

A Proposed Training Module on Gerontological Counselling in Preparing Volunteers to Work with the Elderly

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Abstract

Gerontological counselling is becoming the wave in the counselling profession in Malaysia. A growing population of elderly people in Malaysia will require not only counsellors but also volunteers who are well equipped with the counselling skills to work effectively with the elderly. A team of researchers have developed a training research module that based on gerontological counselling to prepare volunteers (who are not having counselling background) in providing more effective volunteering services toward elderly living in residential care. This study aims to develop a training module to enhance volunteers' competence in working with elderly. This study adapted Myers's work and ADDIE Model as a design for the study. It involves five phases of developing module namely analyse, design, develop, implement, and evaluate. The study proposed a training module that contains eight units including introduction to volunteer module based on gerontology counselling approach; introduction to volunteer services; understanding the clients; developing rapport and the therapeutic relationship; helping process; termination; helping skills for the special population; and keep up the good work! The training module on gerontological counselling for volunteers is expected to enhance the skills and competency of volunteers to work with elderly. In addition, the implications of the module for clinical practice are discussed.

Keywords: Gerontological Counselling, Volunteers, Elderly, Training Module

Introduction

Malaysia is expected to be an ageing nation when more than 15 percent of the total population had reached the age of 60 years and older. In 2019, an estimated 3.4 million (10.3 per cent) of the total population were elderly people (Department of Statistic, 2019). In

addition, there was an increase in the number of elderly people by 6.7 per cent compared to 6.5 percent in 2018. The growing numbers of elderly people in Malaysia can be attributed to the aging of the Generation Jones (Boomers II) who were born in 1955 to 1964.

The trend of increasing number of elderly people has had an impact on the increase in elderly people living in residential care homes. Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development (2018) reported that a total of 1,413 elderly people lived in Rumah Seri Kenangan (RSK) and 207 lived in Rumah Ehsan (RE), which were managed by the Malaysia government. Meanwhile, 1,706 registered residential care in Malaysia were managed by NGOs and private establishments and a total of 6,927 elderly people lived in the residential care homes. This report indicated that almost 8,500 elderly people in Malaysia lived in residential care and did not live with family members.

The effort to create awareness on different communities in Malaysia has been promoted by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MoHE). MoHE is already moving towards a more collaborative approach with the community through the implementation of Service Learning Malaysia (SULAM) into curriculum courses in higher institutions in Malaysia. SULAM incorporates service/community-based learning (SBL) as a teaching pedagogy that brings students to the community. Through this intentional program activity, the students will have an opportunity to meet and interact with various people in the organization and build relationships with other professionals. By interacting with the community members, the college students are exposed to the real-life opportunities and able to apply theories into practice. Specifically, students who are interested in the elderly population are required to learn particular skills namely the principles of counselling in dealing with them. This is due to the nature of elderly who requires special care and attention in terms of physical, mental and emotional needs. Thus, there is a greater need to incorporate the principles of counselling into gerontology training.

Problem Statement

Gerontological counselling is defined to the specialty in the counselling profession working with the elderly (Myers & Blake, 1986). However, in the counselling field, there is limited literature on the gerontological counselling practices in Malaysia and the United States. Based on content analysis on gerontological counselling research of over 26 years (1992-2017), it was found that only 1.68 percent of articles focused on gerontological counselling (Fullen, Gorby Chan, Dobmeier & Jordan, 2019). Thus, this finding demonstrated that there was a tendency for gerontological counselling practices to resist from gaining attention among counsellors across the countries. This also gave a negative impact to the mental health of elderly people in Malaysia.

Fullen (2018) emphasized the impact of mental health counsellors on the elderly people due to the gap between elderly mental health needs and the number of counsellors with specific training with the elderly. This scenario showed that there was a need to improve the mental health of the elderly people by preparing the volunteers on gerontological counselling skills to help the elderly specifically elderly who lived in residential care homes.

Booyesen and Staniforth (2017) emphasized that counselling plays an important role in social work, in which social worker applied counselling skills in their work and activities. Seden (2005) also emphasized that social workers needed counselling skills to communicate more

effectively with their clients. Therefore, the principles of gerontological counselling could be applied to volunteers and social workers to help the elderly effectively.

Elderly people who were living in residential care were reported to experience loneliness due to the lack of communication among residents and caregivers (Chew et al., 2018). The elderly needed psychosocial activities (especially meaningful activities) to enhance functionality, self-esteem, and quality of life (Sengupta et al., 2019). Apart from that, the activities would produce a sense of fun and happiness to the elderly people while maintaining well-being and improving social relationships. Thus, volunteering activities would be a way to help the elderly to meet their psychological needs.

This study aimed to theoretically and empirically identify essential components for gerontological counselling training module that enhanced volunteers' competence in working with the elderly. The research question was "What are the essential topics in the development of gerontological counselling module?"

Literature Review

The basis for the theoretical framework for elderly lifespan development can be found in the works of the psychologist and psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, in 1950s. Erikson introduced Stages of Psychosocial Development Theory that emphasized eight sequential stages of human development. These include stage of trust vs. mistrust (infancy), autonomy vs. shame and doubt (early childhood), initiative vs. guilt (play age), industry vs. inferiority (school age), identity vs. confusion (adolescence), intimacy vs. isolation (young adulthood), generativity vs. stagnation (adulthood) and ego integrity vs. despair (old age). Each of these stages are influenced by three main factors namely biology, psychosocial and social factors (Orenstein & Lewis, 2020). Additionally, Erikson asserted that each stage of psychosocial development acts as a turning point in the development as each phase has its own crisis that needs to be resolved. In other words, people who successfully resolve the crises will contribute to the overall psychological well-being. Erikson described the final stage of psychosocial development begins at approximately age 65 and ends at death. During this period, the elderly will look back on their life with a sense of accomplishment and fulfilment or regret, shame, and disappointment. The current research used the approach developed by Erikson to understand elderly who are facing crisis in their life and as a basis for the methodology.

Community Engagement or Service Learning

Previous studies showed the higher-education institutions college students are able to establish relationship with the community through service learning or community engagement program. Multiple studies suggested that both programs enhance students' perceptions toward older adult. Fung and Fong (2020) described the students gained a meaningful experience in preparing them to understand and analyse the health and social conditions of elderly and motivate them to design more psycho-educational activities for the community. Additionally, Augustin & Freshman (2017) reported that service learning also developed students' interest in pursuing career in elder care. Heuer, Douglas, Burney & Willer (2019) asserted that there was a positive change in the knowledge and comfort among undergraduate students toward elderly with and without dementia after engaging in service learning at care communities.

Elderly

Noraini et al (2015) conducted a study on 5 senior citizens aged between 60 years and above who joined the 'Home Help Service' program organized by the Social Welfare Department in Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. The study involved a qualitative approach through interview methods and thematic analysis. The findings of the study showed that the main factor which led to the occurrence of neglect of the elderly was due to the views that the elderly were considered burdensome as well as the career-oriented behaviour of the younger generation or the preference of the younger generation to live far away from the elderly. These studies indicated the needs of special training in the forms of module and specific training to further educate the volunteers to understand the nature of elderly and their special needs.

Appropriateness of Counselling Intervention to the Elderly

Hill & Brettle (2004) conducted an analysis of 47 articles on the effectiveness, suitability and feasibility of counselling for the elderly. The articles were sourced from six databases such as MEDLINE, CINAHL, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews and DARE, Credata, and Counsellit. The results of the analysis showed that the counselling approach was very effective with the elderly in helping the elderly who suffered from anxiety and depression to improve their own well-being. Furthermore, this analysis found that individual counselling was appropriate for elderly people living in the care centres, and group counselling was found to be appropriate for elderly people living in community day care centres. Finally, related to the feasibility of counselling among elderly people, the analysis showed that elderly people also benefited from the counselling approach. Based on these reviews, it can be concluded that the application of counselling principles is vital to cater to the needs of elderly populations in Malaysia as there is no evident in the literature yet that address the existence of that module in the local context.

Method

In order to answer "what are the essential topics in the development of gerontological counselling module?", this study adapted Myer's (1981) work on a trainer's manual for basic helping skills: counselling older person, and chose 11 topic to be included in the module. The researchers used the ADDIE model (Dick et al., 2001) to design instructional modules through five phases namely analyse, design, develop, implement, and evaluate (Kurt, 2017).

Analysis

Prior to the study, a needs analysis was conducted among 114 (29 males, 85 females) college student volunteers who were involved in the community service engagement program at the old folks home in Selangor. The survey questionnaire was designed to measure volunteers' needs of the module on gerontological counselling. Questionnaire consisted of 22 items. On the four-point-scale (0-strongly disagree; 4-strongly agree) respondents were asked the needs of gerontological counselling contents in volunteering training program. The findings showed that 96.7 percent of volunteers needed specific skills in dealing with the elderly. In addition, 95 respondents (82.6%) needed volunteer training and 109 respondents (94.8%) agreed that aspects of gerontology counselling should be applied in the training.

Design Phase

In the design phase, the researchers obtained permission from the original authors to adapt the original module based on the various cultures in Malaysia. During this stage, the researchers also identified the learning objectives, the contents and the units, learning strategies, materials, and reflection activities that based on the learning objectives for each unit, which based on the original module. The module framework was based on Rogers' counselling approach and Erickson's Theory of Psychosocial Development.

Development Phase

Development of content and materials was based on the feedback received from four subject matter of experts from various professionals related to elderly (a gerontological volunteer, a geriatric expert, a gerontology social worker, and an associate professor in social work with specialized in gerontological social work).. A total of 11 units were selected to be included in the module that comprised reflection activities for each unit, which were in line with the learning objectives. The content validity analysis showed that this module could help volunteers in providing more effective services to the elderly. The findings can be shared as the following:

“Overall, this module clearly helps volunteers to carry out volunteer activities effectively”. Expert 1

In addition, the finding showed that volunteers needed the module and further planning on the usefulness of the module to be used by various categories of groups should be considered. The panel shared this as the following:

“This module is very much needed for those involved in volunteering work. There is a need for further planning to be used to the specific target groups. At the initial stage, it is possible to introduce the module to students”. Expert 2

However, there were suggestions from the panel that improvements needed to be made in the sentence structure in module writing. In addition, "role play" activities needed to be added in the activity section of the module. This could be seen from the following Panel 3 excerpts:

“Can be improved by using the appropriate words for a strategy, and the "addition of" role play "activities for each strategy for each unit.”

Finally, the panel expressed an agreement in the development of this module, which was expected to attract more people to be a volunteer. This was clearly stated by the following panel.

“This module can produce more volunteers”. Expert 4.

Based on the findings of content analysis, it was found that this module had a good fit and could be applied to volunteers. Improvements to the content had been made based on the reviews from subject matter experts.

Implementation Phase

The research project implemented on 30 students before performing volunteering program at Rumah Ehsan, Kuala Kubu Bharu, Selangor.

Evaluation Phase

This evaluation phase was implemented by analysing the suitability of the module needs analysis, the module design and the module implementation. Fifteen volunteers participated in focus group interview. Improvements were implemented based on suggestions from the respondents. The findings of the study found that 3 units were dropped from the module and the training could be reduced to 16 hours (2 days). Based on the overall evaluation of the respondents, this module had an impact on improving their skills to help the elderly more effectively.

Findings

A Proposed Module on Gerontological Counselling for Volunteers to Work with the Elderly

The main objective of this module was to train volunteers on specific skills in gerontological counselling to advance the skills of volunteers. The training covered a period of eight meetings. The eight units of the module are described below:

Unit 1: Introduction to Volunteer Module Based on Gerontology Counselling Approach

In the early stages, this module provides an overview related to the lives of elderly people who need help from community. In addition, this unit also describes the function of the Gerontology Counselling-Based Volunteer Module in providing training to volunteers as well as developing closeness between participants in the training. This unit also provides participants with an initial overview of volunteers and elderly, in addition to preparing participants for future units.

Unit 2: Introduction to Volunteer Services

This unit provides an explanation of the division in helping relationships namely the formal or informal help support system for the elderly. The participants will be able to differentiate between professional and non-professional services. In addition, this section reveals and enhances participants' understanding of the role of the individual as a volunteer who offers ongoing services. At this stage, participants are given exposure to their own self-exploration. As the participants understand themselves better, they will be more effective in helping others to understand themselves. Next, participants will look at and consider their beliefs towards others as a whole and also relate to the elderly in particular.

Unit 3: Understanding the Clients

This unit discusses the types of communication in order for the participants to understand clients (elderly people) namely verbal and non-verbal communication. The participants will learn about body language, eye contact, body posture, gestures and basic listening sequences. Next, they will be exposed to effective communication skills. Not only that, they will be introduced to basic counselling skills even though they are not from the counselling background.

Unit 4: Developing Rapport and the Therapeutic Relationship

This unit provides an overview of the aging process so that participants better understand the elderly who are going through the aging process in terms of biological, psychological, and social aspects. In addition, the participants will be shown that all human beings will go through a similar process. Next, the participants will better understand the elderly as they learn and practise ways to do self-disclosure, respect for others and unconditional positive regard. Therefore, the rapport between participants and elderly could be established.

Unit 5: Helping Process

This unit describes the stages in helping a relationship that consists of identifying problems, setting goals, clarifying issues, listing alternatives, exploring alternatives, and supporting decisions. Participants are guided to apply comprehensive, organized, and applicable techniques in a variety of situations and issues. This training will further enhance the competence of participants as volunteers in providing assistance to elderly people. Through this training, the elderly are expected to work with volunteers and to be able to continue their lives well. Next, they can feel more independent when given the responsibility in facing their own life problems.

Unit 6: Termination

This unit explains to the participants on the termination element in the helping relationship. They are given roles and training to explain the elderly about termination in helping relationship and make referrals if necessary. The participants are also exposed to the actual procedure for making a reference to another professional. Participants are also introduced to various agencies which can work together in providing the best services to the elderly on an ongoing basis. Additional social support can be obtained from family members, friends and the community.

Unit 7: Helping Skills for the Special Population

This unit exposes the participants to the type of elderly population that needs more attention from community. This include the differences that exist are in terms of problems faced by the elderly or more specifically those who are involved in substance abuse problems, loss of physical ability, facing death or mourning, and any mental health issues. In addition, appropriate methods in providing services to the elderly in this special population are discussed.

Unit 8: Keep up the good work!

This unit discusses the end of the training where the participants will be provided with the importance of continuous development and learning after the completion of this training. Support groups are important to improve skills and help participants as volunteers stay motivated and not make volunteer work a burden. This unit which emphasizes volunteering to help others is not only limited to filling free time but more towards an ongoing process and requires commitment from the volunteers and the community. Therefore, the volunteers need to be assisted first before extending assistance to other individuals.

Discussion

This research indicated an effort to develop a training module for volunteers based on gerontological counselling and would be suitable to be used with elderly people in the residential care homes in Malaysia. The findings fill up the gap pertaining to the need of training in the gerontological counselling and a specific module to be used by volunteers who do not have any training in counselling.

The implementation of ADDIE instructional design model as a framework-indicated that the model was effective in designing and developing instructional learning module as it was conducted for specific populations for example gifted students (Abd Razak, Surat & Abd Majid, 2020), moral education students Zulkifli et al (2018) and nurses (Hsu et al., 2014). The development of the module was tested and found to be effective for Malaysian users specifically volunteers. The findings of the study also indicated that only eight topics to be included in the module for 16 hours training. In addition, the ADDIE model met the needs of the target learners (volunteers), community (elderly people and residential home administrators) as well as the researchers.

This study shows there is a need to provide volunteers with the prior knowledge and skills of gerontological counselling, so that, the elderly people can benefit from the volunteer services provided. In addition, the researchers recommend that the volunteers examine their readiness to work with elderly people in clinical settings, as they will be expected to reduce the psychological issues experienced by the elderly. Additionally, this study showed that the module is valid for volunteers to apply at higher education institution. However, this preliminary study cannot be generalized for a wider demographic as the small number of participants involved in the study. Future research may focus on more rigorous approach on knowledge, sample, and the application of the content module.

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