

BEYOND DECLINE: PRESERVING A VALUED SENSE OF SELF IN LATER LIFE AMONG OLDER ADULTS IN URBAN SARAWAK

Siti Radiah Binti Aaini¹, Jamayah Binti Saili², Salmah Mohamad Yusoff³

¹Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development / Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia

²Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development / Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia

³Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development / Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia

*Corresponding e-mail: [radiah112@gmail.com]

Abstract

Population ageing has intensified the need to understand how older adults maintain psychosocial health beyond the traditional focus on disease, decline, and functional limitations. Although previous research has identified factors associated with psychosocial well-being in later life, much of the existing evidence remains quantitative, providing limited insight into how older adults themselves experience, interpret, and sustain psychosocial health in their everyday lives. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of psychosocial health among community-dwelling older adults in urban Sarawak, Malaysia, using a qualitative phenomenological approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants aged between 60 and 79 years residing in Kuching, Sarawak. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Three interrelated themes emerged from the findings: (1) Meaning-Making of Psychosocial Health in Later Life, (2) Psychosocial Challenges in the Ageing Journey, and (3) Coping and Adaptation in Later Life. Participants conceptualised psychosocial health not merely as the absence of psychological distress, but as the capacity to preserve meaning, purpose, belonging, spirituality, and resilience despite age-related changes and adversities. Across the narratives, maintaining a valued sense of self emerged as the central integrative concept that enabled participants to remain engaged, connected, and significant within their families, communities, and broader social environments. The findings challenge deficit-oriented perspectives of ageing by portraying older adults as active agents who continually construct and sustain psychosocial health through adaptive meaning-making and social engagement. This study contributes to the fields of psychology, counselling, social work, and gerontology by providing a strengths-based understanding of healthy ageing that can inform culturally responsive counselling interventions, community-based support programmes, and policies aimed at promoting psychosocial well-being and positive ageing among older adults in Malaysia.

Keywords: Psychosocial health, Older adults, Meaning in life

Introduction

Population ageing has intensified the need to understand factors that support healthy ageing and psychosocial health in later life. Psychosocial health is increasingly recognised as a fundamental component of healthy ageing and overall quality of life, encompassing an individual's capacity to maintain meaningful relationships, experience a sense of purpose, adapt to life changes, and remain socially and emotionally engaged (Ryff, 1989; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). A growing evidence suggests that psychosocial health contributes significantly to life satisfaction, resilience, social participation, and well-being among older adults, while poor psychosocial health has been associated with loneliness, depression, social isolation, and diminished quality of life (Chong et al., 2023; Foong et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2023; Mahmud et al., 2024).

The importance of psychosocial health has become increasingly salient as populations continue to age worldwide. In Malaysia, improvements in healthcare and living conditions have contributed to increased life expectancy and a growing proportion of adults aged 60 years and above (Department of

Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2024). As longevity increases, attention has shifted beyond physical health and disease management towards understanding how older adults maintain well-being, purpose, and meaningful engagement despite age-related challenges such as physical decline, bereavement, retirement, changing family roles, and reduced social networks (WHO, 2022). Within rapidly changing societies, urbanisation and evolving family structures may further influence how older adults experience and navigate later life (Azman & Stephen, 2025; Hussain et al., 2023).

Despite these challenges, growing evidence suggests that many older adults continue to experience psychological growth, meaningful engagement, social connectedness, and adaptive functioning well into later life (Lim et al., 2023; Southwick et al., 2023). However, much of the existing literature has focused on identifying predictors or correlates of psychosocial health through quantitative approaches, providing limited understanding of how older adults themselves experience, interpret, and sustain psychosocial health in their everyday lives. Furthermore, research exploring these lived experiences within the multicultural context of urban Sarawak remains limited despite increasing recognition of the importance of psychosocial well-being among Malaysia's ageing population (Stephen et al., 2025). To address this gap, the present study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of psychosocial health among community-dwelling older adults in urban Sarawak, Malaysia. Specifically, the study sought to understand how older adults conceptualise psychosocial health, navigate age-related challenges, and sustain well-being in later life.

Literature review

Psychosocial health is widely recognised as a multidimensional construct encompassing psychological, emotional, and social well-being that enables individuals to maintain meaningful relationships, purpose in life, autonomy, and effective adaptation throughout the lifespan (Ryff, 1989; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Within the context of ageing, psychosocial health has been associated with greater life satisfaction, resilience, social participation, and quality of life, whereas poor psychosocial health has been linked to loneliness, depression, social isolation, and diminished well-being among older adults (Chong et al., 2023; Foong et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2023; Mahmud et al., 2024). Contemporary perspectives on healthy ageing therefore emphasise not only physical health but also older adults' capacity to remain engaged, connected, and psychologically resilient despite age-related changes (WHO, 2022).

Existing research has identified several factors associated with psychosocial well-being among older adults, including social connectedness, family support, spirituality, resilience, and meaning in life (Chong et al., 2023; Hussain et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2023; Southwick et al., 2023; Steptoe & Fancourt, 2019). Malaysian studies similarly demonstrate that meaningful relationships, active social participation, and supportive environments contribute positively to older adults' quality of life, whereas loneliness and social isolation increase vulnerability to poorer psychosocial outcomes (Azman & Stephen, 2025; Chong et al., 2023; Foong et al., 2023; Mahmud et al., 2024). However, these studies have predominantly employed quantitative approaches that examine psychosocial health through measurable indicators and statistical relationships, providing limited insight into how older adults themselves understand and sustain psychosocial health in everyday life (Stephen et al., 2025).

A phenomenological perspective offers an opportunity to address this limitation by exploring how older adults interpret and make meaning of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Rather than viewing ageing primarily through a deficit-oriented lens, phenomenology foregrounds older adults' own perspectives and recognises them as active agents in constructing well-being. Guided by this perspective, the present study explored how community-dwelling older adults in urban Sarawak experience psychosocial health, respond to age-related challenges, and preserve a valued sense of self in later life.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of psychosocial health among community-dwelling older adults in urban Sarawak. A phenomenological approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of how individuals perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The study focused on understanding how older adults conceptualise psychosocial health, navigate age-related challenges, and sustain well-being in later life from their own perspectives.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit six community-dwelling older adults aged between 60 and 79 years residing in Kuching, Sarawak. Participants met the inclusion criteria of being aged 60 years and above, residing in an urban area of Sarawak, and willing to participate in an in-depth interview. Data were collected between March and April 2026 through semi-structured individual interviews conducted in either Malay or English according to participants' preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with field notes to capture contextual observations and support reflexive engagement throughout the research process.

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Analysis followed six recursive phases: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, constructing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Throughout the study, reflexivity was maintained through a reflexive journal and continuous critical reflection to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived experiences. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

Result

Analysis of the interview data resulted in three interrelated themes and nine subthemes that illuminate how older adults experience and sustain psychosocial health in later life. Collectively, the findings suggest that psychosocial health is sustained through preserving a valued sense of self despite the challenges associated with ageing. Participants described preserving this valued sense of self through meaningful contribution, emotionally significant relationships, spiritual grounding, and adaptive responses to physical, emotional, and social changes.

The first theme, Constructing Psychosocial Health in Later Life, reflects how participants conceptualised psychosocial health as maintaining meaning, purpose, belonging, spirituality, and continuity of self rather than merely the absence of illness or distress. Psychosocial Challenges in the Ageing Journey highlights the impact of physical decline, loss, loneliness, and changing family and social roles on participants' well-being. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated adaptive responses captured in the third theme, Coping and Adaptation in Later Life, where spirituality, cognitive reframing, acceptance, supportive relationships, and resilience enabled them to maintain emotional well-being and continue engaging meaningfully with life. The three themes and nine subthemes generated through Reflexive Thematic Analysis are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
Constructing Psychosocial Health in Later Life	Meaning, Contribution and Continuity of Self
	Family and Emotional Belonging
	Spiritual and Emotional Grounding
Psychosocial Challenges in the Ageing Journey	Physical Decline and Bodily Vulnerability
	Loss, Loneliness and Emotional Disruption
	Role Transitions and Caregiving Burdens
Coping and Adaptation in Later Life	Spiritual Surrender and Acceptance
	Cognitive Reframing and Positive Adaptation
	Relational and Internal Resilience

Figure 1. Conceptual Interpretation Of Psychosocial Health In Later Life.



Preserving a valued sense of self emerged as the *central integrative concept* linking meaning and purpose, belonging and connection, adaptive resilience, and sustained psychosocial health.

Discussion

The findings suggest that psychosocial health in later life is best understood as an active and dynamic process through which older adults preserve a valued sense of self despite the challenges associated with ageing. Rather than defining psychosocial health as the absence of psychological distress, participants described maintaining well-being through meaning, contribution, emotionally significant relationships, spirituality, and adaptive coping. This finding extends existing literature by demonstrating that these dimensions are not isolated protective factors but interconnected processes that collectively sustain psychosocial health. It also supports Ryff's (1989) model of psychological well-being, which emphasises purpose in life, positive relationships, autonomy, and self-acceptance as key dimensions of positive functioning.

Participants consistently described remaining engaged in meaningful roles, maintaining close family relationships, and drawing upon spirituality and resilience to navigate physical decline, bereavement, loneliness, and changing social roles. These findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting the importance of meaning in life, social connectedness, spirituality, and resilience in promoting healthy ageing and psychosocial well-being (Chong et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2023; Southwick et al., 2023; Steptoe & Fancourt, 2019). The findings also resonate with Continuity Theory (Atchley, 1989), which proposes that individuals strive to maintain continuity in their identity, values, relationships, and patterns of living despite life transitions. Participants' narratives demonstrated that while physical abilities and social roles changed with age, their sense of personal identity and significance remained largely intact.

The findings have important implications for counselling practice and healthy ageing initiatives. Counselling interventions should move beyond problem-focused approaches to recognise and strengthen older adults' existing psychological, relational, and spiritual resources. Programmes that promote meaningful engagement, family connectedness, social participation, spirituality, and adaptive coping may enhance psychosocial well-being while supporting older adults in preserving a valued sense of self. Collectively, the findings contribute a strengths-based perspective of healthy ageing that informs counselling practice, community-based interventions, and policies supporting the well-being of older adults in Malaysia.

...

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that psychosocial health in later life extends beyond the absence of psychological distress and is experienced as an ongoing process of preserving a valued sense of self amidst the inevitable changes associated with ageing. Participants' narratives revealed that meaning,

emotionally significant relationships, spirituality, and adaptive coping do not operate independently but are deeply interconnected in supporting psychosocial well-being. Despite experiencing physical decline, loss, and changing social roles, participants continued to find ways to maintain purpose, connection, and personal significance throughout later life. The findings offer a strengths-based understanding of psychosocial health that challenges deficit-oriented perspectives of ageing. Rather than portraying older adults as passive recipients of age-related decline, they highlight older adults' capacity to adapt, remain engaged, and sustain well-being through the personal, relational, and spiritual resources they value most. These insights have important implications for counselling, psychology, social work, and community practice by emphasising interventions that build upon older adults' existing strengths, support meaningful engagement, strengthen social connectedness, and recognise spirituality as an important psychosocial resource. Ultimately, healthy ageing is not simply about living longer or avoiding decline, but about preserving meaning, connection, and a valued sense of self throughout the ageing journey.

References

- Atchley, R. C. (1989). A continuity theory of normal aging. *The Gerontologist*, 29(2), 183–190. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/29.2.183>
- Azman, N. A., & Stephen, J. (2025). Exploring items and developing an instrument for measuring the relationship between age-friendly environment and the psychosocial well-being of older adults in Kuching and Bintulu City: An exploratory factor analysis procedure. *Malaysian Journal of Medicine and Health Sciences*, 21(2), 154–162.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.
- Chong, S. T., Abdullah, M. F. I. L., & Ahmad, N. (2023). Social participation and quality of life among community-dwelling older adults in Malaysia. *BMC Geriatrics*, 23, 417.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2024). *Current population estimates, Malaysia, 2024*. Department of Statistics Malaysia.
- Foong, H. F., Ibrahim, R., Hamid, T. A., & Bagat, M. F. (2023). The individual and combined effects of social networks and loneliness on life satisfaction among community-dwelling residing older adults: A longitudinal study. *Healthcare*, 11(7), 935. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11070935>
- Hussain, B., Mirza, M., Baines, R., Burns, L., Stevens, S., Asthana, S., & Chatterjee, A. (2023). Loneliness and social networks of older adults in rural communities: A narrative synthesis systematic review. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11, 1113864. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1113864>
- Lim, S. C., Chan, Y. M., & Gan, W. Y. (2023). Social and health determinants of quality of life of community-dwelling older adults in Malaysia. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(5), 3977. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20053977>
- Mahmud, A., Jani, R., & Erfanian, A. (2024). The likelihood of self-perceived loneliness among older persons in Malaysia. *JATI – Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 29(1), 68–93. <https://doi.org/10.22452/jati.vol29no1.4>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage.
- Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(6), 1069–1081. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.57.6.1069>
- Southwick, S. M., Charney, D. S., & DePierro, J. M. (2023). *Resilience: The science of mastering life's greatest challenges* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Stephen, J., Jiee, S. F., Azman, N. A., Rahman, M. M., Saimon, R., Gui, H. C., Hee, L. S., & Ngui, R. (2025). Determinants of psychosocial well-being of older adults in Sarawak, Malaysia. *Journal of Family and Community Medicine*, 32(4), 295–302. https://doi.org/10.4103/jfcm.jfcm_177_24



6TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON PSYCHOLOGY, COUNSELLING AND SOCIAL WORK (ICPCSW)

-
- Steptoe, A., & Fancourt, D. (2019). An outcome-wide analysis of purpose in life and older adulthood health and well-being. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(16), 7857–7862. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1814723116>
- World Health Organization. (2022). *Decade of healthy ageing: Baseline report*. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240017900>