

A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF YOUNG CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS IN MALAYSIA: EXPERT PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract. Mental health awareness has become an important component of public health in Malaysia, particularly in terms of young children's mental well-being. This qualitative study explores mental health experts' perceptions of awareness regarding young children's mental health issues in Malaysia. Nine themes emerged from semi-structured interviews with professionals such as psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and non-governmental organisation representatives. These include seeing mental health as a spectrum, the persistence of stigma and cultural barriers, the influence of early childhood experiences, and the significance of personalised treatment approaches like play therapy. The findings illustrate both progress and obstacles in Malaysia's mental health strategy, revealing generational shifts in views as well as the need of supporting family contexts. The study emphasises the importance of focused interventions and enhanced knowledge for reducing stigma and improving mental health outcomes in early children. Further research should look into the changing role of cultural dynamics and media in shaping mental health beliefs.

Keywords: *child mental health, young children, Malaysia, situational analysis*

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a state of well-being that allows individuals to realize their potential, handle everyday stresses, work productively, and make meaningful contributions to their communities (WHO, 2004). A child's mental health is just as crucial as their physical health. For children to truly thrive, they need stable, caring, and consistently supportive relationships with adults. Young children who are healthy both physically and mentally tend to find it easier to build these connections, whereas those dealing with chronic conditions like depression may face more challenges in doing so (Savarkar and Das, 2019). Mental health awareness has developed as a critical component of global public health programs in recent years. Seeing a growing recognition of mental health's importance affected Malaysia with its varied population. While Malaysia has made significant progress in many years, mental health understanding and discourse remain difficult and stigmatized. Based on a National Health and Morbidity Survey conducted by the Ministry of Health Malaysia in 2015, mental health issues affect a considerable section of the population, with 29% reporting symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression. Mental health issues are growing more widespread among Malaysians due to a lack of access to mental health services, as well as social and academic pressures (Ali et al., 2024).

According Koning et al. (2019) recognizing potential warning signals of mental health issues and taking immediate action can lead to early diagnosis and treatment. Similarly, raising public awareness of possible warning signs of mental illness improves the likelihood of timely and effective intervention (Bin Hassan et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, there remains a significant gap in public awareness and discussion on mental health. Bin Hassan et al. (2018) raised three challenges: lack of awareness and ignorance, stigma, and policy insurance. They also emphasized pressing issues including a rising trend of mental illness, work-related stress, and negative economic impact. To strengthen the focus on mental health in Malaysia, the Ministry of Health should review mental health services and education provided to the public. As a result, the purpose of this situational analysis is to provide an expert viewpoint on the current situation of mental health awareness in Malaysia. The analysis will dive into the available literature, bringing together insights from mental health professionals who have played a significant role in defining the mental health discourse in Malaysia. The situational analysis provides valuable perspectives that might offer future strategies for increasing mental health awareness in Malaysia by assessing current initiatives, challenges, and possible interventions.

Literature review

The literature review focuses on mental health issues in Malaysia and globally. It analyzes and critically evaluates the issue in terms of society's awareness of mental health issues. The main objectives of this research are the perception of mental health issues and the promotion of mental health awareness. Hence, the literature review summarizes previous research regarding these aspects. Mental health is a serious issue that has been showing an increased pattern since 2020 according to The Malaysian National Security Council (NSC). However, there are still publics that are not aware and well exposed about mental health that previous researchers have studied. For example, the participants of this research reported having limited knowledge, awareness, and experience about mental health issues (Berry et al., 2020). Other researchers have also addressed the same issue that one of the challenges of mental health in Malaysia is a lack of awareness (Bin Hassan et al., 2018), and the public still lacks knowledge about this issue (Pendit and Choo, 2020). Research by Radez et al. (2021) also found that young people's factors as one of the help-seeking barriers that young people often perceive as a lack of knowledge about mental health issues. Therefore, the lack of knowledge and awareness on this issue may lead to other serious problems that will affect the individuals or the society that we live in.

A lack of knowledge about this issue leads to negative assumptions and stigma towards mental health issues (Pendit and Choo, 2020). This research also stated that stigma persists to this day because of the false portrayal of the media especially on suicidal cases. Perceived stigma by the public will influence individuals who are experiencing mental health issues to seek professional help and be looked down upon by society. It is also stated by Berry et al. (2020), that stigma was identified as a barrier to formal help-seeking, and it leads to preventing or delaying disclosure and help-seeking. The result of the study also shows Malaysian culture and stigma towards mental health as a weakness. A previous study has found stigma as one of the main challenges of mental health in Malaysia (Bin Hassan et al., 2018). This causes children and adolescents to not seek professional help for their mental health issues due to the feeling of embarrassment consequences of the negative public attitude (Radez et al., 2021). Other than that, a study also found that having no intention of seeking help for depression increases the odds of having depression (Singh et al., 2020). All in all, this has proven that Malaysian society is still not well educated on this issue, and it is very concerning as it will affect the younger generation.

All in all, this has proven that Malaysian society is still not well educated on this issue, and it is very concerning as it will affect the younger generation. Although the prevalence of mental health issues among children was 11.1%, which was lower when compared to the prevalence globally (Sahril et al., 2021), we should not take this lightly and work together to increase awareness of mental health issues. Furthermore, previous research focuses on perception of the society from different backgrounds such as low-income families, mental illness patients, young adolescents, etc. However, this research paper that we conducted focuses on the perception of mental health experts. Therefore, this will be a contribution of new knowledge in this field and this issue.

Materials and Methods

Research design

A situational analysis has been conducted via qualitative surveying with experts with different backgrounds and specialties. A qualitative survey gathers information to characterize a topic. The goal of a qualitative survey also is to ascertain the diversity of a certain topic of interest within a specific population rather than frequencies, means, or other parameters (Sandelowski, 2010). In other words, the survey is more interested in discovering people's thoughts, perspectives, and impressions than it is in collecting numerical data. Qualitative surveys are less structured and seek to elicit information about how people think, what motivates them, and how they feel about a certain topic. Based on Marsland et al. (2000), these surveys are more difficult to analyse, but they can provide valuable depth to the research. Qualitative surveys address the questions "why" and "how." It identifies the meaningful variance (important dimensions and values) within that group, not counting the number of persons who share the same feature (variable value). In short, a qualitative survey examines diversity (rather than distribution) in a population.

Participants and participant selection

Interviewing a few experts beforehand is an excellent place to start to survey awareness of mental health issues in young children. It provides an idea of the topics and follow-up questions in the semi-structured interview. Gaining an expert's opinion is valuable in acquiring information on the topic of interest; this study involved three individuals in their area of expertise on the subject matter. The participants were asked questions related to mental health issues and data will be analysed to get an idea of what area topics to be highlighted during main research other than what researcher may have in the lists. It might be found that other topics and issues emerge as they interact with researchers. The participants' profile as in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Participants' profile.

Participants	Position/occupation	Institution	Year of experience
A1	Psychiatrist	Hospital Tunku Azizah	10 years
J2	Clinical psychologist	Hospital Sultanah Bahiyah	10 years
P3	Vice President / Founder of Playschool	Non-governmental Organisation (NGO)	7 years

Data analysis

Data analysis begins with a general description and the investigation of themes emerging from the case, culminating in a discussion of themes, issues, and implications

(Yin, 2003). First, after all interviews are done, the researcher reads all of the interview summaries to look for major themes and categories connected to the variables, which are documented. The first themes and categories found were then refined. The researcher then reread the summaries to classify the interview responses. The initial themes and categories found were then refined. The researcher then reread the summaries to classify the interview responses. In the current study, as in the process outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2017), the responses to the question about the perception, experiences, benefits, challenges, and aspirations of young children's mental health awareness will be examined in light of the overall interview summary to ensure the researcher's interpretations are contextualised. The assigned categories will be documented, and quotations from the summaries will be selected to highlight each subject.

Data credibility and trustworthiness

Credibility of this study was further established using data that was collected from multiple sources and investigators triangulation. Interview was conducted to a psychiatrist from a hospital in Kuala Lumpur, a clinical psychologist from a government hospital in Kedah and a Vice President of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) that advocating Mental Health Awareness.

Results and Discussion

The study aimed to investigate the awareness of young children's mental health in Malaysia. Seven (7) themes have been identified through the analysis related to the perception of mental health of young children in Malaysia. The themes are discussed in the coming sections.

Theme one: Understanding of mental health

The first theme highlighted the perspective on mental health seen as a broad spectrum that varies by individual and societal understanding. The recognition of mental health encompasses a range from mild to severe as mentioned by A1:

"I felt that mental health issues... are really wide... it includes something as trivial as stress, it can also include something more serious like depression..." (A1)

Mental health exists on a spectrum, which is a broad scale that can range from its very best to its very worst. At its worst, it can lead to mental illness. However, even in such cases, there is potential for improvement. With appropriate treatment and support, an individual's condition can progress down the scale from a more severe state to a less severe one, ultimately leading to better overall mental health.

"However, there is actually potential to get better again, even if someone has reached level 10 on the scale. With proper treatment and support, it is possible for it to improve from level 10 down to level 5, so their mental health gets better." (J2)

There is also the potential of perception variability, with the differences in how the general public, professionals and cultural contexts perceive mental health issues.

Theme two: Stigma and cultural barriers

The cultural and societal stigma surrounding mental health and how this affects access to care and willingness to seek support. This particular theme consists of how collectivist society, self-stigma and generational differences view mental health. As Malaysia is a community-oriented country with a collectivistic culture, it creates pressure to conform to societal norms which lead individuals to hide their mental health struggles.

“Malaysia's community is... we call it collectivism. That is our culture... we are very collectivist, so when we are collectivist, we tend to be a culture that often considers what others say. Most of the time, the problem for people who come to psychiatry is stigma. I think the stigma is a very long-standing problem...” (J2)

In addition, internalized beliefs about being perceived as weak prevent individuals from seeking help they need, contributing to self-stigma, as stated by participants A1:

“Self-stigma is because they... feel that they themselves shouldn't... if they do get help, they are maybe weaker...” (A1)

However, both participants agreed that younger people are more open to discussing mental health compared to older generations.

Theme three: Awareness and education

The findings revealed a theme of awareness and education, where participants expressed variability in mental health awareness based on age, media consumption and exposure to discussions about mental health.

“I think it really depends on the age group... young children are a lot better at talking about mental health issues.” (A1)

A1 disclosed that older individuals may lack awareness due to limited media exposure and entrenched beliefs. In contrast, younger people are more informed, gaining awareness through platforms like Instagram and Twitter. Nevertheless, J2 suggested that increased guidance is necessary to foster a more accurate understanding rather than distorted perceptions of mental health.

“Awareness can be quite high but immature... needs more guidance so that it is not distorted...” (J2)

Theme four: Impact of early childhood experiences

The fourth theme discovered the influence of early childhood development on later mental health, stressing the importance of a supportive environment. developmental trauma, particularly during critical phases of growth from birth to three years, has critical implications for a child's attachment and emotional well-being.

"... you have a mental health issue. Somehow, it relates back to either your trauma or past life experiences, so there are quite a lot of factors that relate to your mental condition." (J2)

"When you talk about developmental trauma, it happens to the child during the early developmental years. Which affects their attachment, bonding so between 0 to 3 where this is the critical psychological development." (A1)

Participant PA3 also highlighted the connection between unresolved mental health issues and behavioral problems, stressing how deeply childhood traumas can embed themselves in the brain.

"Mental illnesses, if not addressed properly, can lead to behavioral issues. This is because childhood traumas or early experiences are deeply rooted in the core of the brain, creating underlying problems."

Plus, according to A1, family dynamics, including family structure and parental relationships play a crucial role in shaping a child's mental health.

"All children who come with mental health issues... their main issue is actually the family." (A1)

Theme five: Need for emotional support and safe space

The theme suggested the importance of providing a secure environment for individuals, especially children, to express their feelings and receive support.

"No child in fact no adult will open up if they don't feel safe..." (A1)

The statement from A1 expressed creating trust for children to share their thoughts and experiences. In other words, building rapport is the key for children disclosing about themselves to both parents and professionals, as it promotes a sense of validation and avoids judgment. The element is portrayed in the statement below:

"Once the children build rapport... everything will come out." (J2)

Another statement by J2 clearly reflects the importance of building rapport with children during therapy sessions by the mental health professionals in ensuring effective treatment.

"It's about rapport... that's why, in my treatment plan, until I've established rapport, the plan is solely focused on building that rapport... just to build rapport. If it takes five sessions... go get the rapport... build the rapport."

Theme six: Parental influence on child mental health

One of the central themes that emerged from the data was parental influence on child mental health, as consistently mentioned by participants throughout the interviews. As

mentioned by A1, the impact of parental conflict often reflects the tensions that exist within the family environment.

"...they are often unaware that for all the children who come with mental health issues, the main issue is actually the family. I've never encountered a child with a mental health issues where the family wasn't a contributing factor." (A1)

Besides, parents' unresolved issues can pass on to children, affecting their behavior and emotions as noted by PA3:

"When parents are not happy... it actually affects their children." (PA3)

Both statements imply that supportive and engaged parents are important to foster positive role models, helping to mitigate mental health challenges, encouraging resilience and emotional well-being in children

Theme seven: Treatment approaches for children

A recurring theme in the participants' responses was treatment approaches for children, which were effective methods for addressing mental health issues in children, highlighting non-pharmacological and play-based therapies. The participants believed that play therapy allowed children to express and verbalize their emotions. It can be found in the statements provided by all participants as below:

".... sometimes we use therapy, sometimes we use treatment medication, combination of both. We do use play therapy; we use drama intervention." (A1)

"Play therapy is the best... children don't talk... they cannot express themselves yet..." (J2)

"I would say play therapy is the best." (PA3)

The same participant highlighted the importance of learning through play for children's mental health.

"Umh... why play therapy? Because children are still in the process of learning and developing their emotions. Play learning comes from them. The children are involved one hundred percent."

Additionally, addressing mental health issues early can prevent their escalation into more severe conditions. Early intervention allows for timely support, which can significantly improve outcome. This study aims to examine participants' views on the awareness of mental health issues affecting young children in Malaysia. The findings showed that stigma and cultural barriers, and the impact of early childhood experiences are among the themes identified with play therapy being stressed as an important treatment approach for children's mental health issues.

Stigma and cultural barriers

The theme indicates that cultural attitudes and societal norms often create stigma around mental health, making it difficult for individuals to reach out for help. Many people may feel pressure to conform to certain beliefs or fears about being judged, which can prevent them from accessing the support they need. The findings aligned with previous research suggesting that cultural norms influence people's attitudes, especially in collectivist cultures where there is a strong pressure to conform, leading to individuals discounting and stigmatising anything considered to be outside the norm, such as mental health issues and illness (Sarah Natalia and Fridari, 2022). The same article contends that, unlike collectivism, mental health literacy has a significant impact on reducing the stigma associated with mental health disorders among young people. The findings revealed that mental health concerns are regarded as an unresolved core problem, and the unfavourable attitude towards them remains alarming. The study by Martin (2023) found that mental health stigma and ethnicity were not significant predictors of accessing mental health care. However, cultural obstacles proved to be significant factors.

The impact of early childhood experiences

Apart from that, the results revealed that early childhood experiences are vital in shaping a child's emotional, social, and cognitive development. These formative years can greatly influence their mental health throughout life, laying the foundation for how they navigate relationships and cope with challenges as they grow older. Similarly, the systematic review by McLaughlin et al. (2019) sheds light on the significant impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on brain development and long-term mental health outcomes. The findings emphasize how crucial early interventions can be; by providing timely support, we can help lessen the negative effects that ACEs may have on children. Likewise, early attachment to parents and childhood experiences can profoundly influence mental health over the long term. It underscores the importance of parents providing supportive interventions early on, which can help redirect negative developmental paths and promote healthier outcomes for children.

Play therapy

By engaging children through play, therapists can access the child's inner world and foster emotional healing in ways that traditional talk therapies may not, particularly when language development is still in progress. This aligns with existing literature on the effectiveness of child-centered play therapy, which is increasingly recognized as a primary treatment modality for young children (Zhang et al., 2019). Similarly, research by Bratton et al. (2005) examines recent studies on play therapy, confirming its effectiveness for various psychological issues in children, particularly emotional and social challenges.

Conclusion

Mental health is as important as our physical health. Hence, it is concerning since there are still some people taking this issue as something that is not worth giving their attention and understanding. It is important to deepen our knowledge about this issue to support and encourage someone with mental health issues to seek help from professionals. This study proves that stigmatization of this issue was created through

cultural norms. Although nowadays there is a better awareness of this issue compared to previous years, mental health promotion should always be fostered to spread awareness continuously. One of the main limitations of this study is the small number of participants and the lack of diversity among them. With only three individuals from three areas and expertise, it is challenging to generalize the findings to different contexts and perspectives. To address this issue in future research, it's important to aim for a larger and more diverse group of participants. Additionally, qualitative research often involves subjective interpretations, which can introduce bias. The researcher's own biases and perspectives may have influenced the data collection and analysis process, potentially impacting the findings. Hence, using a mix of data collection methods such as combining interviews with observations could provide richer insights and a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences being studied.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that no conflict of interest is involved with any parties in this research.

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