern to study them is as equally important in researching on other social issues such as poverty, gangsterisme, crime, divorce, abuse, housing, crime and so forth.

Of late, the eagerness and confidence showed by the academic community to study various aspects of older people can be viewed as an effort to give respect to this aged cohort group. Ethically and objectively, the interest to study them should not be merely driven by the availability of the research grant provided by the government. Since the concern about the older people is in the national agenda (as reiterate in the Ninth Malaysia Plan), thus the diligent and patient research work on them should be seen as part of the effort to create a conducive atmosphere to empower them. This is very true as the National Elderly Policy stated that "this policy also encourages research on various aspect of the older people aim at gathering information to plan program to develop them" (Strategy no. 5).

National Elderly Policy (NEP) launched by the government aimed at creating a community of older people who are contented; possess a high sense of self-worth, able to optimize their potential and to ensure that they have the opportunities, rights and access to care and protection as members of their family, society and nation. The three main objectives outlined to achieve the policy are: (i) to enhance the self-respect and self-worth of the older people in their family, society and nation; (ii) to improve their potential so that they continue to be active and productive in national development, and create opportunities to help them to live independently; and (iii) to encourage the creation and availability of specific facilities to ensure the care and protection of the older people in order to enhance their well being. The policy and its objectives offered a framework that creates opportunities and avenues for the older people to get involve in the development process. One of the opportunities is through research. Regardless of the ethnic

group, location, economic status, education achievement or religious background, the older people should be engaged in research. Involving the older people in the research process is about encouraging them to understand about themselves within their living arrangement i.e. within the context of a family, neighbourhood, or the mainstream society. In other words, research on the older people is an activity of gathering information to generate more knowledge about them and, at the same time making them aware about themselves, their situation, and challenges faced. It is through research that the discourse between researcher and the older people could take place. Within that discourse, exchange of information and consciousness raising activity between researchers and researched occur. Action research has the credibility to enable this exchange take place.

Research Parameters and Research Themes

Institute of Gerontology (IG), Universiti Putra Malaysia, established in 1 April 2004, at present, is the only Institute in Malaysia which focuses primarily on the older people. Since its establishment, the Institute has spearheaded a number of research projects under the IRPA grant including Programme Research (PR) and Experimental Research. Besides that this Institute provides post graduate programme at Master and Doctor of Philosophy level.

Table 1 displays the research projects on older people in Malaysia conducted in Eighth Malaysia Plan at the Institute. The list is not exhaustive. Looking closely the area of concerns of each research project, it is obvious that parameters under inquiry evolved around the issue of the well-being of the elderly. There are also studies examining the meaning of depression and successful ageing. As a matter of fact, quality of life and the well-being of the older people are the main research themes in Malaysia at the present. These two themes cover a wide range of issues. The research parameter are health (nutrition, mental health and physical health), economic, knowledge, consumerism, psychosocial (perception, emotion, depression), social support system and friendly services. Examining closely on the research development of the older people in Malaysia, these two themes do not emerge by chance. Here, it can be suggested that the research works have been framed by the NEP. In the policy, research has been acknowledged as a strategy to enhance the sense of self-respect and self-worth of the older people by optimizing their existing individual's qualities (potential). Indeed, by and large, the policy and its objectives have influenced the thinking framework among researchers. Not to exaggerate the facts that there is a band-wagon effect accompanying this mode of thinking. For the last three years, many researchers have shown their interest to study the older people. In relation to this a quick point to ponder here: Is the research project purely driven by the intention to unveil more undiscovered knowledge about the older people? Or is it motivated by the research fund which is relatively easy to be granted by the state as it (the

Table 1: Older people - Research Title, Parameters, Method (technique) and Grant (during 8th Malaysia Plan)

Type		Title	Research parameters	Primary method	Grant
PR	1.	Quality of life amongst older Malaysian	Mental health incidence and problem, depression, mental health status, mental health, aetiology and resilience.	Quantitative (survey)	IRPA
	2.	Economic and Financial Aspects of Aging	Economy and elderly financial, resource availability, resource demand, quality of life	Quantitative (survey)	IRPA
	3.	Health related quality of life	Physical health and functional, quality of life	Quantitative (survey and health screening)	IRPA
	4.	Psychosocial and intergenerational relationships of older person	Interpersonal relationship, inter-generational relationship, psychosocial, influence to quality of life.	Quantitative (survey) and Qualitative (Focus Group Discussion)	IRPA
	5.	Consumption behaviours of older persons in Malaysia	Consumer behaviour	Quantitative (Survey)	IRPA
	6.	An elderly friendly housing environment for older Malaysians	Utilization, needs and choice of technology among the elderly, increase in life opportunities through technology – social, infrastructure and services.	Quantitative (survey) and Anthropometric measurement	IRPA

Type		Title	Research parameters	Primary method	Grant
EA	7.	Poverty among elderly Malaysian: Towards productive ageing	Profile of the elderly poor, accessibility and availability of support system, action strategy, managing skill, focus control and intervention strategy.	Quantitative (survey) and Qualitative (Focus Group Discussion)	IRPA
	8.	Research on Developing an Intervention package for Healthy Ageing: Identification, Prevention and Management of Malnourished Malay in Rural Area	Education Nutrition Management, status of understanding on nutrition among career and the professional, attitude and nutritional practices, perception and views on healthy food for the elderly.	Quantitative (survey) and Qualitative (Focus Group Discussion)	IRPA
	9.	Social support for the older persons	Types, frequency and pattern of social support	Quantitative (survey)	IRPA
Consultancy	10.	Study on the perception and needs of older persons in Johor	Type of problems, needs, (physical, services and emotional) ²	Quantitative (survey) and Qualitative (Focus Group Discussion)	State government
Master	11.	Understanding successful ageing: A qualitative study of older Chinese Malaysians	Meaning of successful life, successful dimension of older persons	Qualitative (In-depth interview)	
Ph.D	12.	Depression among older Javanese-Malays males	Meaning of depression among older people, dimension of depression	Qualitative (in-depth interview)	-

research) is inline with the government policy and aspiration towards the older people as stipulated by the NEP? Objectively, despite the fact that the concern of older people is in the national agenda, the crucial issue to think and implement is the involvement of the older people in research. The meaning of involvement is the direct participation of the older people in the research process, which later could empower them. This demands a new paradigm shift in researching the older people.

What is the research methodology that can empower older people through research?

Research can enhance the sense of self-respect and self-worth of the older people. This is not impossible to achieve if researchers have a same premise, assumption, value and believes that all older people have their own qualities or potentials. Facilitating these potentials through research enables them to understand more about themselves, thus giving them equal opportunities and chances to say about their lives. In many research, especially in basic research as mentioned earlier, the findings can be utilized to develop programs to improve the living condition of the study population, to safeguard their welfare or to upgrade their standard of living. If the academic community believes that research can effect change to the older people (study population), the next question is how this can be brought forward? This involves a methodological issue.

The older people - Are they as an “object” or “subject” in research?

These two concepts which have been introduced earlier need further elaboration. It is very much related to the ideological foundation of a research methodology. The basic issue in research inquiry concerning the older people is about the researcher's perception towards the respondents. How are they being treated? Are they being treated as an object or subject? If a researcher belief that the older person has certain potential and should be given opportunity in research, then the respondents are being treated as a subject. In this respect, the older people is no longer been perceived merely as a source of information from which data can be gathered to answer research questions or problems. This also means that the researched is not only a unit of analysis. Indeed, the respondents (the researched) have changed their status.

Accepting the older people as a subject in a research process depicts that they are being recognized. It also symbolizes that they are being respected. As a subject in research means that the older people are partners in the research process. This is the turning point to empower them. This involves action giving them opportunities to think, to reflect about their life, to speak and to voice out what they think best to improve the living conditions. By giving them such opportunity to speak about themselves in a research process illustrates that researchers encourage and promote them to use their potentials and rights as

an ordinary citizen without feeling of fear, pressure or discrimination. Here, the primary information gathered from the older people through research is a manifestation of how they interpret things and response to their social settings or living environment. Since they are not treated as an object in the social inquiry process, the older people is not a 'specimens' in the "social laboratory", which can be manipulated to obtain information about their feelings, attitudes, expectations, views and so forth. It is within this empowering approach that a researcher is also responsible and accountable to gauge to what extent the inquiry should go. This would minimize and ensure that the subject is not over-burden as a source of information. As a subject, through research, the older people can exert influence on policy which may affect their lives. All in all, this practice is about empowering the older people.

In addition, the older people who are directly involved in a research process that utilised an interactive data gathering technique could promote self-awareness among themselves. Eventually, this would enable them to take action collectively to improve their living condition, welfare, or living standard. As such, participating in an empowering research procedure could empower the older people to make change in their lives. Similarly, when there is a change in the perception among researchers towards the elderly, the research orientation also changed. Empowering research is about "research with the subject" – a direct involvement of respondents in the process of inquiry.

Approach and data collection technique

Change in the perception and orientation among researchers on studying the older people would also influence choices to adopt research approach and technique of data collection. Social inquiry about the older people should be investigated within their social context. This is because human being interacts with their social world within which they give meanings to the events, things, and phenomenon that they are encountered. The social world i.e. the social setting is not the same for all older people. Due to different locations where they reside - urban, rural or urban fringe- the norms, customs, values, and culture of the areas provides different social setting for them. All these may influence and construct the meaning of their life. Therefore, any research that does not take into consideration the actual social settings of the elderly in their methodology may fail to understand the meaning of the subject matter study from the viewpoint of the respondents.

Qualitative approach in many ways emphasizes this principle, value and the importance of meanings interpreted by the respondents as the result of their interaction with their social surroundings. Understanding and internalizing the explanation given by the respondents on certain issues (for examples on health, economic, social or physical) enables the researcher to understand the meanings from the researched point of view. This approach to research is different compared to the quantitative approach. Traditionally, quantitative

approach “reduce” the process of understanding the social phenomenon into pre-determined variables for testing certain hypotheses or theory which may be developed from different cultural, values and social background. Such approach is contrast to the principle to empower the older people through research in terms of giving them chances to think and speak for themselves. On another account, many quantitative research used an established instrument to capture the pre-determined variables. This ignores the significance of different social settings as well as the interpretation by the subject about their social surrounding, and hence the meanings articulate by them.

Many instruments have been developed in western countries to study the older people. To mention a few as examples are the *Grand parenting and Step-grand parenting Questionnaire* (GSQ) by C.S. Henry and C.P. Ceglian, *Multigenerational Interconnectedness Scale* (MIS) by S.M Gavazzi and R.M Sabatelli, *Attitude Toward the Provision of Long Term Care* (A-TPLTC) by W. C. Kelvin or *General Health Questionnaire* (GHQ) designed by World Health Organization and AGE CAT for diagnostic mental health patient. There are among these instruments that have been adapted to the local situation by eliminating items that are not suitable to the indigenous culture and practice. Though there are adaptations to the questions, however, the choice of answers are still within the pre-determined framework of thinking underpins by the theories. The respondents’ (the older people) opportunities to interpret their understanding on certain things or issues, and meaning as what they perceived is not that significant and important in such research approach.

Now, the question is: What are the techniques in research that support and promote empowerment among the respondents (i.e. the older people)? In qualitative research, the researcher is a tool for data collection. He/she must be patient, sensitive, and able to listen and think carefully to what the older people say before probing or asking a new question. Thus, research technique in qualitative research approach such as in-depth interview and focus group discussion (FGD) has the capacity to empower the respondents. Both techniques provide more avenues for the respondents to think, to speak, to express themselves, and interact with the researcher. Researcher does not limit him/herself to ask questions based on a rigid prepared questionnaire, instead questions are very much loose based on the guidelines. It is within this flexible manner that the respondents participate actively in an interactive dialogue style with the researcher. The paraphrasing and probing technique used in the in-depth interview session or in focus group discussion are able to capture more in-depth information, sensitive account, and also promote the feeling of sharing information between the respondents and the researcher. The close interaction between these two parties in its natural setting strengthens the status of the respondents as a subject in research. The subject-to-subject relationship between researcher and the respondents reinforced the idea to give respect to the older people through research. This means that in the process of gathering information and to understand them from the respondent’s point of view, the research approach and procedure acknowledge the potential of the older people. In contrast, quantitative

approach that normally used questionnaire provides ready-made answers which do not give enough opportunities for the older people to say loud about themselves. The approach creates a distance between the researcher and the respondents, and in this one-way interaction the environment is not empowering the older individuals to participate in the research process.

Depending solely on one data collection technique is difficult to ensure the data collected is credible enough to reflect the true and holistic picture on the matter study. To compensate the weaknesses by using only one technique, it is now a trend to integrate both qualitative and quantitative approach and technique of data collection. However, some of the data collection technique in qualitative approach such as in-depth interview is time consuming. Of late, FGD seems to be a "popular" qualitative technique for collecting data used together with the survey technique (see Table 1).

Can we ensure that by employing additional data collection technique, especially the FGD or in-depth interview, the approach to research could empower the older people? Though in the earlier part of this paper has mentioned that there is a possibility that qualitative approach can empower the older people, however it is very much depend upon the question when, how and why the technique is used for? If the information gathered from FGD and in-depth interview is used for supporting the quantitative approach and technique, it position is just a plated-liked procedure. It is a cosmetic process-adding and beautifying the figure generated by the quantitative approach. On the other hand, if the qualitative approach and technique of data collection used is to obtain information, to get insight, to internalize and understand things from the perspective of the older people on certain issues, then, it has empowering flavour. Afterward, from analyzing the information gathered, an instrument to measure related variable could be developed for a quantitative study. At this juncture, the technique of data collection takes into account the new elements, ideas and concerns discovers from understanding the facts (data) and internalizing the information direct from the older people. Taking into account the older people direct concerns in a research is about a empowering them in the research process. They are partners in the research activity.

An empowering research can go beyond the methodological level of a traditional research. As proposed by the NPE, it can be interpreted that the involvement of the older people in research is not only at the data gathering level. Instead, the older people can also be involved in the intervention activity or project, based on the research findings. If this happens, it means that they can exert influence for their own benefit. They can be part in the planning process. In this kind of action-research, which usually utilized the qualitative approach, the respondent's awareness, motivation and consciousness are stimulated. However, in this country, this type of research is not yet popular. To date, there is only one research project at the national level entitle "Developing an Intervention Package for Healthy Ageing: Identification, Prevention and Management of Malnourish Malay in Rural Area" employed both qualitative and quantitative

approach. Based on the findings, an intervention project has been developed as a prototype for the elderly. Generally, in this kind of research, the outcome has the potential to upgrade the standard of living, to secure the welfare and quality of life of the older people. Nevertheless, the challenges for most qualitative research approach and particularly the action research is time factor. Though the technique is empowering in terms of giving more avenues and opportunities for the respondents to speak for themselves but the process to get people involved in the research-cum-intervention project demand patience, determination and passion among both parties.

Conclusion

People do research primarily for knowledge inquest. Knowledge generated from research is useful to understand certain social phenomenon. Deep understanding on the phenomenon enables us to find solutions to any problem emerged from the phenomenon. Indeed, the authenticity of the research finding depends on the methodology. The methodology to discover the body of knowledge varies, and this is influenced by the ideology and philosophical stands of a researcher. In the discipline of social gerontology, this paper argues and suggests that qualitative methodology offers an alternative approach to study older people. This is in line with the NPE in that it promotes to empower the elderly through research. Basically, qualitative approach using more interactive data collection techniques such as FGD and in-depth interview enables the researcher to understand social phenomenon from the respondent's perspective. Thus, the data collection technique allows the older people to think, to judge, to reflect and to express in their own words about an issue, an event or a problem they faced. Such practice empowers respondents to exercise their rights to participate directly in the research process. They become partners in research endeavour, and as such the older people are not treated as an object. There is a change in human relation between the researcher and the researched. This change in human relation is an empowering environment induced by the philosophical stand and principles of a qualitative methodology. It gives the older people greater chances to speak for themselves, which would give more impact on research output. This empowering exercise can intensify if the policy makers (government) recognize the importance of research and the alternative approach in research that has the merit to empower ordinary people, such as the older people.

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