

THE PSYCHOSOCIAL PROBLEMS OF THE ELDERLY: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Tracy B. E. Omorogiuwa

University of Benin, Department of Social Work, Benin City, Nigeria

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore the psychosocial problems of the elderly and the likely measures in response to this phenomenon. A descriptive survey design is employed in this study to achieve the set objectives. The population of this study consists of all elderly persons aged 60 years and above, both male and female in Benin Metropolis, Edo State, Nigeria. The standardized questionnaire with the four point Likert type format is utilized. The simple random technique was adopted to select participants from Egor, Oliha, Uselu, Ikpoba-Hill and Oka communities of the Benin Metropolis. Sixty-two (62) elderly persons were randomly selected from each of the communities, giving a total of 372 persons that participated in the study. Face and content validation of the instrument was determined by three social workers in gerontology. The test retest reliability method was utilized at 0.5 co-efficient. Data collection was analyzed using the descriptive statistics; mean and standard deviation. The results show that the key psychosocial problem of the elderly in the Benin Metropolis is the socio-economic challenge, with the highest mean value of 2.95, social isolation accounts for 2.74, health accounts for 2.69 and emotional challenges scored the least score of 2.67. The psychosocial problem of the elderly was not restricted to any specific psychological or social variable, but rather it was established in all variables. Given the findings, potential social work intervention and implications are suggested for improving the psychosocial functioning of the elderly.

Key words: *elderly; emotional; social isolation; health; socio-economic; social work; intervention*

INTRODUCTION

The world population has been undergoing momentous aging (the process that marks increasing numbers of older adults in the total population) since the mid-twentieth century (United Nations 2013). Although aging started earlier in the developed societies, it started to be established in some developing countries and became more evident at a global scale (Richards 2000). Globally, people aged 65 years and above accounted for approximately 280 million; Africa is projected to increase four-fold from the current 45.7 million

to 182.6 million in 2050, while the proportion of the total population will double from 5% to 10% in the same period (United States Bureau of Census 2008).

The population of Nigeria is among the most aged populations in Africa. According to the Nigeria National Population Commission (2006), the elderly (aged 60 years and above) account for 16% of the total population in Nigeria. This rise in the aging population, according to Ajomale (2006), has been due to increased life expectancy, resulting from the declining fertility rate, improved standards of life (Adler 2006), and

technological breakthroughs in the fields of medicine, including the development of new and effective drugs and vaccines. However, the intensity and depth of aging varies considerably among countries and regions, and aging has insightful impacts of a far-reaching range on their health, psychological, economic and social life.

The growth of the elderly population often leads to their vulnerability in terms of the range and intensity of problems/challenges, especially the cognitive, emotional and social aspects, and in particular with the gradual breakdown of the extended family system (Clarke and Bennett 2013). A number of the elderly experience a loss of social roles, loss of esteem, limited economic resources and a depleted social and psychological network (Burnette et al. 2003). Old age has been recognized as a stage in human life with its own distinct features, such as psychological, physiological, health impairment or the presence of severe diseases and also with changes in social life (Kourkouta et al. 2015). This is the stage of the life descent, hence the effects are not only biological and physically marked, but have psychological and social effects too. All of the changes that occur in the lives of the elderly make them very sensitive and there are many psycho-social problems such as long-term illnesses that lead to inactivity, dementia, depression; feelings of loneliness, isolation and abandonment (Kontis et al. 2013).

Although efforts have been made to update the health care status of the elderly, studying and understanding the social and psychological challenges of the elderly seems to have been overlooked. Hence this study intends to examine the psychosocial problems experienced by the elderly persons in the Benin Metropolis, Nigeria, and to specify the possible social work practice implications.

The psychological and social issues of the elderly

Researches worldwide have recognized various problems confronting the older adults in society, such as mental health issues, deprivation or isolation, psychological or emotional and socio-economic issues (Abiodun et al. 2011, Fajemilehin and Odebiyi 2011, United Nations 2013, Kourkouta et al. 2015). The sense of psychological loss tends

to worsen the fear of getting old as loss and grief present a serious emotional challenge for the elderly (Abiodun et al. 2011). Besides the health issues, an overwhelming challenge for the elderly is the notion of a loss of identity. Elderly people equally experience a loss of self-worth and self-esteem as well as loss of esteemed social roles (World Health Organization 2007). Repetitive loss occurs as significant others die (relatives and friends as well as acquaintances), leaving them emotionally isolated. Inadequate coping with the losses make the older people believe that life is worthless. According to Moore (2009), the feeling of isolation and alienation with a sense of social relegation is a key challenge for some elderly people. The single biggest challenges for the elderly are dealing with loneliness due to the loss of a partner, friends, career, home, mobility or a combination of these. To access the psychosocial well-being of the elderly, research identified the loss of self-esteem, isolation, and that the feeling of loneliness and anxiety in old age is critical as it leads to less mental and physical health (Koukourikos et al. 2014).

The most common problem encountered in old age that can result in health challenges for the elderly people is depression (Fajemilehin and Odebiyi 2011). Richards (2000) in his study on the prevalence of depression among the elderly, indicates that community dwelling elderly people can be diagnosed with major depressive and cognitive problems. The incidence of depression is higher in the elderly as a number of them experience feelings of unhappiness, sadness, hopelessness or disappointment on a daily basis (Kourkouta et al. 2015). This shows that a larger proportion of older adults report clinical symptoms of depression and cognitive disorders. Dementia, a mental health condition, manifested as short-term memory loss, critical capacity problems, difficulty in handling complex everyday things, apathy, irritability and in more severe cases loss of speech is prevalent among the elderly (Ray and Phillips 2012, Kontis et al. 2013). Aging has inappropriate consequences; it is likely to reduce the functioning of elderly people's physical and mental health capacities.

In spite of the significant roles of a number of the elderly in ensuring societal development, in many contexts, they also

encounter social issues including socio-economic challenges (Ajomale 2006, Fajemilehin and Odebiyi 2011). Indeed, in most societies it is peoples' age and not their abilities that often define how others consider their ability and potential. For the elderly, the negative societal responses to their age are the obstacles to their socio-economic activities and poor access to vital services. Research asserts that "there are stereotypes about the reduced ability of the elderly to work, or reduced work possibilities in education, vocational training and entertainment" (Kourkouta et al. 2015, p. 234). Ajomale (2006) indicates that the loss of income and prestige or economic instability due to the lack of a job can pose financial challenges for elderly persons. Growing older does not remove the importance of social status, but could reduce a person's social and economic prospects. A decline in physical energy may cause economic activities to diminish, since an old person cannot actively pursue economic activities with the same resilience that young person can (Ray and Phillips 2012). The challenges the elderly experience is likely to weaken them, this has some socio-economic, health and an emotional repercussion such as that aging is seen as a state of insecurity.

Resolving the issues confronting individuals is one such area that has been associated with the helping professions, but has not been focused on in terms of the psychosocial problems of the elderly and the measures of tackling them. Given the vital role of social work in the health and psychosocial well-being of the elderly, a greater mindfulness of elderly peoples' strength and resilience could enable social workers to improve the social functioning of elderly clients with psychosocial problems.

Statement of problem

In Nigeria, the elderly constitute the poorest group in society, given the obvious rate of destitution among them (Fajemilehin and Odebiyi 2011). With a collapsing extended family, these elderly persons no longer enjoy the care and support of family members and relatives as was the case in traditional African society, thereby exposing them to challenges of various dimensions. As a consequence of the collapsing family many elderly persons also suffer financially. The increasing level of

depression and lower emotional capacity in this group results in reduced logical reasoning among their contemporaries. They engage less frequently in social roles and social activities, resulting in their inevitable withdrawal from their environment and society. A number of the elderly in the context of Nigeria are disadvantaged as there seems to be a general apathy and little or no attention given to the problems they face.

Objectives of the study

The purpose of the study is to examine the psychosocial challenges of the elderly. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Identify the mental challenges of the elderly in the Benin Metropolis.
2. Identify the emotional challenges of the elderly in the Benin Metropolis.
3. To determine whether social isolation is experienced by the elderly people in the Benin Metropolis.
4. To examine the socio-economic challenges of the elderly in the Benin Metropolis.
5. To determine the possible social work implications of the problems of the elderly.

Research questions

1. What are the mental challenges of the elderly in the Benin Metropolis?
2. What are the emotional challenges of the elderly persons in the Benin Metropolis?
3. Is social isolation a challenge of the elderly in the Benin Metropolis?
4. What are the socio-economic challenges of the elderly in the Benin Metropolis?
5. What are the possible suggestions to address the problems of the elderly?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A descriptive survey design is employed in this study to achieve the set objectives. The population of this study consists of all elderly persons within the age range of 60 years and above, both male and female, in the Benin Metropolis, Edo State. A standardized questionnaire with the four point Likert type format is utilized. The simple random technique was used to select participants from Egor, Oliha, Uselu, Ikpoba-Hill and

Oka communities of the Benin Metropolis. Sixty-two (62) elderly persons were randomly selected from each of the communities, giving a total of 372 participants in the study. The face and content validation of the instrument was determined by three social workers who are experts in gerontology. The test retest reliability method was utilized at 0.5 co-efficient. Twenty (20) elderly persons who are not part of the study were randomly selected, the instrument was administered to them, and after an interval of two weeks the same instrument was re-administered to them. The two sets of test scores were correlated and the responses were subjected to Pearson's product moment correlation. The reliability co-efficients of 0.80 and 0.87 were obtained respectively. Data collection was analyzed

using the descriptive statistics; mean and standard deviation as presented below.

RESULTS

Question 1: What are the emotional challenges of the elderly persons in the Benin Metropolis?

Table 1 shows a calculated mean value of 2.72, 2.68, 2.66 and 2.63. For all the items the grand mean is 2.67 with a test value of 2.5. The mean value is higher than the test value, so psychological challenges, such as trauma, low self-worth; deprivation and neglect are the emotional issues of the elderly in the Benin Metropolis.

Table 1. Emotional challenges of the elderly

S/N	Items	N	Mean	St D	Decision
1.	The elderly experience emotional trauma because of their age	372	2.72	0.78	Accepted
2.	The elderly experience a loss of self-worth or self-esteem as an aging issue	372	2.68	0.76	Accepted
3.	I have been deprived of so many of my essential needs since I became an elderly person	372	2.66	0.72	Accepted
4.	The elderly are neglected because of their age	372	2.63	0.69	Accepted
	Emotional challenges	372	2.67	0.74	Accepted

Criterion mean = 2.50, aggregate mean = 2.67 (accepted), rejected if <2.50

Question 2: Is social isolation a challenge for the elderly in the Benin Metropolis?

The mean value is higher than the test value, so social isolation, loneliness, the absence of contact with family members; stigmatization and seclusion are the isolation challenges for the elderly in the Benin Metropolis.

Table 2 shows a calculated mean value of 2.80, 2.82, 2.65 and 2.68. For all the items the grand mean is 2.74 with a test value of 2.5.

Table 2. Social isolation of the elderly

S/N	Items	N	Mean	St D	Decision
1.	As elders, many of my friends do experience loneliness as a result of the lack of a companion	372	2.80	0.69	Accepted
2.	Absence of contact with family members leads to isolation	372	2.82	0.69	Accepted
3.	The elderly are often being stigmatized	372	2.65	0.75	Accepted
4.	The elderly find it difficult to relate with the younger generation as result of seclusion	372	2.68	0.77	Accepted
	Social isolation	372	2.74	0.73	Accepted

Criterion mean = 2.50, aggregate mean = 2.74 (accepted), rejected if <2.50

Question 3: What are the health challenges of the elderly in the Benin Metropolis?

Table 3 shows a calculated mean value of 2.51; 2.66; 2.88 and 2.70. For all the items the grand mean is 2.69 with a test value of

2.5. The mean value is higher than the test value, depression, hopelessness, memory loss or cognitive disorder and dementia constitute the health challenges that impact the elderly in the Benin Metropolis.

Table 3. Health challenges of the elderly

S/N	Items	N	Mean	St D	Decision
1.	The aged feel hopeless when they are not cared for	372	2.51	0.77	Accepted
2.	The elderly find it difficult to assimilate facts and information quickly as a result of memory loss	372	2.66	0.81	Accepted
3.	The lack of support from family, friends and relatives leads to depression among the elderly	372	2.88	0.79	Accepted
4.	The elderly experience dementia due to their age	372	2.70	0.73	Accepted
	Health challenges	372	2.69	0.78	Accepted

Criterion mean = 2.50, aggregate mean = 2.69 (accepted), rejected if <2.50

Question 4: What are the socio-economic challenges of the elderly in the community?

Table 4 shows a calculated mean value of 2.78, 3.20, 3.02 and 2.80. For all the items the grand mean is 2.95 with a test value of 2.5. The mean value is higher than the test

value, so, socio-economic contexts such as economic recession, insufficient income, and irregular payment of pensions and lack of elder economic empowerment constitute socio-economic challenges for the elderly in the Benin Metropolis.

Table 4. Socio-economic challenge of the elderly

S/N	Items	N	Mean	St D	Decision
1.	I cannot be employed as it is believed that the elderly are not physically strong enough for productivity	372	2.78	0.65	Accepted
2.	Insufficient income contributes to the economic problems among the elderly	372	3.20	0.72	Accepted
3.	Irregular payment of the elders pension is a panacea for their economic instability in society	372	3.02	0.70	Accepted
4.	Lack of economic empowerment of the elderly increases poverty among the elderly	372	2.80	0.69	Accepted
	Socio-economic challenge	372	2.95	0.69	Accepted

Criterion mean = 2.50, aggregate mean = 2.95 (accepted), rejected if <2.50

DISCUSSION

This study found that the main psychological and social problems of the elderly in the Benin Metropolis, Nigeria, as indicated by research participants include emotional, social isolation, health and socio-economic issues. The findings of this study are consistent with the research findings that

explored that the problems of the elderly are characterized by various psychosocial issues (Kourkouta et al. 2015), which impacts on their psychosocial well-being. This study reveals the emotional challenges of the elderly given their experiences of trauma, deprivation and neglect. These findings support the study by Abiodun et al. (2011) that the sense of psychological loss tends to

worsen the fear of getting old, as loss and grief present a serious emotional challenge such as neglect, deprivation and trauma for the aged. This is also supported by the WHO (2007); elderly persons also experience a loss of self-worth and self-esteem as well as loss of valued social roles. This study also found that social isolation is a challenge for the elderly, given their loneliness, absence of contact with family members; stigmatization and seclusion from social life activities. This finding is supportive of Moore (2009) in that the feeling of stigmatization, separation and alienation with a sense of social relegation is the main challenge for elderly persons. Similarly, Koukourikos et al. (2014) identified social isolation and the feeling of loneliness in old age as critical in disintegration of older persons.

The results of our research further reveal that health challenges are also associated with the elderly, as they experience depression, cognitive ailments and dementia. This is indicative of the feelings of unhappiness, hopelessness, fear, anxiety and memory loss. The indication is that health issues often constitute a problem for the elderly. Therefore the findings agree with Fajemilehin and Odebiyi (2011) in that some of the common problems encountered in old age include depression and cognitive impairment, which present a major mental health challenge. Equally, Kontis et al. (2013) and Kourkouta et al. (2015) concur that some problems of the elderly are linked with their health as a number of them experience a feeling of unhappiness, sadness hopelessness, or disappointment on a daily basis, as well as dementia or memory loss and incompatibility. In addition, this study also found that socio-economic insecurity is a challenge for elderly people. This implies that socio-economic contexts, such as physical incapability to be productive, insufficient income; irregular payment of pensions and lack of elder economic empowerment constitute socio-economic challenges of the elderly. This finding concurs with Ajomale (2006) in that the loss of income and prestige or economic instability due to the lack of a job can pose financial challenges for elderly persons. Ray and Phillips (2012) conclude that a decline in physical energy may cause economic activities to diminish since an old person cannot actively pursue economic

activities with the same resilience that young person can. Given the findings of this study, all of the variables obtained may better explain the psychosocial problems of the elderly in the Benin Metropolis, Nigeria.

Elderly people who experience emotional issues showed the lowest scores (2.67), followed by health challenges which account for 2.69, social isolation accounts for 2.74 and socio-economic accounts for 2.95 of psychosocial problems. Consequently, this analysis demonstrates that elderly people who lack financial support and opportunities due to their age show the highest challenge scores; suggesting that aging plays a critical role in influencing the psychosocial well-being of the elderly. Hence, the psychosocial problem of the elderly was not restricted to any specific psychological or social issue, but rather it was established in all forms.

Implications for social work practice

As the number of elderly people increases, managing the psychological and social issues associated with the aging process becomes vital. Social workers, through their direct intervention in the lives of the elderly can play a crucial role in assessing their circumstances and helping to enhance their functioning (Adler 2006, Vance et al. 2008). As help providers, social workers are in the appropriate position to recognize the elderly who are in need or who have different psychosocial problems. They identify the underdeveloped potentials in the elderly client and help to encourage and enhance their capabilities to facilitate their psychosocial well-being. Appropriate intervention measures can be directed to either maintain the strength in the elderly or to aid the development of their functioning abilities. The result of such measures is to increase and promote the elderly's effective living.

Social work intervention with the elderly could begin with determining the level of the clients' psychosocial problems and an assessment of their condition can also be undertaken by series of observations. Considering the complexities linked with the aging process, multiple assessments and observations is proposed to determine the physical, emotional, cognitive/affective, health and social functioning of the elderly (Emlet et al. 2002). The social and emotional

account of the elderly clients is significant as it offers social workers the required information regarding how clients responded to their past challenges (Kivinick and Murray 2001). This is because social workers can use such observations to define clients' resilience as they engage with their responses to their health, emotional, deprivation and financial issues. These intervention measures can help social workers to anticipate the challenges of the elderly due to aging.

Intervention measures to enhance the psychosocial well-being of the elderly can be derived from client centered approaches such as behaviour modification therapy, individual counselling (Fajemilehin and Odebiyi 2011), strength and support techniques, medicine approaches and cognitive restructuring and coping skill training techniques, which can be suitable measures to tackle the psychosocial problems of the elderly (Vance et al. 2008). These client centered approaches can be effective in enabling social workers to focus on addressing the identified issues relating to physical or mental health, the encouragement and promotion of social support services for the elderly, as well as the areas that can be enhanced to ensure their psychosocial well-being. Focusing attention on assessing psychosocial stress, and developing coping and social support resources can be considered an effective intervention to improve the self-worth of the elderly. This implies that social workers could help develop clients' coping skills when dealing with distress, obstacles and responses to negative situations.

Moreover, to encourage the upkeep and functioning of the elderly, in addition to the

psychological resources outlined above, social workers can promote health and income enhancing behaviours, encouraging social support and linkages to available resources. These supportive measures can assist in enabling the successful functioning and well-being of the elderly.

CONCLUSION

This study found that there are psychological and social problems associated with the aged (growing old) that can mitigate their social functioning. Considering the growing number of the aged in the society, in particular in the context of Nigeria, an understanding of the psychosocial problems of the elderly as well as intervention measures to enhance effective functioning of the elderly is crucial. However, there seems to be limited studies in this regard to promote social work interventions. Evidently, there is scarcity of research in response to the psychosocial problems of the elderly. Hence this present study has attempted to offer an understanding of the psychosocial issues experienced by the elderly, as well as providing possible social work measures to address these problems and improve the psychosocial well-being of elderly clients. However, further research is called for.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

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 **Contact:**

Tracy B. E. Omorogiuwa, University of Benin, Department of Social Work, Benin City, Nigeria

Email: tracy.omorogiuwa@uniben.edu; tracy_4life@yahoo.com