

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES AND FLOURISHING AMONG ELDERLY: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Flourishing is a state of optimal mental well-being associated with the experience of doing and living well across all aspects of life, including psychological and social. Flourishing is important and beneficial throughout a life span including late adulthood. Yet, studies on flourishing among elderly especially from a heterogeneous culture such as Malaysia are still limited. Socio-demographic variables (such as age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, source of income and education attainment) can be key variables that contribute to flourishing among elderly. This paper reviews previous studies on this topic and found that ethnicity, marital status, income, and education attainment are significantly related to well-being and flourishing. The implications of the review on future research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Elderly, Flourishing, Heterogeneous society, Socio-demographic factor

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is witnessing a dramatic increase in elderly population over the past two decades. Malaysia will be one of the “super-aged” countries by 2030 (Tey, 2017). There is genuine concern that longer life expectancy does not guarantee that elderly can live a flourishing life.

The elderly frequently face challenges due to ageing process including illness, loss, futility, and even death (Ponzo, 1992). They are also at higher risk to experience various types of mental health problems (Kwag, Martin, Russell, Franke, & Kohut, 2011). Depression is one of the most common mental illnesses, and it is associated with decreased well-being in old age (Skoog, 2011). In addition, loneliness has also been identified as a global public health issue among elderly (Basu, 2012; Holt-Lunstad, Smith & Layton, 2010). Loneliness has been found to reach a crucial threshold among Malaysian elderly (Momtaz et al., 2012).

All the above issues can have a substantial detrimental influence on the elderly’ well-being if they are not appropriately addressed. An understanding about flourishing among elderly in Malaysia can indirectly help to address the above issues. According to Seligman (2011), being in a state of mental health is not merely being disorder free; rather it is the presence of flourishing. Flourishing can help increases resilient at the old age thus minimising the risk of depression and loneliness. Flourishing can help elderly live an optimal life.

Flourishing in general has always been referred to an optimal state of mental well-being (Huppert, 2009a, 2009b; Keyes, 2002; Ryff & Singer, 1998). However, long-standing traditions suggest that flourishing or human well-being is more than one's mental state and how one feels about various parts of life. Flourishing includes happiness and life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and positive social relationships (VanderWeele, 2017). Hence, in layperson's term, flourishing is the experience of doing and living well in all aspects of one's life and thus it is not simply the present of pleasant sensation (Satici, Uysal, & Akin, 2013).

By achieving optimal performance in all aspects of life, the elderly will not only be able to overcome many adversities and challenges in their daily lives, but they will also be able to contribute and live an enriching and more independent life in their old age. According to past research, flourishing older adults can demonstrate a sense of personal growth in which they are still evolving and changing. Moreover, past literatures also indicated that, human flourishing is associated with favourable life outcomes. This include both psychological and social functioning such as effective learning, healthy relationships, longevity, physical well-being, life satisfaction, self-esteem, vitality, academic success, and psychosocial functioning (e.g., Chida & Steptoe, 2008; Diener et al., 2010; Dolan et al., 2008; Huppert, 2009b; Keyes et al., 2012; Vella-Brodrick, Park, & Peterson, 2009).

2.0 FLOURISHING OF ELDERLY

A review of the past studies revealed that limited research has focused on flourishing of the elderly both in and outside Malaysia. Keyes (2005) conducted a study on flourishing and concluded that mentally stable adults who flourish had a variety of positive life outcomes. For instance, a flourisher had less health restrictions in everyday events, the fewest missed workdays, the fewest half-day work cutbacks, and the healthiest psychosocial functioning (low helplessness, clear life goals, high resilience, and high intimacy). Keyes's study (2005) shows that there is a positive correlation between a mentally healthy individual (e.g., flourish) and positive life outcomes. While the sample in Keyes' study (2005) include a wide range of participants, adults between the age of 60 to 74 years old were also included in the study. The findings can further support the importance of flourishing in daily functioning and the need to investigate the factors and elements that can contribute to a flourishing life among the elderly.

Sorrell (2017) focussed more specifically on elderly and found that those who is flourishing and mentally stable has a high degree of emotional, psychological, and social well-being. While many older adults in the study emphasised the mental and physical challenges of ageing, some also reported personal growth and changes even at their advanced age. The flourishing elderly appeared to have a different perspective in which they display a sense of personal development. They also tended to see their lives as having meaning. One of the crucial things that might continue to propel the elderly towards a flourishing life is a sense of meaningful life. Meaning appears as one of the key factors contributing to flourishing.

In relation to old adult's well-being, Roe, Blythe, Oliver & Roe (2022)'s study concluded that, despite the increasingly negative stereotyping of the 'older-old', the final decades of life can be a period of continuing growth and learning, a stage of life with its own unique character, rather than a period of decline. This is because result in Roe et al. (2022)'s study showed that older-old adults (aged 80 years old and above) were vitally engaged in a wide spectrum of projects exercised in a range of 'enabling places' which categorised as (1) *restorative niches* (places that afford psychological restoration) such as nature settings (e.g. a garden, local park or riverside); (2) *affinity niches* (places that afford social opportunities) such as religious venues, social clubs, or cafes; and (3) *flow niches* (places that afford immersion in mental or physical tasks) such as the home (e.g. the kitchen) or a place associated with a previous career or amateur sport (e.g. cricket club). We can then conclude from both Sorrell (2017) and Roe et al. (2022)'s studies that, even at an advanced year, people still can be zestful, vitally engaged in meaningful project pursuits, have the desire and potential for self-growth and that this supports their flourishing.

In a more recent study conducted by Saranchuluun, Sugarmaa, Denise, & Khorolsuren (2023), flourishing scores were higher among Mongolian older adults in urban areas than in rural areas. Despite facing many challenges to well-being, Mongolian older adults overall reported relatively high levels of flourishing, or psychological resources and strengths. Older Mongolian adults appear to regard their lives positively in areas such as relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism. These researchers stated that the high level of flourishing among this population may

be explained by the Buddhist Doctrine's of positive life rule. According to the Buddhist attitude of mind, saying bad things or good things is related to destiny. Buddhism is one of the most critical influences on Mongolian culture, with approximately half of the population following Tibetan Buddhism and Shamanism/Tengrism. These attitudes or predispositions may challenge the operational definition of flourishing, making comparisons more tenuous.

In the context of Malaysia, the first flourishing study was conducted by Momtaz et al. (2016). The aim of this study was to identify the prevalence and socio-demographic and health factors associated with flourishing. Momtaz et al. (2016) employed Complete State Model of Mental Health (CMH) by Keyes (2002) as their conceptual. Results in Momtaz et al.'s study (2016) found that, 50.1% of the elderly in their study were flourishing in life, 36.3% were languishing, 8.4 percent were struggling, and 5.2 percent were floundering in life. The study also further revealed that socio-demographic factors play an important role in impacting level of flourishing among the elderly. Gender, employment status, level of education, having living children, and chronic medical conditions were significantly associated with flourishing whereas, age, marital status, living alone, and economic status did not have much impact on flourishing. These findings will be further discussed in the following section where a review of each sociodemographic factors is presented.

When comparison was made between flourishing of Malaysian elderly and those from different countries, the level of flourishing among elderly in Western and European countries appeared to be relatively lower. For example, in Hone, Jarden, & Schofield (2013) and Didino et al.'s study (2019), the mean score reported by the New Zealanders elderly and Russian elderly aged 60 years old and above were $M = 45.5$ and $M = 40.9$, respectively, whereas in Momtaz et al.'s study (2016), mean score reported by the Malaysian elderly was $M = 50.2$. In all the three studies, Flourishing Scale (FS) as developed by Diener et al. (2010) was used.

While Momtaz et. al.'s study (2016) provided a lot of insights related to flourishing among elderly in Malaysia, it does not offer a complete picture. The study employed respondents from a single ethnic (Malay). Clearly it is important to capture a broader range of flourishing experience across different ethnic groups in diverse Malaysia. This represents a research gap that is important to be addressed at this point.

In conclusion, the preceding studies show that, while old age can present life challenges for the elderly, at the same time, the elderly can live a more optimal life if they have the opportunity to live a meaningful and flourishing life. Furthermore, reporting population norms across different socio-demographic groups can provides critical evidence to further understand flourishing, particularly among elderly.

Factors influencing an individual's level of flourishing and well-being are multiple and vary between societies. According to past literatures, socio-demographic is one of the personal factors which is linked to and have a significant impact in influencing an individual's perception of flourishing and well-being (e.g., Bronstein, Davidson, Keyes, & Moore, 2003; Momtaz et al., 2011; Momtaz et al., 2016; Hashim & Zaharim, 2020; Chow, 2010). Studies related to this topic are reviewed in the paper. Flourishing sometimes being referred to as high state of well-being and many of these studies looked at flourishing together with well-being. For the purpose of this review, we include studies that are looking at both flourishing and well-being.

3.0 DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES AND FLOURISHING

i) Age

Well-being and age are closely related (Newton, Howard, Houkamau, & Sibley, 2022). Newton et al. (2022) study revealed that, age is positively correlated with well-being/flourishing (life

satisfaction and meaning in life) among mid- to later-life New Zealand women (mean age = 55.62). Life satisfaction (hedonic well-being) was highly correlated with age, with older women showing greater levels than midlife women. In terms meaning in life (eudaimonic well-being/flourishing), age was also substantially correlated, with older women scoring higher than midlife women.

In Keyes's review (2002), age is also strongly associated with flourishing where the probability of optimal well-being increased as age increased. Flourishers were older compared to non-flourishers. To be more exact, flourishing is more prevalent among the age group between 45 to 74 years old, while younger age adults (25 - 44 years old) were less flourish. López et al. (2020) conducted a study during the COVID-19 outbreak, the results showed that the old-old group (71–80 years old) did not have a lower level of flourishing (psychological well-being) than the young-old group (60–70 years old) among the elderly in community-dwelling Spaniards (N = 878). On the contrary, Saranchuluun et al. (2023)'s study indicated that, age (55-59; 60-64; 65-69; 70 and above years old) did not appear as a significant predictor of flourishing among Mongolian older adults who reside in both urban and rural area.

The above review suggests that age may make a difference when comparing people with huge age gaps, for example between adolescents and older adults, but may be of lesser importance when comparing between two groups of older adults or a homogenous group of young adulthood. Future studies trying to understand age further should include a diverse sample that will allow comparisons to be made across a wide range of age group and not just between people of similar age group.

ii) Gender

Although women typically outlive men, they frequently do so with higher rates of disease and disability (Crimmins & Beltrán-Sánchez, 2011), as well as the effects of limited life paths because of expectations for caregiving, lower wages, and intermittent work histories (Newton et al., 2022).

In a landmark review of the well-being literature, Diener et al. (2010) reported no evidence of gender difference on flourishing. Similarly, result in Eshkoo, Hamid, Mun, & Shahar's study (2015) showed an insignificant gender differential in life satisfaction among elderly in Malaysia, in which the prevalence of life satisfaction among males and female's elderly were the same. On the other hand, Saranchuluun et al. (2023)'s study summarized that, gender is associated with flourishing in rural area, in which female's level of flourishing is higher than male. It may be that men and women differ in their understanding, evaluation, and reflection of what matters in life. This finding is at odds with previous past studies (e.g., Diener et al., 2010; Eshkoo, Hamid, Mun, & Shahar, 2015) in similar settings as mentioned above. Based on past literatures, level of flourishing and well-being differences in gender have often been inconsistent and there was no common agreement when gender differences are concerned.

It can be concluded that the impact of gender will be less obvious when the life experience between the two are more or less similar. For example, in societies that practice more gender equality, the difference between men and women in terms of their flourishing level will not be significant. This is as opposed to more traditional societies where women may be at disadvantaged and experience more forms of discrimination. Clearly more studies are needed to confirm this.

iii) Ethnicity

Even though previous research on the prevalence of flourishing and well-being in different ethnicity has been limited, Keyes' (2009) findings demonstrated that African Americans reported higher levels of flourishing and mental health, as well as being free of mental illness, than European Americans. In addition, African Americans have lower rates of a variety of common

mental disorders. Despite exposure to discrimination and dramatic social inequalities, African Americans outperformed European Americans in terms of mental health resilience. Although inequality and discrimination increase the risk of physical morbidity among African Americans, they do not completely suppress the possibility of positive mental health in them. Based on Keyes' findings (2009), we can conclude that ethnicity has a bearing in how flourishing is experienced. In a recent study by Newton et al. (2022), results indicated that there are differences between two ethnic groups (mid- to later-life Māori and New Zealand European women) in levels of life satisfaction (hedonic well-being), but no difference between ethnicities in levels of meaning in life (eudaimonic well-being/flourishing).

However, the lack of representative past studies on the flourishing among older adult population especially from a diverse ethnicity background prevents us from drawing definitive conclusions. We suggested that ethnic differences in terms of flourishing may reflect cultural differences placed on the importance of flourishing or well-being. Culture that invests more on flourishing or well-being may facilitate development of the construct within individuals. Ethnic differences may also indicate other differences between the groups such as income and educational level. These differences may explain ethnic differences in flourishing more than just culture. Malaysia has multi-ethnic. Further research is needed to delve into factors and to have better understanding on the important distinctions across various ethnic groups with diverse cultural backgrounds, such as values, religion, life experiences and so on.

iv) Marital Status

Previous studies have found that marital status has a significant impact on the level of flourishing and well-being among the elderly. Marriage has been shown in studies to have a protective effect on physical health (e.g., Waite & Gallagher, 2000), well-being (e.g., Pedersen and Dall Schmidt 2009) and psychological well-being (e.g., Schwarzbach, Lupp, & Forstmeier, 2014; Argyle, 1999; Suhail & Chaudhry, 2004). Married persons are more likely to benefit from a supportive personal connection and experience less loneliness (e.g., Argyle, 1999).

Eshkoo et al. (2015) revealed that Malaysian elderly who were living with a partner reported higher level of flourishing (life satisfaction) than elderly living without a partner. In addition, Shah et al. (2021) also found that marital status had a significant impact on level of flourishing (happiness) among elderly people. Married people reported higher levels of flourishing (happiness) than widowed, divorced, or never married people. Hone et al. (2013) discovered that married/living with partner New Zealanders scored significantly higher than single/never married participants in terms of flourishing score. According to Tey (2017), during illness, spouses are the primary source of material, social, and emotional support, as well as personal care givers for an elderly. As a result, living with one's spouse has many benefits (e.g., cognitive functioning), therefore it can help to enhance the overall well-being of the elderly. We can conclude from Tey's study (2017) that, elderly who lives with spouse or family has an active role in providing elderly not only in terms of social stability but also protecting them from psychological stability. Result in a study by Nurul, Suzana, Devinder & Norhayati (2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that, middle-aged and older adults in Malaysia (mean age of 71.18 years old) who are living with family, had good psychological health. Besides that, the participants had also scored high in flourishing scale (mean 44.47). The findings could be explained in terms of family support reported by the participants in that the participants were not living alone. Surprisingly, while most of the previous studies have shown that marital status had a significant impact on level of flourishing, in Saranchuluun et al. (2023)'s study, marital status was found to be a non-significant predictor of flourishing among older adults in Mongolia.

The above discussion suggests that a marriage's life experiencing by elderly provide a room to achieving a higher level of flourishing in old age. The capacity of elderly people to cope with changes and challenges in their health, income, social activities, and other aspects are largely

dependent on the support given by family members. Therefore, the emotional support from families and receives by the elderly indirectly allow them to experience a flourishing life.

v) Source of Income

Financial hardship can result from a lack of a sufficient financial cushion at any age, but it can have particularly negative effects on later adulthood. In order to maintain the standard of living and in promoting a flourishing life, a reliable source of income can be key. In relation to this matter, Bialowolski, P.Cwynar, A. and Weziak-Bialowolska, D. (2022) study shown that it is difficult to achieve a good quality of life among European older adults without ensuring financial resilience. These authors urge that financial literacy plays a protective role for financial resilience. Its role is not symmetrical and protects more against the loss of financial resilience than it contributes to the gain of financial resilience. Among individuals aged 65–74, the association between financial literacy and financial resilience is weaker than among adults in the middle-age (50–64) and among the oldest (75 years old and above). Thus, fostering financial literacy can be important to help middle-aged and older adults maintain a good quality and a flourishing life.

In Saranchuluun et al. (2023)'s study, result indicated that being employed (with income) is the significant predictor of flourishing among Mongolian older adults. This is because employed older adults with income had higher levels of flourishing in the total sample. Similarly, Selvaratnam, Norlaila, & Nor Aini's study (2010) also revealed that income adequacy ensures that Malaysian elderly can finance their own healthcare and medical expenses. Elderly who are financially prepared and independent will be less burdened and less stressed. This may indirectly increase the level of flourishing of the elderly. Evidence by Gildner et al. (2019) showed that income appears to have positive association with well-being among elderly. However, there were also previous studies (Bruni & Zamagni, 2004; Diener, Scollon & Lucas, 2003; Easterlin, 1995; Kasser & Ryan, 1996) revealed that, income and wealth do not influence an individual overall well-being and level of flourishing.

Elderly with secure sources of income is likely to experience higher level of flourishing. Hence, financial source for elderly is an important aspect that must not be overlooked as it can impact their level of flourishing. An elderly with secure sources of income (e.g., own saving/EPF/pension) is generally more flourish than those who are not. Having stable income and financially independent allows elderly to meet his or her basic needs and feel comfortable, which indirectly may affect one's level of flourishing. The above discussion implies that, apart from continuing to assist in the growth of the retirement fund through prudent investment, the Malaysian government should make greater efforts to lead and encourage all Malaysia citizens to save adequately (either in the EPF or own savings pool) while they are still young and capable of contributing, for their own benefit in old age. This can potentially increase their chances for a more flourishing life.

vi) Education Attainment

Du et al. (2019) conducted a study either through online or paper format among elderly in different regions of China. Results showed that mental health was found to be better in older people (75 years old and above), those with lower levels of education (1–5 years of education), those with higher incomes, and those who are married and live with their spouse or others. In a study by Belo, Navarro-Pardo, Pocinho, & Carrana (2020), the findings of this research revealed a positive relationship between educational attainment and a better mental health among older adults in Portugal. In this study, a better mental health defined as a combination of better psychological well-being and a lower distress level. Old-aged people with higher education levels show a better psychological well-being and a more positive leisure attitude. Saranchuluun et al. (2023)'s recent study also demonstrated that, education level is associated with flourishing among Mongolian older adults. Although the education level was lower in rural than urban areas,

overall levels were high. This finding is due to social and political initiatives under the People's Republic of Mongolia, which invested in education to improve the understudy generation's access to primary and higher education. Higher education level is the significant predictor of flourishing among Mongolian older adults. Compared to older adults who are illiterate or only have a primary school education, older adults with a university or high school education score higher on the flourishing scale.

In Malaysia, past studies also revealed a significant positive correlation between educational attainment and flourishing among Malaysian elderly. For instance, in Momtaz et al.'s study (2016), Malay elderly who were from primary and secondary tertiary education groups had higher level of flourishing as compared to elderly who have no-formal education. Similarly, Momtaz et al.'s study (2011) also found a significant correlation between education attainment and flourishing (psychological well-being) among older Malays aged 60 years old and above. Secondary education group have the highest level of psychological well-being. This is followed by primary education group. No-formal education group reported the lowest psychological well-being among all.

The above findings based on international and Malaysia studies show that, educational attainment, and level of flourishing of the elderly are indeed positively correlated. The higher the level of education attainment, the higher the level of flourishing and well-being experienced by the elderly. This can be explained that elderly with higher educational attainment may have a more positive perception of all ageing changes. When compared to non-literate elderly, literate elderly may believe they are more capable of dealing with life's challenges.

4.0 DIRECTION OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Previous research has shown that socio-demographic factors are indeed important and can influence the level of flourishing and well-being of the elderly. Ethnicity (e.g., Eshkoo et al., 2015), marital status (e.g., Eshkoo et al., 2015; Momtaz et al., 2016; Shah et al., 2021), income (e.g., Selvaratnam et al., 2010) and education attainment (e.g., Murrell, Salsman, & Meeks, 2003; Momtaz et al., 2016; Belo et al., 2020) are key variables that have been shown to be related to well-being and flourishing. People from certain ethnic group, not married, lower income and lower education attainment are at risk of experiencing lower flourishing. It is important to examine these risk factors further whether in Malaysia or in other parts of the world.

More studies need to be conducted to understand how resources can be built within community that can elderly to flourish better. Social support and financial support can be two main resources that be made available, particularly for elderly with low level of relation and financial resources. Specifically related to marriage, the review found that, a supportive marriage can help to sustain one's well-being. Married people are more likely to be shielded against loneliness (Allen, Blieszner, & Roberto, 2000; Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 2004) and therefore married elderly experiencing higher level of flourishing. Hence, perhaps the government or private sector can arrange more family-based campaigns or programmes, marriage motivation talks, or seminars to promote and encourage a healthy marriage from the beginning of maturity. This can help to instil a positive marriage life concept among young individuals that will last into old age. In addition, elderly who are "widowed" and "divorced/separated" have the lowest level of flourishing as revealed in the current study. In this regard, perhaps, government, NGO team and with the present of the relevant marriage consultant should organise more social activities or events to assist the elderly who are widowed or who have experienced a broken marriage in coping with their losses. The interaction and cohesion from these social activities and events could be beneficial to the elderly as it may act as a buffer against the adverse effects of being lonely and help provide affective support to enhance self-esteem and mutual respect to improve their well-being. Apart from this, social support especially from family members should also be given priority to the elderly who is single in old age. Studies show that, social support is the emotional

and practical support received from families and friends (Anne, 2009) and is important for the overall well-being of older people (Ajrouch, Blandon, & Antonucci, 2005).

Education attainment is a strong socio-demographic factor in predicting level of flourishing among elderly. The higher the level of education gained by the elderly (college or university), the highest the level of flourishing they experienced. Although educational attainment is typically determined by the time one reaches early adulthood but its effects on one's well-being are cumulative across the life course. Hence, this review suggests the need for government or relevant parties to further explore the possible benefits of continuous lifelong learning for old adults' group. Elderly especially those who did not receive any formal education or had lower level of education should be encouraged to actively participate in lifetime learning programmes, even after retirement. Past studies revealed that education entails more than just the transfer of facts or information, it also can help a person in reaching his or her full potential, both personally and professionally (Sleigh & Ritzer, 2004). In general, education can provide an individual with better decision-making skills and consequently lead to a flourishing life.

5.0 CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, this review has provided critical and comprehensive discussion related to studies on flourishing among elderly and the potential role of sociodemographic factors. Clearly more studies are required to further understand other key variables that may play a role in contributing to flourishing of the elderly. It is also important to examine how these key variables can interact with each other and have more comprehensive impact on flourishing.

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