

## Development of a Gerontology Counseling Competency Model: A Need Analysis Study

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Received: 4 July 2023  
Revised: 22 July 2023  
Accepted: 2 August 2023

### Abstract

Malaysia is projected to attain the status of an aging nation by 2030, with its elderly population encountering unique mental health challenges. Consequently, counselors need to possess specialized competencies to effectively fulfill their roles and responsibilities in assisting elderly clients. This study aimed to assess the necessity of developing a gerontology counseling competency model specifically tailored for counselors working with older adults. The research employed a Design and Development Research approach with a fully qualitative method in the need analysis phase, with semi-structured interviews involving 15 registered counselors who met predefined criteria. Thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted, and the findings unveiled a concerning gap in the availability of structured or specialized gerontology counseling courses, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Furthermore, there is a noticeable dearth of in-service training opportunities tailored specifically for gerontology counseling, which strongly supports the need for such a model that would serve as a valuable reference and set of guidelines for counselors. This model is expected to elevate the professionalism of counselors when working with elderly individuals, highlighting the growing importance of counselors in actively promoting the well-being of older adults, in alignment with the 2011 Malaysian National Policy for Older Persons.

**Keywords:** Older adults, gerontology counseling, competency, competency model, counseling older adults

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**How to Cite:** Nik Jafar, N. N., Kee, P., & Ahmad, A. (2023). Development of a Gerontology Counseling Competency Model: A Need Analysis Study. *International Journal of Education, Information Technology, and Others*, 6(3), 410-425. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10029877>

## INTRODUCTION

The demographic landscape of Malaysia is undergoing a significant transformation. Projections indicate that individuals aged 60 and above will constitute a substantial 14.5% of the total population by the year 2040 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2016). This demographic shift is reflective of a global trend highlighted by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), where aging is emerging as a universal concern impacting populations worldwide. Aging not only influences physical health but also plays a pivotal role in mental well-being, contributing to the decline in both physical and mental functions among older individuals.



Within the context of aging-related challenges, the mental health of the elderly is gaining increasing attention. Critical issues within this domain include depression, anxiety, loneliness, and social isolation (Lee et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2022). As the aging population continues to expand, the imperative to address these mental health concerns grows more pronounced.

The evolving landscape of counseling practices, now encompassing the entire lifespan, is responding to the demands of an aging society and its associated demographic shifts. This transformation has heightened the sense of professional urgency, resulting in a surge in the demand for professional counseling services tailored specifically to older adults. Concurrently, there is a notable increase in the utilization of mental health services by this demographic, yet this surge in demand has occurred alongside a dearth of clear guidelines and standardized competency assessments within the counseling field (Fullen et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2019).

This gap in competencies and guidelines has far-reaching implications, impacting not only the quality of care provided to older adults but also their families and society at large (Gatchel, Schultz & Ray, 2018; Handrianto et al., 2021). Within this context, the field of professional counseling assumes a critical role, not only in addressing the mental health needs of older adults but also in actively working to mitigate the negative effects of ageism. By promoting a more positive perception of the aging population, counselors can significantly contribute to enhancing the overall well-being and quality of life of older individuals (Fullen, 2018).

In light of these pressing challenges and opportunities, this article undertakes an exploration aimed at developing a gerontology counseling competency model. The primary objective is to elevate the professionalism of counselors specializing in older adult care. This endeavor is substantiated by conducting a comprehensive needs analysis, which serves to provide a solid rationale for the development of this model.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The increasing global life expectancy presents a significant challenge for the development of social and healthcare systems (Bone et al., 2018). With the rise in the older adult population, there is a heightened demand for mental health services (Wagner et al., 2019; Ramadhani et al., 2021). Age-related stigma negatively affects the physical health, psychological well-being, and self-perception of the elderly, impacting support systems, network providers, and community resources accessible to them (Fullen, 2018; Corrigan et al., 2014). The World Health Organization (2017) anticipates that 15 percent of individuals aged 60 and above will experience mental disorders.

In Malaysia, a notable 16.5 percent of the elderly population grapples with mental disorders, including geriatric depressive disorders (Vanoh, Shahar, & Hamid, 2016). Loneliness rates surge from 56% to 95.5%, anxiety escalates from 3.6% to 38%, and depression ranges from 11% to 85.5% among older adults in long-term care settings (Ellias, 2018; Saputra et al., 2021). These statistics underscore the need for further research to identify effective care methods for older adults.

Counselors working with this demographic must possess specialized competencies to effectively address the multifaceted mental health needs of older individuals, which are distinct from counseling the general population (Blando, 2014). Despite increasing concern, a knowledge gap persists in crafting effective treatment approaches and care models for this demographic (Beiring, 2019). Customizing therapy to address specific symptoms, considering potential benefits and risks, and accounting for pre-existing medical conditions are crucial (Marshall & Hayslett, 2021).

Moreover, it's essential to note that only a small fraction of the healthcare and mental health workforce possesses the specialized skills required to address the unique needs of older adults (Hinrichsen et al., 2018). The increased demand for competency assessments, coupled with a lack of clear guidelines, can negatively impact the elderly, their family members, and the general public (Gatchel, Schultz & Ray, 2018). Therefore, there is a growing urgency to develop a gerontology counseling competency model tailored to counselors working with older adults. Such a model would not only assist counselors in effectively addressing the mental health needs of older adults but also contribute to mitigating the adverse impacts of ageism by promoting a more favorable perception of the aging population (Fullen, 2018; Rita & Handrianto, 2021)

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

The objective of this study is to determine the need for developing a gerontology competency model for counselors.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The research question is: Do counselors need a gerontology counseling competency model?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The field of gerontology counseling encompasses crucial tasks such as intervention, consulting, addressing issues of professional importance, and providing education and training specifically designed for older individuals (Bar-Tur, 2021; Musta'in & Handrianto, 2020). Counselors with prior expertise in working with the elderly are more inclined to engage in specialized continuing education programs that address age-related concerns, enhancing their perception of proficiency in gerontology (Schmidt & Steffen, 2022).

Gerontology counseling focuses on assisting older adults and their families to promote physical and mental well-being, navigate difficulties, and enhance their overall quality of life (Dev & Narayan, 2021). Competency evaluations are crucial in this field, emphasizing the need for practitioners to possess the necessary skills and proficiencies, as the absence of evidence-based standards for these assessments could have negative outcomes (Cohen et al., 2018; Utami et al., 2021).

Specialized education in geriatric mental health care is crucial for mental health professionals to effectively address cognitive impairments and depression symptoms in older adults (Blando, 2014; Segal et al., 2020). This education is vital for generalist practitioners responsible for the care and welfare of elderly individuals, emphasizing the urgency of enhancing expertise in this field.

To meet the complex demands of different older adult populations, psychologists and practitioners from various domains must have fundamental abilities in geropsychology. This includes a comprehensive understanding of age-related alterations, awareness of social and cultural impacts, and knowledge of evidence-based interventions tailored to the aging population (Moye et al., 2019).

Gerontology counseling, tailored to meet the specific needs of older adults, intersects with multicultural counseling as it involves interactions with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Vasquez & Johnson, 2022; Rita et al., 2021). Developing cultural competency is vital for counselors to effectively address misunderstandings and communication challenges when working with clients from varied cultural backgrounds (Gopalkrisnan, 2019). Proficiencies in multicultural counseling are essential for delivering high-quality counseling services to clients with diverse cultural backgrounds (Amat et al., 2020; Nengsih et al., 2021).

### **THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF COMPETENCY**

The concept of competence and competencies has been steadily gaining recognition in various fields, including education, human resource management, training, and professional development (Suhairom et al., 2014). Competence entails the seamless integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, signifying the capacity to perform professional duties effectively and ethically while prioritizing safety (Chuenjitwongsa, Oliver & Bullock, 2016).

To effectively address challenges related to competency, it is necessary for stakeholders to establish a consensus definition that can serve as a guiding framework (Lepre et al., 2021). Competence is a multifaceted concept that encompasses a range of observable traits and talents, enabling individuals to enhance their effectiveness and achieve high performance in their respective professions. This attribute involves the ability to effectively, efficiently, and successfully accomplish goals and attain achievements (Elliot, Dweck & Yeager, 2017).

Boyatzis (1982) emphasized the importance of the competency model, highlighting its dual role as a management framework and a guide for employees in terms of appropriate behaviors and processes. Competency models have been found to offer numerous benefits, ultimately leading to the improvement and optimization of system evaluation procedures (Staskevica & Aija, 2019). The lack of comprehensive criteria has presented difficulties in identifying and assessing competencies, despite their significant impact on individuals' career trajectories (Suhairom et al., 2014). Currently, there is a significant amount of research being conducted on skills, which has garnered substantial attention across multiple areas, including counseling and psychology. Numerous scholarly investigations have been undertaken pertaining to counseling abilities, specifically in the areas of multiculturalism (Benuto et al., 2018; Worthington, Soth-McNett & Moreno, 2007), training in counseling psychology (Ali & Sichel, 2014), and the practice of psychology (Von Treuer & Reynolds, 2017).

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

The current study used Design and Development Research (DDR), characterized by a systematic approach based on problem-solving criteria derived

from scholarly literature and empirical evidence. This approach significantly contributes to the advancement of scientific knowledge by providing essential insights into the conceptualization, development, and assessment of instructional products and tools (Richey & Klein, 2007; Handrianto & Salleh, 2019). DDR plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between academic investigation and practical implementation, hence fostering the creation of influential instructional products.

According to Mohd Ridhuan et al. (2021), need analysis is a crucial first step within the DDR framework that helps researchers identify fundamental problems before beginning model development. This stage involves the process of examining, researching, and evaluating the matters to be studied before determining the decisions to be implemented (McKillip, 1987). At the same time, needs analysis aims to investigate existing issues and assess the necessity of supporting a particular innovation, such as a model (Saedah et al., 2021).

### **Need Analysis**

In the need analysis phase of this study, the following steps were undertaken:

- i. The design of the Proposed Interview Protocol for Assessing the Needs of Developing a Competency Model was aligned with the research objectives and research questions.
- ii. Employed an expert from a public university for a content validation process to ensure validity and alignment with the research objective.
- iii. Additionally, the protocol underwent content validation by selecting three experts in the field, each from different public universities. This panel of experts played a crucial role in confirming the protocol's alignment with the research objectives and research questions.
- iv. The identification of 15 registered counselors, each with a minimum of 10 years of experience in the field of counseling and engagement with older adult clients, was conducted. The selection of participants was carried out using purposive sampling techniques.
- v. A pilot test was conducted with a sample of three registered counselors who met the same criteria as the actual research participants.
- vi. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 15 registered counselors, each possessing a minimum of 10 years of working experience.
- vii. Verbatim analysis was performed on the transcripts to extract meaningful insights from the interviews and draw conclusions. This included the identification and articulation of development requirements for the model.
- viii. Data analysis, result interpretation, and conclusions were drawn from the collected data.
- ix. The conclusion of this phase addresses the research inquiry concerning the necessity of developing a gerontology counseling competency model tailored specifically for counselors working with older adults.

### Content Validity Index (CVI)

To assess the interview protocol's usability, the Content Validity Index (CVI) process was implemented, following the guidelines by Yusoff (2019). The results of the CVI were presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Result of instrument development based on CVI calculation**

Item (Questionnaire)	Expert 1	Expert 2	Expert 3	Expert in agreement	i-CVI	UA
1. Participant's background	5-1	5-1	5-1	3	1.0	1
2. Experience in counseling	5-1	5-1	5-1	3	1.0	1
3. Specific experience in counseling elderly	5-1	5-1	5-1	3	1.0	1
4. What should be considered when dealing with senior citizens	5-1	5-1	4-1	3	1.0	1
5. Challenges faced by counselors in counseling older adults	5-1	5-1	5-1	3	1.0	1
6. Competency issues in counseling elderly clients?	5-1	5-1	4-1	3	1.0	1
7. Counselor's competencies in counseling elderly clients	5-1	5-1	4-1	3	1.0	1
8. What areas need improvement in counseling for the elderly	5-1	5-1	5-1	3	1.0	1
9. Assessment on the needs of elderly clients and the tools or techniques used	5-1	4-1	4-1	3	1.0	1
10. How can a counselor better understand the needs of elderly clients	5-1	4-1	4-1	3	1.0	1
11. Recommendation for handling challenges and issues in counseling the elderly	5-1	5-1	5-1	3	1.0	1
12. Is there a gerontological counseling competency model in this country? If yes, please describe its pros and cons.	5-1	5-1	4-1	3	1.0	1
13. Do you think there's a need for a gerontology competency model for counselors?	5-1	4-1	4-1	3	1.0	1
14. Will the development of a gerontology model benefit counselors and organizations?	5-1	4-1	5-1	3	1.0	1
15. Will the model benefits older adults and their significant others?	5-1	5-1	4-1	3	1.0	1
16. What are the components and element needed in the model?	5-1-	5-1	5-1	3	1.0	1
17. Any other idea or suggestion on the need of the model	5-1	4-1	5-1	3	1.0	1
18. Overall idea about the model development	5-1	5-1	5-1	3	1.0	1

19. Appreciation for participation	5-1	5-1	5-1	3	1.0	1
				S-CVI /Ave	1.0	
Proportion relevance	1.0	1.0	1.0	S-CVI /UA		1.0

Based on Polit & Beck (2006) and Polit et al. (2007), it is recommended to have CVI values of 1.0 for the consensus of three to five experts. Table 1 above shows that all items have scores meeting the 1.0 threshold, indicating their acceptance. Consequently, both S-CVI/Ave and S-CVI/UA, which both scored 1.0, meet the required level of content validity. Thus, all items can be utilized in Phase 1 of the study. The study demonstrates high levels of content validity, affirming the suitability of all items for the actual research.

### Pilot Study

Prior to conducting the actual interviews, a pilot study was conducted with three registered counselors actively practicing with older adults, each selected from Selangor, Trengganu, and Sabah. The interviews were conducted using online platforms, specifically Google Meet. The primary goal of this pilot study was to thoroughly evaluate both the procedures and results for potential weaknesses, with the ultimate aim of enhancing the overall research quality and providing valuable insights for subsequent phases in alignment with the recommendations outlined by Malmqvist et al. (2019). It is important to highlight that all participants in the pilot study met the pre-established criteria. Furthermore, it provided the researcher with valuable experience in conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews and building rapport with participants (Chin et al., 2023).

### Actual Study

In the actual study, interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia to accommodate the participants' preferences. These participants were selected using purposive sampling, taking into consideration their willingness to take part in the study. The interviews themselves, with an average time of 40 minutes each, were conducted via the Google Meet platform. They followed a semi-structured format and involved a total of 15 participants, all of whom were registered counselors and met the predetermined study criteria.

Following the interviews, a comprehensive data analysis process was undertaken. Initially, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. These transcripts were then imported into the Atlas.ti software for systematic data management and analysis. The analysis process involved a combination of thematic analysis and coding techniques. Themes and patterns within the data were identified and categorized, and relevant segments were coded accordingly. This rigorous analytical approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the participants' insights and experiences, ultimately contributing to the study's findings and conclusions.

### **Research Participants**

A total of 15 research participants were carefully selected for these semi-structured interviews. These individuals bring extensive expertise to the study, with each participant boasting over 10 years of invaluable work experience within the counseling field, and they have had experience working with older adults. Furthermore, to ensure the highest level of professionalism and credibility in our research, each participant not only possesses a Master's degree in counseling but also holds a valid license as a registered counselor and certificates of practice. This additional layer of qualification guarantees the reliability and authenticity of the insights gathered during our interviews, providing a robust foundation for our research findings.

Based on these criteria, individuals meeting these standards can be considered experts, and the number of experts need not be extensive. This aligns with the assertion of Adler and Ziglo (1996), who proposed that a group of 10 to 15 individuals is sufficient when there is high uniformity among the chosen experts. Therefore, selecting a cohort of 15 participants is adequate for this phase of the analysis study. Furthermore, these participants can be classified as experts according to the criteria outlined by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) and Sekaran (2016), who define individuals with more than 5 years of experience in their current roles as experts.

### **RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

All the participants who were interviewed unanimously expressed the need for this gerontological counseling competency model. This view was voiced because they were not exposed to formal gerontological counseling courses during their undergraduate or graduate counseling studies or in subsequent formal training. This can be seen from the statements of participants in the transcripts of Participants P2, P3, P5, and P7.

*"So far, I haven't received any specific training. I've only learned through the lectures I've attended or through the radio programs that are related to the elderly. There haven't been any formal structured or certified courses." (P2)*

*"I didn't study gerontology at all. I mean, it wasn't even part of our subjects when I was at university. I studied a lot of other subjects at university, but they were very basic". (P3)*

*"There's no specialized training. Usually, we're provided with the basics. Basic techniques for individual and group counseling. So, how do we go about handling the elderly, that's all." (P5)*

*"To be honest, during my undergraduate studies... even at the master's level, we were not specifically exposed to the field of counseling for the elderly... so the focus*

*wasn't on any particular group." (P7)*

Participant P4 also mentioned that he has never attended formal courses on gerontological counseling but has had some exposure to the elderly. Similarly, Participant P14 stated that he has learned about gerontology, but it wasn't specifically focused on gerontological counseling.

*"Most of the courses I attended were organized by UKM and also by MAINS. I had a temporary attachment with MAINS for 3 months, during which I managed to attend a 3-day intensive course organized by MAINS. But as for formal courses specifically for the elderly, they didn't exist." (P4)*

*"I did study gerontology in the past, but there weren't specific courses on gerontological counseling." (P14)*

Similarly, Participant P1 mentioned that he has also attended seminars on the elderly but not specifically focused on gerontological counseling.

*"I attended seminars related to the elderly, but not specifically on gerontology counseling." (P1)*

At the same time, Participant 6 mentioned that specialized training in the field of gerontological counseling was indeed lacking. However, she did collaborate with other professionals in their workplace, but it wasn't something structured.

*"My experience with specialized training in that field is indeed lacking, but I collaborate with doctors who have taken courses, like that. It's not structured, meaning we do something like 'training of trainers.' The doctors who are experts in geriatrics will share knowledge. It's like here we call it something like regular education, like CME ...." (P6)*

Some participants also mentioned that although there wasn't specific training in gerontological counseling, they did attend workshops related to handling the elderly. This was stated by participants P11 and P13.

*"In terms of specific training, it wasn't available. However, I did participate in workshops. For example, I attended workshops on handling the elderly organized by JKM (Department of Social Welfare), and I also attended workshops at Universiti Sains Malaysia.... I joined these workshops because I have elderly clients, so I wanted to benefit from the skills. In terms of certification, there wasn't any, just a certificate of participation." (P11)*

*"At JKM, most of the focus is on the elderly, targeted populations, and children. I also participated in counseling courses with JKM, specifically on issues involving shelters and elderly homes. However, there weren't specific courses on gerontological counseling; they covered it in a general sense. There were courses*

*related to the family life circle, but they weren't specific to gerontological counseling. They covered all stages of development, including the elderly." (P13)*

Participant 10 confirms that he did not receive specific training in gerontological counseling. However, he did learn about elderly individuals to some extent.

*"Training courses or specific counseling for the elderly were not available. I primarily focused on child and adolescent psychology. However, I did learn a bit about the elderly, but it was not in-depth." (P10)*

Participant P15 also stated that she did not receive specialized training in counseling for the elderly. However, their involvement in counseling was based on experience and interactions with the elderly, which they applied to their counseling practice.

*"I didn't receive any specialized training in counseling for the elderly. That's why it's great that Mr. Nik conducted research on this topic, as we're already in this field, so we understand its needs. Back then, we did it in an ad hoc manner, relying on our own knowledge and experiences, reading materials, and how we interacted with elderly acquaintances, family members, and so on. We applied that to counseling. But there really was no specific training." (P15)*

Participant P12 also acknowledged not receiving specific training in gerontological counseling but mentioned being involved in programs related to the elderly, which addressed issues and emotions of the elderly.

*"Specifically for counseling the elderly, there wasn't any specialized training. However, I often get involved in programs related to retirement courses where we invited counselors or lecturers who specialize in gerontology at UPM (Universiti Putra Malaysia). So, in these programs or courses, various methods are shared. We also learn about issues related to the elderly, their emotions, retirement planning, family matters, preparation activities, and so on." (P12)*

Participant P9, although not receiving specific training in gerontological counseling, did study developmental psychology during their degree, which included the development of the elderly.

*"I actually didn't receive any specific training in gerontological counseling. We accept clients as they come, including elderly clients. What we use is an attempt to understand them based on my background in psychology. I have a degree in psychology and a master's in psychology counseling. So, in psychology, we study developmental psychology, which includes the elderly and various aspects of it. There's no specific training for it." (P9)*

Participant P8, on the other hand, mentioned that he gained exposure to the

elderly through his experience with specialists in the workplace. However, he did not receive specific training in gerontological counseling.

*"I've never taken gerontology counseling courses. Such courses don't exist in Malaysia, as far as I know. My experience is that, in the Ministry of Health Malaysia, we are only exposed to programs for the elderly. So, in programs for the elderly, for example, those conducted in health clinics or communities for those receiving healthcare services, we are usually exposed to the expertise of medical officers who specialize in this field, what we call family medicine specialists." (P8)*

For Participant P12, he stated that he did not specifically receive training in gerontology counseling. However, he gained exposure to the elderly population through his involvement in retirement-related programs.

*"Specifically in gerontology counseling, none. But I often get involved in programs related to retirement courses. We also invite counselors or lecturers who specialize in gerontology at UPM." (P12)*

Based on the insights gathered from the interviews, it is evident that the research participants, as a collective, strongly advocate for the imperative development of a gerontology counseling competency model tailored specifically for counselors. The lack of structured or specialized gerontology counseling courses during their undergraduate or graduate programs and the scarcity of in-service training opportunities specifically focused on gerontology counseling serve to highlight this unanimity.

The needs analysis phase has successfully addressed the fundamental questions at hand, leaving no doubt as to the importance of developing a specific gerontology counseling competency model. This concurrence aligns with the views of previous researchers (Nik Jaafar, Pau Kee & Aslina, 2023) who advocated for the development of such a model. This, in turn, would provide counselors with the essential skills and competence needed to enhance the well-being and overall quality of life of the aging population through their professional practice.

Given these compelling findings, it is imperative to allocate the necessary attention to the development of this competency model. Counseling clients as the older adult requires a unique knowledge and skill set compared to other populations. The distinctive nature of gerontology counseling underscores the significance of creating a tailored model, a perspective that resonates with the insights shared by Fullen (2018).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study was undertaken to ascertain the necessity of creating a gerontology counseling competency model for counselors working with the elderly population. The study's results validate the requirement for such a model, aimed at encouraging older adults to remain active, healthy, and engaged in society by providing support for their physical and mental well-being. The model is envisioned to enhance the professionalism of counselors in their interactions with elderly individuals, emphasizing the increasing significance of counselors in actively

fostering the well-being of older adults, aligning with the 2011 National Policy for Older Persons.

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