

Loneliness Among Elderly: Scenarios in Malaysia and Solutions Based on the Commentaries of Risale-i Nur

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Abstract

As ordinary human beings we cannot avoid feelings of loneliness. While all individuals will experience loneliness at some point in their lives, most studies emphasize that it is the elderly who are particularly vulnerable to such feelings. If not addressed, loneliness can lead to lowered resistance to infections, cognitive decline, and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. This article discusses the definition of loneliness, the scenarios in Malaysia’s community, the factors of the increment and approaches in addressing it based on the scriptures of Risale-i Nur for the elderly. The methodology employed in this study is qualitative studies based on the statistical data of elderly and its issues in Malaysia and written sources especially the Risale-i Nur as the main data source. According to Bediuzzaman’s perspective there are three possible solutions or antidotes to the feelings of loneliness among the elderly. The fundamental solutions provided in this paper can serve as guidance especially to the elderly and indirectly to operators of senior citizen care centres as well as the government in managing the welfare of the elderly in Malaysia.

Keywords: Loneliness, Elderly, Risale-i Nur

الشعور بالوحدة بين المسنين: السيناريوهات في ماليزيا والحلول القائمة على ضوء رسائل النور

نورناجهان جعفر، رزقي برداني ساواي ، شاه ريزول إزيان ، جلال أكار

المستخلص

لا يمكننا تجنب الشعور بالوحدة كبني بشر. يعاني الكثير من الشعور بالوحدة في مرحلة ما من حياتهم، تؤكد معظم الدراسات أن كبار السن هم الأكثر عرضة لمثل هذه المشاعر. إذا لم يتم التعامل مع الوحدة؛ يمكن أن تؤدي إلى انخفاض المقاومة للعدوى، والتدهور المعرفي، ومشاكل الصحة العقلية مثل القلق والاكتئاب.

تناقش هذه الدراسة تعريف الوحدة، والسيناريوهات في المجتمع الماليزي، وعوامل الزيادة والنهج في معالجتها بناءً على رسائل النور لكبار السن. المنهجية المستخدمة في هذه الدراسة هي دراسات نوعية مبنية على البيانات الإحصائية لكبار السن وقضاياها في ماليزيا ومصادر متنوعة بالأخص رسائل النور للإمام بديع الزمان سعيد النورسي كمصدر رئيسي للبيانات. هناك ثلاثة حلول محتملة أو تزيق لمشاعر الوحدة بين كبار السن. يمكن أن تكون الحلول الأساسية المقدمة في هذه الورقة بمثابة إرشادات خاصة لكبار السن وبشكل غير مباشر لمراكز رعاية كبار السن وكذلك الحكومة في إدارة رعاية المسنين في ماليزيا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الوحدة، المسنين، رسائل النور

1.0 Introduction

The number of elderly persons in the Malaysian population is showing an increasing trend. The World Health Organization (2013) defines the elderly as those aged 65 years and above. However, in Malaysia, those 60 years and above are considered elderly based on the definition set by the United Nations (National Policy on Senior Citizens).

The greater urbanization among the younger population and changes of family systems in Malaysia have had a significant impact on the care of the elderly, including the resettlement of welfare homes for the elderly. The Department of Social Welfare Malaysia provides care facilities for the elderly through the establishment of residential homes or *Rumah Seri Kenangan* (RSK). Facilities provided include treatment and rehabilitation to improve the quality of life of the disadvantaged elderly people. Various activities are conducted for RSK residents such as physical exercise (every morning), games or karaoke, and playing traditional musical instruments. Residents can decide whether or not they wish to participate in these activities.

Private nursing homes also provide scheduled activities similar to those in public welfare homes such as physical exercise and games. In addition, spiritual activities such as congregational prayers and religious knowledge are also provided. However, a review of the literature shows increasing evidence of loneliness among the elderly whether they live in welfare homes or at home with their children. Loneliness, which occurs when individuals feel unappreciated or irrelevant, lack of social interactions, and withdraw psychologically from others (Amran Hassan et al., 2013), is a major mental health issue among the elderly (Marziah Zakaria et al., 2013). Although loneliness is also experienced by youths and younger adults, the elderly are more disposed to it due to life changes, such as the death of a spouse,

loss of social relationships, lack of friends, retirement, relocation of children to the city, and deterioration in physical and cognitive functions (Lopatta, 1995; Berg et al., 1981).

Compared to the elderly who live with their families, those in nursing homes are at higher risk of loneliness as some are separated from their families, companionless, come from remote areas far from their loved ones and families. Even more disturbing is observed if their children neglect them by not visiting and having no concern for them at all. The most distressing is when children abandon their sick elderly parents in hospitals which end up having to send them to care centres (Suraiyah Harun, 2017; Zaila Hussin & Khadijah Alavi, 2016). Such situations of neglect inevitably generate trauma and depression among the elderly parents. The rate of loneliness, anxiety, and depression among the elderly in welfare homes have been reported at 95.5% (Nikmat et al., 2015), 38% (Khairudin et al., 2011), and 85.5% (Nikmat et al., 2015), respectively.

2.0 Factors of Increasing the Loneliness Statistics Among Elderly

Among the factors contributing to the increase in the statistics on loneliness could be life changes such as the death of a spouse and deterioration of physical and cognitive functions (Lopatta, 1995) due to reduced social interactions (Brownie & Horstmannshof, 2011), moving to an alien environment (Amzat & Jayawardena, 2016), and unappealing routines in welfare homes (Marziah Zakaria et al., 2013). The study by Amran Hassan et al. (2013) shows that loneliness also stems from weak religious or spiritual aspects. In addition, doctors, health care providers and social workers are also poorly trained and lack the skills to deal with loneliness issues. The sense of loneliness of patients are rarely discussed with them. Therefore, there is a need to educate medical students, the community, and other professionals in recognizing loneliness and managing it in a collective manner. As Mother Teresa stated, “Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty.” Without appropriate interventions, such mental health issues can

lead to increased rates of suicide (Kiosses et al., 2014) and have significant implications for the quality of life of the elderly. Therefore, it is important to identify and use appropriate intervention initiatives to reduce the impact of such mental health issues.

3.0 The Importance of Spiritual Intervention

Loneliness is defined as a lack of meaningful contact with others or the inability to establish adequate contact (Brownie & Horstmanshof, 2011). Through spiritual activities such as prayers and meditation, individuals feel a connection with God and others around them (Byrne & MacKinlay, 2012).

Accordingly, the authors highlight the spirituality perspective of Risale-i Nur especially for Muslims as one of the intervention strategies for addressing loneliness among the elderly. The need for spiritual intervention programmes has to be addressed to improve the well-being of the elderly. For the elderly who are Muslims, a calm state of mind is of utmost importance at all times especially when approaching the end stages of life. Preliminary studies show a lack of empirical research on the relationship between psychological and spiritual aspects among the elderly (Tengku Aizan, 2015). Nevertheless, such psychospiritual aspects cannot be ignored as there are many issues that are closely related to the psychology of the elderly such as depression, loneliness, mental health problems, and others.

4.0 Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and his *Risale-i Nur*

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi was a well-known Muslim scholar and preacher in Turkey. He was born in 1877 in Bitlis, East Anatolia during the late period of the Ottoman Empire in a peasant family of moderate Kurds. He was the fourth child of seven siblings Durriyyah, Hanim, Abdullah, Said, Muhammad, Abdul Majid, and Marjan. Said Nursi is given the honorific “Badi’ al-Zaman” meaning “Wonder of the Age” because of his ability to master traditional religious knowledge and modern science at a very young age. He remains a leading figure in Turkey to this day (Biro Kajian Ilmiah Altinbasak, 2011).

The *Risale-i Nur* is a Qur'anic commentary by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. It contains over 130 titles in books such as *al-Kalimat*, *al-Maktubat*, *al-Lama'at*, *al-Shu'a'at*, *Isharat al-I'jaz fi Mazan al-Ijaz*, *al-Mathnawi al-'Arabi al-Nuri*, *Sayqal al-Islam* and *al-Malahiq*. The aim of the *Risale-i Nur* is to safeguard faith by explaining the essence and facts of the Qur'an especially the arguments on complex issues that address the oneness of Allah ((SWT)), the hereafter, and others. In the early years in 19th century, the *Risale-i Nur* such as the *Isyarat al-I'jaz* and *al-Mathnawi al-'Arabi al-Nuri* was written in Arabic. When the Muslim community in Turkey no longer mastered the Arabic language, Said Nursi produced his later works in Turkish but using the Arabic alphabet (Ottoman Turkish Letters) (Biro Kajian Ilmiah Altinbasak, 2011).

5.0 Addressing Loneliness among the Elderly from the Risale-i Nur Perspective

Old age is a stage in life that is distressing and feared by humans. The deterioration in physical, cognitive, and psychological faculties often make the elderly feel depressed, sad, and lonely. However, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi offers a new perspective on thinking that allows senior citizens to go through their old age in a calm and contented state. The remedy and hope he highlights for the elderly is to make the Quran as solace and a strength to lean on at the end stages of life.

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi shared the experiences of his life journey as a senior citizen although he was only in his early 40s at that time. His experiences are mentioned in his book *The Twenty-six Flashes* which is among his collection of literature comprising the *Risale-i Nur*. In the book he prescribes 26 remedies that centre on faith in Allah as antidotes to all forms of psychological issues experienced by senior citizens. Each element of hope is an antidote to the psychological issues experienced by the elderly and takes the form of a lens of faith in the journey of life being contemplated. His writings highlight three approaches that serve as a means to overcome loneliness, that is, the first, sixth, and eighth hopes. Results show that the three hopes as highlighted by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi help to deepen faith and enable the elderly to relieve themselves of feelings of loneliness in this life.

5.1 The First Hope

Faith in Allah represents the basis of all hopes among the elderly. Views of faith will transform the perspectives of senior citizens in responding to emotions being experienced such as a sense of weakness, helplessness, loneliness, separation anxiety, frustration, guilt, remorse, and others. Since Allah exists and all creations belong to Him then there will be no sense of loneliness if He is acknowledged.

5.2 The Sixth Hope

Some of the less fortunate elderly will be abandoned by their children in old folks' homes. Such seniors, whose children are grown up and have careers and families of their own, will definitely feel lonely. Yet, with the conviction that Allah is always with them they will not feel as neglected as He has sent guardian angels to take care of them. Allah SWT has created everything in the heavens and on the earth for the use of mankind. In accepting this, a senior citizen will, in principle, not feel lonely because the whole universe comprising animals, plants, wind, clouds, and others will be his companions. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi states:

Yea, O you elderly men and women! Given that our Creator who is all-Merciful exists, then there will be no alienation for us. Since He is there then everything is there for us. Since He exists, so do His angels. Therefore, (meaning) this world is not empty. The deserted mountains and the barren deserts are full of the servants of The Truth, The Most Glorified, The Most High. Apart from His wise servants, with His light, with His reckoning, His stones and plants are also like affectionate friends. The creatures can talk to us through their voices and accommodate us.

Faith in Allah is an antidote to feelings of isolation and loneliness during the golden years. Therefore, it is important for individuals to prepare themselves with true faith in Allah so that when approaching the golden years, they will not feel so lonely and isolated. When Allah is in the heart then everything will work in our favour.

5.3 The Eighth Hope

In addition to the sadness of parting with this life and with children being busy with their respective careers, there are among the elderly who feel lonely despite living at home with them. This eighth hope provides an antidote to such loneliness.

While in Istanbul during the final years of Ottoman rule Said Nursi began to feel increasingly lonely with signs of old age beginning to colour the hair on his head, the upheaval caused by the world war, and the uncertainty of his captivity. The caliphs, the Islamic sheikhs and the commander-in-chief to the students of the madrasah showed much attention and diligence that far exceeded his ability. The spiritual state engendered by the obsessions of youth and circumstances had hardened the indulgent senses of the youth to the point where they saw the world as eternal and that he himself believed that he would never die. Thus at that time, in the month of Ramadan, Said Nursi visited the glorious Beyazid Mosque in Istanbul to listen to the learned and sincere huffaz (Nursi, 2015).

He found that, through the heavenly sermons of the al-Quran mu'jiz, al-Bayan mentioned the edict *كُلُّ نَفْسٍ دَائِقَةٌ الْمَوْتِ* which firmly states, through the tongues of the huffaz, the mortality of humans and the ultimate demise of all beings. Thus, he saw that his youth in which he indulged and revelled in all its enticements was now leaving him behind. The worldly life he loved so much had begun to fade. The world that he was so attached to and loved deeply was saying “good luck!” and reminded him that he would be leaving this house of kinship. He also said “may Allah protect you” and be ready to depart. Through the signal indicated by the verse *كُلُّ نَفْسٍ دَائِقَةٌ الْمَوْتِ* of the al-Quran al-Mu'jiz al-Bayan, the heart is opened to the belief that the human race is a single soul that will eventually pass on and be resurrected. The whole earth is also a soul. It will also expire to enter into a state of eternity. The world is also a single soul and it will also cease to exist and to become part of the everlasting hereafter.

Once again, he listened to the recitation by the Huffaz in the Beyazid Mosque on the heavenly teachings of the Quran. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi stated:

At that time I heard glad tidings through the sacred words as in the verse **وَبَشِّرِ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا** til the end. In fact, I sought entertainment, hope, and light in the amazing, in loneliness, and in despair instead of seeking solace that overflows from the Quran. A hundred thousand thanks to Allah Subhanahu wa Taala because I have found a cure in the disease itself, found light in the darkness, and found entertainment in solace. I have looked at the face of death which is thought to be the most frightening and the most terrifying to everyone, and through the light of the Quran, I see that the claws of death though seen as dark, black and ugly, from the outside, are actually radiant and beautiful to the believer.

Continuing, he says,

I express a hundred thousand thanks to al-Khaliq Dzul Jalal who made this world in this form. I have understood that although feelings of love for the true and beautiful face of the world have been imparted to the human race in looking to the hereafter and the names of the Divine, yet despite abusing the love by squandering it on the mortal, ugly, harmful, and neglectful face of the world, they then become the advocates of the meaning of the noble hadith **حُبُّ الدُّنْيَا رَأْسُ كُلِّ خَطِيئَةٍ**.

He adds,

Therefore, O old men and women! I have seen this fact through the nur al-Quran al-Hakim, through the reminders of old age, and because faith has also opened my eyes, I have stressed it in many treatises using evidence that is compelling. I have seen real events, overwhelming hope, and a shining light for myself. I am content in my old age and happy with the passing of my youth. So, do not weep and be grateful. Since there is faith, and this is the reality, let those who are negligent weep and those who go astray be regretful. (Nursi, 2015)

6.0 Conclusion

As the elderly do not experience loneliness in the same way or to the same extent, there is an urgent need to adapt intervention initiatives that can meet their

individual needs. It is recommended that future research differentiate between various elderly groups to determine which forms of intervention work best for them, the contexts in which such interventions are effective, and the mechanisms through which they operate under a given setting. Such information will be invaluable in planning and implementing programmes aimed at alleviating loneliness and enhancing the well-being of the elderly especially those who are Muslims. The golden-agers need to be assisted in coping with loneliness to enable them to have a better quality of life and to experience an active and healthy ageing process. Family members and the community as a whole have a role in assisting senior citizens in addressing the issue of loneliness, even if their parents have been sent to live in care institutions.

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