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PERCEIVED KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES OF SOCIAL WORKERS TOWARDS THE ELDERLY IN ILORIN, KWARA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Ageing does not only change how people look, it changes how they think, behave and the functions of their body system. Even though, many elderly people experience a lot during this stage, social workers who work in care agency like geriatric homes are expected to be aware of some of the challenges during old age. This study investigates the major challenges that faced the elderly. In addition, the study also investigates the perceived knowledge and attitudes of social workers towards the elderly in Ilorin, Kwara state. Eleven participants who are social workers working in geriatric homes were purposively selected for the study. Data collected was analysed using thematic analysis. The study found stroke, memory loss, ageism, isolation and resource mobilization as the part of the perceived experience of elderly people. The traditional emphasis on family-centered care is fast becoming a relic of the past because of changes in family dynamics. The study recommends that there is need for government at all level to establish geriatric hospitals where the interdisciplinary team including the social workers who have a clear understanding of older people's challenges will be employed. Lastly, the paper concluded that there is little or no effort from governments to support geriatric institutions in Kwara state.

Keywords: Ageing; Ageism; Attitude; Knowledge; Elderly; Social worker

Introduction

Nigeria's population is ageing rapidly, and the population of age 60 years and above is expected to be doubled by 2050 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2017). Out of 191 million population of Nigeria, 3.1% (5.9 million) are of age 65 years and above (National Council on Ageing, 2016). Consequently, with increasing age and longevity older people, aged eighty years and above will eventually require care services (United Nation, 2017). Ageism against older people has been widely recognized as a major threat to active ageing and an important public health issue (World Health Organization, 2017). Studies (Levy, 2011; Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2017; Swift, Abrams, Lamont, & Drury, 2017) attest that ageistic attitudes, and in particular ageistic stereotypes, have negative impacts on the elderly in many different domains, leading to poor outcomes for the elderly in many different areas such as memory and cognitive performance, health (Levy, Zonderman, Slade, Ferrucci &, 2009) work performance (Naegel, De Tavernier & Hess, 2018) and even their will-to-live (Marques, Lima, & Abrams, 2014). In addition, the fast-growing number of older adults during the last few decades has impacted significantly on the political, economic, and social functions of societies in both industrialized and developing regions (Carney & Gray, 2015; Nagarajan, Teixeira & Silva, 2016; Harvey & Thurnwald, 2009). Around the world, those responsible for providing support services to the elderly are being challenged by how best to care for rising numbers of elderly with complex needs such as terminal illnesses (Graue, Dunning, Hausken, & Rokne, 2013). These challenges include social support, care for their health challenges, financial needs and accommodation (Graues et al, 2013; Akil, Abdullah, & Sipon, 2014). Moreover, it should be recognised that care needs can change and increase over time, particularly for people living with a progressive condition such as dementia. While some studies (Crampton, 2011) claimed that social workers have more understanding on older adults' challenges, however, studies by Alsenany (2009) and Eltantawy (2013) submit that, though health professionals in social care for the elderly may have understanding of the challenges of older adult but many of these health professionals including social workers exhibit negative attitude towards the elderly.

In order to contribute to the literature on ageing and to better understand social workers knowledge and attitude towards the elderly in Ilorin, hence; this study looks at the perceived knowledge and attitudes of social workers towards the elderly in Ilorin. The findings of this study are expected to also identify the challenges of elderly in Ilorin. The study has adopted the Planned Behaviour (PB) theory as a theoretical framework to offer an explanation on the social workers perceptions on ageing. The theory postulates that people are motivated to change based on their perception of norms, attitudes, and control over behaviours. Each of these factors can either increase or decrease a person's intent to change his or her behaviour. Therefore, PB explains how behavioural intention determines behaviour, and how attitude toward behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control influence behavioural intention. Accordingly, attitudes toward behaviour are shaped by beliefs about what is entailed in performing the behaviour and outcomes of the behaviour (Abdulkadir et al. 2016). Beliefs about social standards and motivation to comply with those norms affect subjective norms. The presence or lack of things that will make it easier or harder to

perform the behaviours affects perceived behavioural control. Thus, a chain of beliefs, attitudes and intentions drive behaviour. The strength of the relationship between the first three constructs, that is; attitude, intention and behaviour varies, depending on the population and the specific topic being studied (Hardeman et al. 2002).

Research Method

This study uses a phenomenological qualitative research, designed to explore the perceived knowledge and attitude of social workers towards the elderly in Ilorin. The study employed qualitative technique to allow study participants (Social workers) to share their opinions about their perceptions towards the elderly in Ilorin. This is because qualitative method enables researcher to get information directly from the mouth of the participants (Mohajan, 2018). The study used purposive sampling procedure because the respondents have features needed to be included in the study. Hence, this sampling technique was used to select ten (10) participants for the study, from two geriatric homes in Ilorin. The selection criteria were based on; being a professional social worker (either male and female) and working in geriatric homes in Ilorin. Interview guide was the instrument used to conduct an in-depth interview session with the participants. The interview session lasted for between 20-25 minutes for each participant and the data was collected over a period of two months. The data collected were later transcribed and analyzed. To minimize personal biases on the results of the study, member checks were utilized during and after interviews for credibility, validity, and transferability of the results of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each interview was also restated and summarized by the researcher, questioning the participants on the accuracy of the data. After transcribing the taped interviews, the researcher asked each participant to look for accuracy in the contents of their transcripts. The researcher consulted resources and other prominent advisors throughout the duration of the study. Guidance from the advisors helped the researcher to focus on the relevant details that participants offered, leading to themes developed from the data. Ample and relevant quotes from participants were included to substantiate the findings of the study (Maxwell, 2005). Ethical approval for the study was granted by the managements of the geriatric homes.

Results

After transcription of the in-depth interviews with social workers on their perceptions of attitude and challenges of elderly people in Ilorin, the following themes and sub-themes emerged; (i) Challenges associated with ageing (ii) loss of memory (iii) socio-cultural challenges (iv) Attitude towards the care of elderly (v) Mobilisation of resources towards elderly.

Generally, old age is the most nasty and challenging period for those who are able to get the stage. These challenges range from physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, attitude towards the aged and resources towards the care of elderly. However, social workers who work in geriatric home are better equipped on the challenges faced by elderly people in our society today.

Health Challenges Associated with Ageing

Social workers who work in the study area help the elderly in their care manage psychopathological and other social and physical challenges that come with old age. They do this using social work interventions for the aged. The essence of the intervention is to help the elderly manage the challenges that comes with old age. Generally, many of the participants showed their in-depth understanding of various health challenges confronting old people. They claimed that stroke and dementia are the major health and mental challenges bedeviling the elderly.

A male respondent expressed that:

Many of the elderly in our care have stroke. It is really a serious problem. In fact, many of the elderly in our agency have either partial or complete paralysis of both arms and feet. It impedes their movement and causes them to be dependent on others for assistance to perform Activities of Daily Living such as bathing, dressing, eating etc. Caring for them can be very stressful because they often become paranoid- (feeling of being harmed). Although stroke is not really an old age problem like that but it makes people look older in physical outlook than their chronological age. (Male/04/08/2020).

However, some of the participants expressed that the family of some of the elderly in their care often refer to those suffering from the effects of dementia as witches, wizards or possessed by a supernatural spirit. Another female participant expressed that:

It is a serious problem. The elderly can forget anything even what they are doing at that present time. They keep asking you about things you have done for them repeatedly. Dealing with them can be really annoying to be honest. They are often very confrontational when asking about things they've forgotten. For example, they usually take their drugs after breakfast and dinner as a routine on a daily basis. Yet they will still keep asking for drugs after they have been given. That's very common with many of the elderly we have here. The most distressing part is having to introduce yourself every day before you can take care of them. They just don't have any retentive memory again. (Female/02/07/2020).

Therefore, the participants see stroke and memory lost are some of the challenges old people are battling with during the old age. This is because many of the elderly people who developed stroke and memory lost can only be managed because there is no permanent cure to these health and psychological challenges.

Socio-cultural Challenges

Beyond health and mental challenges, elderly people are also confronted with socio-cultural challenges. These socio-cultural challenges come in form of attitude and behaviour of people towards the elderly. Although, many of the participants

demonstrated their knowledge about sociocultural challenges confronting the elderly especially ageism. For instance, a male participant expressed that *“old people are not appreciated in our society, people often see them as burden”*. Another female participant said that:

some children also treat their old parents as strangers and others as witches or wizard. This is why you see some of these elderly people begging in the street (Male/02/07/2020).

A female participant commented that:

Ageism is new to me really. The elderly is accorded with respect in recent past before people started having this unnecessary negative thought about them. I can still remember how children use to honor the old people in the 90s. If you see any elder carrying anything and rush towards him or her to help them, you will be shocked to notice that another person has raced forward to just that. The care of elderly parents used to be a collective effort by all members of the family. Everyone providing one form of care or the other but things have really changed nowadays (Female/02/07/2020).

She continued that:

Even children now abandon their parents at home and travel to other cities without checking on them for years. Some will only return home to come and organize an expensive funeral for their parents after their demise. Many of them die begging for money to eat by the road side. You will see people referring to old women as witches in market places (Female/02/07/2020).

Another male respondent comment that:

Some people will not even patronize an elderly businessman or woman. Even the Nigerian government have neglected the elderly populations in the country. For those that work as civil either as civil servant or public servant, their pension and other retirement benefits are not paid on time, elders in the informal sectors are not considered in the pension scheme and there is no adequate medical or welfare provision for the elderly. Hence, old people also have to struggle with younger ones to use hospital, transport services, water and other social infrastructural facilities as there are no specialized provisions for the elderly (male/02/07/2020).

The researcher deduced that some of the children who abandon their parents do so because of the enormous responsibility of taking care of them. At times, it is more than just being with them but the financial aspect of the care. At the same time those who do not patronize them may have the African mentality that an elderly person is a witch especially those whose husband or children have died.

On social isolation as a challenge to elderly people, the traditional cultural belief in many cultures in Nigeria stand against taking one parent to a geriatric home or agency for adequate and appropriate care. For instance, a male participants expressed that:

Social isolation is a serious problem confronting elderly care in our society. There was a time when someone came to make enquiries about our services and even asked that we visit his house to assess his father's health condition. All arrangements to bring the old man to our facility was almost completed when some other family members pressured the son against bringing his father to the centre for care. He was forced to hire a housemaid for his father instead. There have been many cases like that. Many people especially uneducated ones perceive taking parent to elderly centre as breaking the cultural norm. This has continued to subject many elderly persons to social isolation because there is no one who has time to cater for their needs at every given time. Some elderly persons are locked indoor from morning till evening when their children would be back from work. With no one to talk to or call for assistance, many elders have developed emotional problems from this way of life (Male/02/07/2020).

What could be deduced from this is that, the participants show significant knowledge about the health and social problem confronting the elderly as a result of their experience in geriatric cares.

Carriers' Knowledge on their Roles in the Care of Elderly

The care social workers working in geriatric home provide for elderly cannot be quantified. In fact, these care help some of the elderly to stay healthy which is why some people bring their elderly people to geriatrics homes for management and care. However, many of the participants agreed that social worker's roles in the provision of care for elderly clients include daily assessment of client health conditions as well as assisting the elderly with mobility among others. A female participant expressed that "we do take care of elderly people in our agency as if they are our parents". Similarly, a male participants said that "is better for children to take their elderly parents to geriatric home for care but unfortunately many Nigerians don't know what we do". One of the male respondents encapsulated the general roles in this excerpt:

Our roles are many but it all centered on ensuring the welfare of our elderly client. Assessing their health status through checking of vital signs done by the nurses is a major task we do every day. When they wake up, we first observe them for a while to understand their state of health. You have to be very careful in performing those roles because anything and everything can go wrong at any time given their vulnerabilities. So we are typically caring for them like a baby (Male/02/07/2020).

Another female participant corroborated the statement above when she expressed that:

Our roles also ensuring they are provided with timely meal in a hygienic environment. Working with them demands patience because it is not just about performing your role as a care giver, it is about meeting their need at every time and that may involve working beyond schedule. It also involves being in constant communication with the family members or our elderly clients to update them concerning how their elderly are faring. Sometimes we may need to call on their relatives to occasionally pay them a courtesy visit to make them happy. The sight of loved ones always goes a long way in making them happy and lively. There's been many occasion when a client will refuse food and demand to see his/her children and will not eat until they are visited(Female, 02/07/2020).

She continued that:

Furthermore, it is also our duty to assist the elderly clients with mobility. Moving from one place to another is problematic for most of them. We have to place some on wheel chairs while others only need support to move from one place to another. We help them with bathing, brushing of teeth, feeding, laundry and every other activities of daily living. We also assist the nurse in the administration of drug because many of them have to take some prescription on a continuum. (Female, 02/07/2020).

What can be deduced from the above responses show that many of the participants have been trained on how to manage elderly people with varying health and physical challenges. It shows that the social workers have adequate knowledge about their roles in the care of the elderly people in our society and in lines with our culture.

Attitude towards the Care of the Elderly

Regarding the attitude of social workers' attitude towards the care of elderly. All the participants expressed that having good attitudes towards the elderly make their job becomes part of their daily life. However, three respondents expressed that being patient, respecting their self-worth and finding a responsible way to deal with frustration that come with the job is the best attitude any social worker can have. A female respondent comment that:

Being knowledgeable only cannot sustain a care giver for long here. Being patience is the key. That has been the driving force for me. Also, I tried to empathize or see them as my parent. (Female/03/07/2020)

A female respondent commented that:

In this job, frustrations are every day thing. There are many things that can frustrate you as a social worker. Apart from dealing with a client group that may choose to be unresponsive at any times, there are those elderly ones that have mental or neurological issues. Dealing with their excesses can be very stressful and frustrating. I can vividly remember how my cloth was tore by one of our clients when I was trying to care for her. Those things happen every now and then. However, a caregiver is prohibited from retaliating so one just have to get used to them. And I think that's why the agency always look out for experienced caregivers when employing personnel. Although being experienced does not reduce the stresses, it only reduces the reactions of the care givers. (Female03/07/2020).

Another female social worker said:

Keeping up with good attitude can be difficult for care givers sometimes. Imagine someone leaving her room to defecate at the sitting room and using the faeces to litter everywhere along the way. One just have to get used to it. That has been very helpful for me personally in dealing with frustrations. One just have to respect this people (elderly) because whether we like it or not we will also become old like them one day. It's about having that understanding that ageing and its associated challenges are natural phenomenon. (Female03/07/2020).

From this data, the respondents demonstrated good knowledge about the ageing process and a positive attitude toward the elderly. Thereby showing a significant relationship between knowledge and attitude.

Mobilization of Resources for Elderly Care

While talking about why care of old people often involves some unplanned expenditures, from the narratives of the social workers during the interviews, one of the participants explained that:

We used to solicit for money and material resources from corporate bodies and well-to-do individual philanthropists especially during world elder's day but we don't use to see any substantial support like that (Female03/07/2020).

Another respondent explained that:

The government has never supported us in any way since this agency was established. So client's families are always informed when there are need to meet some expenses that are not covered in the contract. For example, when a client health problem requires hospital treatments. The family have to come in to cater for the treatment of their aged parents or relative (Male 03/07/2020).

It was deduced that major source of mobilizing resources for the care of the elderly is from corporate bodies, individual philanthropists, and family of the elderly. It was explained that no form of support is forthcoming from the three tiers of the government.

Discussion of Findings

On the knowledge about common problems associated with ageing, the study reveals that respondents have adequate knowledge about the various mental health and socio-cultural challenges to the elderly; dementia and stroke are the major health problems confronting many old people in Kwara State. This finding is consistent with the position of Davies et. al. (2019) and Efiong et al. (2015) on dementia and stroke as prevalent among the elderly; on the socio-cultural challenges confronting the elderly, the respondents mentioned ageism and cultural barriers as the social problem facing the elderly. This is in line with the findings of Perpetua (2018) which found ageism and social isolation as socially detrimental to the elderly; on the themes, care givers' knowledge on their role in the care of the elderly, the finding shows that respondents have a detailed understanding of their roles in the care of an elderly client; on care givers' attitudes towards the elderly, the finding shows a significant relationship between knowledge of ageing and attitudes of social workers towards the elderly. This finding corresponds with the findings of Bosswell (2012); Olayiwola et.al (2013); Masciadrelli (2014); Joel et. al (2017)& Singh et. al (2018), that found a significant positive correlation between knowledge of ageing and attitudes towards older adults; on the theme of care givers' attitudes towards ethical guidelines, the finding shows that respondents have a positive attitude toward ethical guidelines that direct the worker-client relationship; on the theme of knowledge requirements and mobilization of resources for treatment of an elderly care, the finding shows that there is no form of support from government or any of its agencies to make life more meaningful for the elderly. This finding go in line with the submission of Perpetual et al. (2018); provision of social services such as income, security, health care, housing, and legal assistance can positively influence the well-being and health of the elderly (Oladeji, 2011).

Conclusion

Social workers have good knowledge about the common challenges associated with ageing and also have positive attitudes towards the care of the elderly; dementia, stroke, ageism and social isolation are factors hindering successful ageing. The respondents have detailed knowledge about their roles in the care of elderly clients while confidentiality and respect for inherent worth of the elderly are the major ethical guidelines for social workers working with the elderly. There is a shift from the traditional emphasis on family-centered care because of changes in family dynamics. It is found that there is little or no effort from governments to support geriatric institutions in Kwara state.

Recommendations

The Nigerian government should establish geriatric hospitals or at least have geriatric sections incorporated in all the teaching hospitals across the country to care for the elderly and should ensure there are enough trained geriatric social workers in the health-care system. Furthermore, government should provide a conducive environment for private organizations to establish private geriatric homes to complement government owned institutions besides empowering the National

Orientation Agency (NOA) to continually organize awareness rallies, seminars and sensitization workshops to change people's negative perception on patronizing geriatric homes for the care of their elderly parents and relatives. The policy makers should assist to enact laws that de-motivate ageism but promote genuine desire among care givers to work in geriatric institutions. The country educational system needs to recognize the challenges of an ageing Nigeria and should therefore include gerontology contents in the social work education curriculum.

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