

ELDER'S DECISION OF MOVING TO *PONDOK* LIVING ARRANGEMENT IN MALAYSIA

Nor Aisah Areff & Novel Lyndon

ABSTRACT

Studies on elders decision to move to different congregated living arrangements in the developed nations have been conducted extensively. As the elders' view is perennially significant in qualitative approach, this article emphasises the reasons of elders' move to Jeram *Pondok*, an alternative congregated living arrangement which has been established for the dissemination of Islam through teaching and learning. Therefore, an abductive research strategy centred on idealist ontology and social constructionist epistemology was engaged to explain their social reality. The meanings constructed by them as social actors were interpreted through the employment of in-depth interviews with 20 elderly informants. The findings yielded three main themes of *information and interest in pondok, decision maker and reasons of move* with five essential sub-themes of religion, relationships with family members and friends, forging new relationship, autonomy and death in understanding the meanings attached to their everyday experience. Lastly, understanding the elders' decision to move to *pondok* would present a better explanation of their needs based on their socio-cultural reality for planning and implementation of future policies relevant to them.

Keywords: Elders, *Pondok*, Reasons of Stay, Abductive Research Strategy, Religion, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to understand the decision made by elders to move to Jeram *Pondok*, Kuala Selangor. It is also to find out whether *pondok* itself as an alternative congregated living arrangement is related to their decision to leave behind the environment that they were familiar with and to most of them the one that they had identified with for many decades of their lives. Subsequently, it is to explain how were they able to disengage themselves from family members and friends with whom they had established closed relationships for the most part of their lives by moving to *pondok*. As a conducive living arrangement that elders feel connected to and at home is important in later life (Wan Ibrahim & Zainab 2014; Wong & Verbrugge 2009; Nihtilä & Martikainen 2008; McCann et al. 2011; Jorgensen et al. 2009; Zainab et al. 2014), their quality of life and well-being are related to the place they live (Jorgensen et al. 2009; Perkins et al. 2012). Coincidentally, many of the studies concentrate more on informal living arrangements for which the elders live in the community (Ahmad Shahir et al. 2016; Wan Ibrahim et al. 2012; Wan Ibrahim & Zainab 2014; Halimatus 2014; Momtaz et al. 2010; Noorlaili et al. 2012). As a result, most of these elders are found either living alone, with spouse, children, other family members or friends (Nihtilä & Martikainen 2008; McCann et al. 2011; Wong & Verbrugge 2009; Durand 2007; Chan 2005; Chen & Feeley 2014). At the same time, familial living arrangement could also be seen as

the most suitable and preferable option in later life (Wan Ibrahim & Zainab 2014; Ahmad Shahir et al. 2016). On the contrary, congregated living arrangement is always considered as the last choice for most elders. Unless there are other avenues that could hold them from moving or relocating to another formal arrangement, they would have preferred to remain in their present arrangement (Young 1998; Koss & Ekerdt 2017).

In the Malaysian context, a gradual change in the family structure could be (National Population and Family Development Board 2016) visualised with the increasing number of and demand for formal support facilities created to tackle the issue of elders' needs for these services. This concern portrays demographic changes of the growing number of the elderly population, higher life expectancy and lower fertility rate of Malaysians (Mohd Fazari 2017). Therefore, it is inevitable for Malaysia to be prepared for better formal or congregated living arrangements in the future. Even though there seems to be smaller number of elders who decide to live in congregated living arrangement, it is important to understand that this number depicts the impending Malaysia ageing society in the future (Mohd Fazari 2017). As it is regarded as the last option for many elders, there are different types of congregated living arrangement that could offer an alternative to them. Rumah Seri Kenangan (RSK), Rumah Ehsan, retirement village and nursing homes are some options that could be taken. However, many research emphases are given on the government funded congregated living arrangements than of any other types (Zainab et al. 2014; Tengku Asri et al. 2016). Thus, *pondok* living arrangement could be considered as a unique phenomenon in this case because it is an educational institution not originally meant for elders' congregated home but starts to gain more acceptance as one.

Comparatively there are more research undertaken to investigate elders who are in congregated living arrangements in the developed than in developing nations like Malaysia. As the focus of the article is on the decision to move centred around elders' reasons to choose congregated living arrangement, related concepts like relocation, mobility, and transition are taken into consideration (Carpenter et al. 2007; Jorgensen et al. 2009; Löfqvist et al. 2013). All these research point to the direction of elders' decision to move to another place mostly acknowledging the growing vulnerabilities of old age. As decision to move is a process (Young 1998), the reasons for congregated living vary based on different services and facilities offered. It is a continuum of total dependency of nursing home (Angelini & Laferrère 2011; Stadnyk et al. 2017;), assisted living (Perkins et al. 2012) to independent living in retirement village/community (Carpenter et al. 2007; Shippee 2009; Shippee 2012; Petersen et al. 2017).

Furthermore, the inclusion of religion is perennially important in this article because *pondok* is viewed as an educational religious institution first and a congregated home for the elders second. At the same time studies of elder's quality of life and well-being would always consider religion as influential. On the same note, in Malaysia, religion and religious activities are important to elders' well-being whether to those who live in the community (Halimatus 2014; Momtaz et al. 2010; Noorlaili et al. 2012) or in varied congregated living arrangements (Zainab et al. 2014; Tengku Asri et al. 2016) including *pondok* (Haliza & Shamsuddin 2008; Salma & Fuziah 1998; Arena 2002; Zainab et al. 2012; Nor Aisah & Novel 2015). Hence, this study shows that, how elders' decision of moving was very much related to what the next living arrangement could offer. However, most of the previous studies were carried out focusing on health and from the Western Christian-Judeo social reality. More interest should be given then, to the elderly who reside in

pondok as an alternative living arrangement. Thus the main purpose was to present elders' own interpretation of their experience and social world in deciding to be in *pondok*.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

i) Congregated Living Arrangements

Throughout the literature, the decision to move is always related to health especially for the older old or very old people (Koss & Ekerdt 2017; Angelini & Laferrère 2011; Jorgensen et al. 2009). Even when the move to retirement community is the focus, similar tone is heard from those elders who were worried to be relocated in the same community but with greater dependency (Carpenter et al. 2007; Shippee 2009; Petersen et al. 2017). For example, Koss et al. (2017) studied the future housing options of elders anticipating the vulnerabilities of reaching 85 and above for which maintaining good health is central and challenging. Other research in the developed nations have started to emphasise the concern on elders' move even before it occurs in their future (Angelini & Laferrère 2011; Angelini et al. 2011; Carpenter et al. 2007). A research by Angelini et al. (2011) compared elders' mobility between private dwellings and a nursing home in eleven European countries. They found out that the former depended on housing quality and mobility costs and the latter is determined by age, bad health and the absence of close family. At the same time, the mobility was related to elders' social class too. Similarly, Löfqvist et al. (2013) discussed the reasoning behind the very old people's relocation or staying put (ageing in place). The knowledge about these reasons could initiate interventions directed to their concerns and decision making about moving or remaining. Therefore, decision making and decision maker are deemed significant in interpreting elders' move as studied by Jorgensen et al. (2009). He identified factors like good and suitable housing, family support and not being left alone all day worked to enable them to remain at home. Conversely, the move to residential care showed the inadequacy of those factors.

Moreover, even when elders experience high dependency living in nursing homes, autonomy is still considered essential to them. Stadnyk et al. (2017) mentioned the significance of exercising autonomy through choice and self-advocacy to understand nursing home elders' quality of life. For those in retirement communities, Shippee (2012) also indicated the importance of autonomy in active independent living. On a different note, Perkins et al. (2012) emphasised the concept of ageing in place in terms of how elders could feel at home anywhere. They revealed that social and institutional change and cultural contexts are important factors that shape the meaning of home for female elders living in a congregate housing complex. The meaning of home was found in "(1) the autonomous decision to find a place somewhere, (2) the deliberate resolve to feel in place anywhere, and (3) the ongoing effort to stay placed there". Thus, ageing in place is about how elders make themselves at home creatively and proactively in any environment.

ii) Pondok as an Alternative Living Arrangement

The history, evolution, objectives and functions of *pondok* in Malaysia were explained in a number of references (Salma & Fuziah 1998; Arena 2002; Awang 1977; Ismail Mat & Ismail Bakar 1993; Abdullah 1993; Pondok Studies Development Centre). In the beginning, it was established to

spread religious teachings especially to the local community and gradually to offer accommodation to the younger generation who wished to continue their studies there. Later as the older generation started to show interest to learn Islam and settled down there, it began opening its door to them. As the concentration of *pondok* has always been on younger students, many *pondok* institutions have progressed into offering religious as well as academic education to train and prepare them to join the mainstream environment at present. Simultaneously, most research attention is given to the younger residents rather than the older ones (Wan Zahidi 1992; Awang 1977; Badriyah 1984; Ismail Mat & Ismail Bakar 1993; Mohd Nasir 2008). For example, Asyraf et al. (2015) examined *halaqah* (a study circle) as the forms of teaching methods of religious education in the mosque and the *pondok*, attended by the young and older people. Yet, the focus was given to how the former applied this in their educational pursuit rather than the latter.

Nevertheless, the limited research on *pondok* elders' living arrangement always point out to its religious appeal (Haliza & Shamsuddin 2008; Salma & Fuziah 1998; Arena 2002; Zainab et al. 2012; Nor Aisah & Novel 2015). A study by Zainab et al. (2012) is the nearest to this article when they explained the reasons of elders residing in *pondok*: "1) consistent in ibadah, 2) easy to join the jemaah at the mosque, 3) able to mix around and learn together with their peers, 4) can increase the deeds for the afterlife, and 5) be able to focus on the religious learning." Undeniably that *pondok* is an educational institution, however it has evolved into something similar to a retirement village in the developed nations. The elders are drawn to spend their old age in *pondok*. On the other hand, it is different from other congregated living arrangements for its religious learning opportunities which are not pressured by educational accreditation and an independent living as one of the criteria of admission.

The understanding of the elders' decision to move to *pondok* could reasonably ascertain their needs in the society and to formulate appropriate future policies in their interests. Furthermore, it could add to the conception of contextual theoretical knowledge of the elderly as the social actors themselves. Therefore, the primary objective of the article was to analyse the construction of elders' interpretation of the reasons that prompted them to move to *pondok* as a living arrangement in their later life. The understanding of elders' decision as the social actors experiencing the moving phenomenon could contribute in explaining the necessities and constraints of this group's social world. Subsequently, it was to examine whether *pondok* itself as a favourable living arrangement was related to the understanding of the choice they made. Consequently, the research question centres around; why did the elders make the decision to move to Jeram *Pondok*?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

i) Research Strategy

In order to explain the elders' experience in the *pondok* and their understanding of the decision to move there, abductive research strategy was used (Blaikie 2000: 114).

...[it] involves constructing theories that are derived from social actors' language, meanings and accounts in the context of everyday activities. Such research begins by describing these activities and meanings, and then derives from them categories and

concepts that can form the basis of an understanding or an explanation of the problem at hand. It is based on the *idealist* ontology and the epistemology of *constructionism*

(Blaikie 2007: 89-90).

It is established in interpretivism for which the researcher's task is to bridge the gap between individuals' comprehension of their experience and social reality, and the scientific explanation in academia. Thus, the researcher bring to the centre the 'insider' view and not to impose an 'outsider' view on it (Blaikie 2000: 115). An idealist ontology assumes that humans have culture and share a social world with others. Therefore, as social actors they keep on producing and reproducing meanings in their social world. In order to understand elders' decision and reasoning of their move to *pondok*, it has to be related to their shared interpretations of everyday activities and reality.

For social constructionist epistemology, "[s]ocial actors socially construct their reality (Blaikie 2007: 22)." They analyse and interpret their own experiences in relation to others' actions and their social environment. Similarly, researchers construct their understanding of these social actors against the backdrop of the latter's realities and theirs. From this same perspective, the elders in *pondok* living arrangement would construct their own realities based on the *pondok* socio-cultural world. As a result, different socio-cultural environment would lead to a construction of different social reality. On the other hand, the use of social constructionism has gained more attention and acceptance in social gerontology and sociology of ageing (Bengtson et al. 2005; Alley et al. 2010). Thus, it is crucial to study the elders in their own *pondok* social world to understand the social meanings and interpretations of their decision to live there. In turn, the researcher could generate the categories, concepts and themes based on their shared interpretation to understand their everyday social reality in the *pondok*.

ii) Data Collection

The data were collected from Jeram *Pondok*, Kuala Selangor as the site of investigation. Since its inception in 2000 as the *pondok* for the elderly, at present it has more than 100 housing units which accommodate approximately 200 elders. Since it is not legally registered as an educational institution or home for the elderly it could not secure funding from the government and relies on the donation from the public. In order to improve the elders' living condition there, many facilities and assistance are needed. Purposive sampling technique was employed for which the criteria for inclusion were elders who were sixty and above, were in *pondok* for more than a year and agreed to be part of the study. This sampling strategy depends on the sufficiency of data to answer research questions (Mason 2002: 134). The researchers stopped the interviews at the twentieth informant once the saturation point was attained (Corbin & Strauss 2008: 143-146). The answers given by the elderly informants became repetitive and thus the sampling selection ended. Since the data collection was flexible and dynamic, a number of informants were interviewed more than once for further information increment and comprehension. Finally, the researchers settled for 20 elders in their effort to discern how the elders understand their move to *pondok* and the reasons for doing so.

Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted from March to April, 2014. The duration of interviews was around one to two hours depending on the elderly informants' ability

and attention to answer. Accordingly, they were carried out in convenient locations to the informants for which all of them were in their own housing unit except for two female informants who were more comfortable with completing the interviews in the *pondok surau* (place of worship smaller than a mosque). Both of them were married and since the houses are small, they felt that the presence of their husband would create an awkward situations in answering freely.

iii) Data Analysis

The data were collected in a Malay language. They were audio recorded and later transcribed and translated into English verbatim. After they were coded, thematic analyses were carried out on the interview data. Atlas.ti 7, a computer software was used in analysing the qualitative data to search for relevant codes for categorisation. Subsequently, the process of comparing and refining were exercised to seek out interrelated patterns. Finally, significant themes emerged from the data to understand the elders' interpretation of their social world and reality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analyses resulted in a two-part explanation: the elderly informants' socio-demographic characteristics and their decision to move to *pondok*.

i) Socio-demographic Characteristics of Elderly Informants

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the study informants. The informants who were in their sixties made up the biggest number (10) followed by those who were in their seventies (6) and eighties (4). There were only 3 male elderly among the 20 informants. Most *pondoks* in other parts of Malaysia depict similar distribution which makes it not an uncommon feature and there are also a few *pondoks* which accept only female elders. In reality, even though the number of female elders is shifting, Jeram *Pondok* has only 12 males and more than 150 female residents. In addition, in terms of marital status, the biggest number of elders were considered single through widowhood (13), divorce (1), and never married (1). Thus the remaining married elderly informants, two were females and all three were males. In fact all male elders in the *pondok* lived with their spouse. One of the criteria of informants' selection was those who had lived for more than a year for the reason of *pondok* familiarity. As a matter of fact, most elders had lived 5 and more years and only 6 of them lived between 2 to 4 years. However, there was a male elder who had lived there for more than 30 years even way back before the *pondok* was opened for the older generation. He joined the *pondok* as a follower to the pioneer, a respected local Muslim scholar.

When it comes to self-reported health status, 16 elders perceived themselves as having very good (6) or good health status (10). Only three informants considered themselves as having poor health. As one of the criteria for admission is a relatively healthy elders, the *pondok* does not provide any nursing or medical facilities and they are expected to live independently. In reality, almost all elderly informants had some kind of health problems, chronic illnesses like hypertension or diabetes were typical. Nonetheless, the management accepted even those elders with a more serious health issue provided that they could find an alternative to handle their lives such as getting neighbours, friends and family members to assist them. In terms of informants' living arrangement before moving to *pondok*, half of them lived with their children, 4 each lived alone or with spouse

and 1 each lived with her employer and the other had moved to *pondok* in his thirties learning from the pioneer, settling down with his family, working as a cook for the attached *tahfiz* school (A school which is established based on Islamic religious teachings with an emphasis on memorising Al-Qur'an) students and gradually serving the *pondok* as one of the teaching staff while growing into old age there. Even though decision to move to *pondok* comes from interrelated sources, it could be considered that mostly individual informants made the decision themselves. Only five were seen as others making the decision for them, children (2), spouse (2) or friend (1).

Moreover, when resources are concern, most elders were deemed capable financially. For most of them, their resources came from different avenues. More than half of them had their own financial resources from previous occupations. The same number had their present occupation or children to help or add to their financial ability. However, five of the elderly informants received *zakat* (alms) from the federal or state government religious bodies as a continuous assistance to live in *pondok*. While a strong financial resource could help in purchasing a permanent *wakaf* (an endowment property for charitable and religious purposes) house, it was not a necessary condition because there is a long list of elders who want to move there and the housing units are not adequate to entertain the demands. Furthermore, the land and house statuses do not belong to the same owner. The land is *wakaf* entity belongs to the *pondok* but the housing units are mostly owned by the elderly residents. Nevertheless, all houses are treated as *wakaf* (donated) because the elders do not mind much to leave them behind not just to their family members but also to anyone who is interested to live and do good deeds in the *pondok* when they are gone. There were six elders who were in a permanent house for which they could live there as long as they wished, but it was donated to them by family members or well-wishers. The concern on the housing is not about ownership but more of privacy. This leads to an elder renting a house there for RM200 monthly. However, two elders had to move to a temporary *wakaf* house for which they had to share with the most two other elders when the need arose. In this case, they could face a little discomfort or adjustment problem to share a space with others initially.

Table 1 Socio-demographic characteristics of study informants

Characteristics	N=20	%
<i>Age</i>		
60–69 years	10	50
70–79 years	6	30
80 years and above	4	20
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	3	15
Female	17	85
<i>Marital status</i>		
Never married	1	5
Married	5	25
Widowed or divorced	13	65
Divorced	1	5
<i>Duration of stay</i>		
2 – 4 years	6	30
5 – 7 years	5	25
8 – 10 years	6	30

11 and more years	3	15
<i>Self-reported health status</i>		
Very good	6	30
Good	10	50
Fair	1	5
Poor	3	15
<i>Last living arrangement</i>		
Alone	4	20
Spouse	4	20
Child(ren)	10	50
Family	1	5
Employer	1	5
<i>Decision to move</i>		
Self	15	75
Children	2	10
Spouse	2	10
Friend	1	5
<i>Resources *</i>		
Previous occupation (pension, property or land rental)	12	60
Present occupation	12	60
Children	12	60
Zakat recipient	5	25
<i>Type of house in pondok</i>		
Permanent wakaf	11	55
Permanent donated wakaf	6	30
Temporary wakaf	2	10
Rented wakaf	1	5

* Total is more than 20 because informants were allowed to give more than 1 answer

ii) Elders' Decision of Moving to *Pondok* Living Arrangement

The elders' decision to move to *pondok* garners three main themes: information about and interest in *pondok*, decision maker, and reasons of move with the sub-themes of religion, relationships with family members and friends, forging new relationship, autonomy and death represent the understanding of the elders' choice to be there. In fact, all these themes are interrelated with one another. Nevertheless, they are separated according to what is the most relevant to show that the decision to move is a process and involves sometimes a longer period to the eventuality of living in the *pondok* itself.

iii) Information and Interest in *Pondok*

In most occasions, the elderly informants themselves had shown interests before entering *pondok* and for some it was suggested or others sparked the interest. Nonetheless, at the end of the day it is their preference to continue living in *pondok* and to spend their remaining days there. Information about *pondok* is crucial before a decision is made. In this case, it comes from multiple sources. Informant 10 had always known about Jeram *Pondok* due to its location near to her house and had always wanted to move there but her husband did not favour the idea. She stated that,

Kuala Selangor is not that big, words of mouth, many people from there come here, friends. However at that time, my husband was still around... sometimes we want to come, husband

did not want to... the intention had been there... if my husband was no longer around I wanted to stay in *pondok*, I want to recite, I did not know how to recite, I just learned Qur'an....

She practically knew about the *pondok* herself from years of mingling around with people who knew about it and her main reason to stay there was the opportunity to learn Al-Qur'an. Many of the informants came to know about the *pondok* throughout their lives and made specific choice to stay in Jeram *Pondok* based on the information they received from others. Informant 5 was not alien to *pondok* living because she used to study under this system in her schooling years. Later in her life, she even used to discuss living in *pondok* with her late husband but he was not interested.

I stayed at home a year after my husband's passing, I was not happy.... I am, from the beginning, have always thought about going to *pondok*, I asked my husband but he did not want to.... [The *pondok*] has been calling me for a long time. I myself originally used to study in *pondok*... but at that time... learning Al-Qur'an... they taught the right way but I did not understand much... I studied in the village too, [from different people].... In the end, I came here... to learn. I did learn there but it was not consistent... once a week or twice, not that frequent. Here, three times a day."

She had always known about what she wanted. At the same time, a friend who used to do business with her referred Jeram *Pondok* to her. The friend had stayed there years before she recommended the place and they continued the friendship until today. Informant 16 too had quite a similar experience in the sense that her husband disagreed to move to *pondok* and she did so only after his passing. In the case of Informant 2, she found out about *pondok* from her friend when she was still teaching. However, she had to weigh her option to save enough money to buy a house, which was possible only after her retirement. At the same time, she managed to influence her mother to move in together but into separate houses there,

We went in together, but when we planned it, the houses were not ready yet. I just went to observe. I said to my mother that I wanted to buy, she was quiet, but she did not say she disliked the idea. However, she was influenced [by me] and wanted to buy.... After my retirement, I had the money, I bought it and my mother followed suit.

For a number of elderly informants, their family members were involved in making them interested in or helping them to get information about *pondok*. Informant 19 was interested in *pondok* since her own daughter studied there, "I am interested to enter *pondok* since my daughter stayed here. After observing her, the feeling to be in *pondok* appeared.... I think... living outside... we waste most of our time doing nothing." Informant 3 too had always wished to stay in *pondok* but she had to care for her parents after her husband's passing. Thus, after both her parents passed away too, the daughter invited her to stay with her. At the same time, the daughter understood the difficulty of the mother to attend religious programmes and hence she suggested living in a *pondok*. She also viewed this opportunity as godsend and the process of moving as fated because it went very smoothly for her.

For Informant 14, she found out about *pondok* from her son-in-law who accompanied his friend for a visit there, "about Jeram, I came to see, my son-in-law [with his friend visiting his]

mother-in-law. I wanted to tag along.... After visiting, I was interested.” Furthermore, for Informant 15, her brother assisted her in finding the place, “... at first my brother, I told him that I did not want to stay home. I wanted to stay in *pondok*. Which *pondok*? Any *pondok* would do, but I visited the one in Grik, [Perak], I do not want, I said.... Do you want it here, [Jeram *Pondok*]? Here it is.” Based on the experience of Informant 17, after staying for eight months in a *pondok* in Pahang, his two sisters who were in Jeram *Pondok* supported him to move there, “I retired,... for me, not compatible to stay there (previous *pondok*). I came here to visit my two sisters... the eldest and the second one are here... They have already had a house here...” Through their contact, he managed to get a *wakaf* house before his move.

Moreover, other elderly informants got the information about *pondok* through other channels. For Informant 8 and 9, who came from the same village, they had attended talks in their place given by the founder. These talks had triggered their awareness of Jeram *Pondok*. For Informant 8, he also received information from a number of neighbours who had already moved there. However, after getting his permission, his wife moved to a *wakaf* house for several weeks to gain the experience of living in *pondok*. Eventually, she managed to persuade him to do the same. He managed to stay in a donated *wakaf* house through kinship relation. Informant 9 found out about Jeram *Pondok* through the same way. Even though she had known about it for a long time, she could not come because her husband was sick and her children were still young. As time passed, the husband passed away, the children moved out from the house and one after another of her neighbours and close friends passed away. Consequently, she decided that it was better to learn religion in *pondok* surrounded by new friends rather than doing nothing at home.

Therefore, information about and interest in the future living arrangement are important to make an informed choice. For example, a study by Petersen et al. (2017) focussed on elders’ informed lifestyle decision based on the variability in professional advice and constraints on choices when their needs and capacities change while living in the retirement village. On a similar note, Young (1998) described the process of moving into four different phases: deciding to move, preparing to move, making the move, and settling in. This confirms that moving involves more than just a simple decision of moving to a new place but also the whole process of trying to live there for life. It is crucial then for the elders to plan and prepare for the future especially when moving or relocating into a new place is involved.

iv) Decision Maker

The majority of the elders made their own decision to stay in *pondok* irrespective of how they got the information or their interest was kindled. For the remaining five elders, even though the decisions were made by either their spouse, children or friend, they eventually favoured living in *pondok* for its various appeals. Informant 7, 12, and 10 are examples of elderly informants who decided themselves to be in the *pondok*. Informant 7 said, “I have wanted to stay in *pondok* since I was younger.... I have never disturbed my children. I have my own house.” She viewed herself differently from other female elderly widows because for her, she had the financial freedom to take care of herself without depending on any of her children. Thus, she valued her freedom to choose. Contrary to the view of Informant 7, Informant 12 had been going back and forth staying with any of her children. Still, they sometimes complained about her staying longer in one child’s house over the others. Hence, she decided to move to *pondok* to avoid unnecessary disagreement.

Despite the fact that Informant 10 made her own decision, her children intervened in terms of the selection of *pondok*. The children gave a condition that it has to be near them, so that it is easier for them to visit. She did stay for a week in a *pondok* in Perak, but the children disagreed with the distance. Thus, they managed to find Jeram *Pondok* which is nearer for her.

One of the informants had never thought about *pondok* living until the idea was brought forward to her by her son-in-law. At first, she was hesitant. He suggested her to stay there rather than with her stepchildren because he observed that she was not happy staying with them. In the beginning, it was a bit hard for her to adjust to the new environment, but in the end, she considered the *pondok* her home. Hence, for Informant 4,

I did not know about coming here, my son-in-law sent me here... I stayed here a week, I thought that it was quite difficult. We are used to have lunch, they (other elders) had breakfast but did not take lunch... When I tried to sleep [alone] here, I was scared.... [Now,] I am always happy.

For Informant 8, the interview was conducted in the presence of his wife who had a neurological disease that paralysed half of her body. He had to help her in her daily activities including the use of toilet. The researcher found out from other informants that the wife was the one who was very interested to live in *pondok* and thus she moved there with his permission before his move. Finally, he was persuaded to follow suit, gradually got adjusted and eventually very much drawn and pleased to stay back.

The importance of decision making and decision maker was discussed by Jorgensen et al. (2009). Deriving to a decision is crucial but who makes the decision is even more crucial because the elders have to be part of the process that involves their lives in the future. They found out that different aspects of appropriate housing, family support and having a company throughout the day were important in deciding to remain at home or to move. However it is different from elders' move to *pondok* because they are expected to be fairly healthy to live independently. At the same time, most of them have these different aspects combined but they still decided to move to *pondok*. This shows that in spite of the lack of facilities, *pondok* has an appeal and advantage in terms of learning and practicing religion that the elders gravitate towards.

v) **Reasons of Move**

There are many reasons of elders moving to *pondok* and it seems that eventually they had decided to accept it as a living arrangement that they could consider a home. Nevertheless, the most significant reasons for elders' move were elucidated first.

- **Religion**

For many elders deciding to move to *pondok* was related to religion while a few others had their own personal with overlapping religious reasons. Irrespective of their initial reasons, in time, learning and practicing religion became the primary reasons for staying put in the *pondok*. According to Informant 13, if she were to stay with her children, she could not perform her religious duties well and would be tied up to other unimportant matters.

I, if there is a certain matter, I will go back. If not, if I go back, I want to come back here fast. I do not want.... She (daughter) would persuade me. Mom want to go back. I left my recitation (class), others have gone up, Mom is left at the bottom. I had to repeat it alone... At the same time, those who recite (attending the Qur'anic classes), complained that they could not recite, I said. After that, I could not attend congregated prayers.... Here, even at 2:00 p.m., I have not prayed yet, still chatting with grandchildren, great grandchildren....

For Informant 19, she wanted to be near to a place of worship and *pondok* is the ideal place. She had always wanted an easy access to a mosque since she did not know how to use any transport. Previously, she always had arguments with her husband about preparing and waiting time to go to the mosque, since she was a passenger. That was why she wanted independence in carrying out religious obligations. She had even prayed, "If it is permissible Oh Allah, make it easy Oh Allah. I want a house that is near to a place of worship....It does not matter a mosque or a *surau* (a place of worship smaller than a mosque). Then, my heart was opened to move to *pondok*." In addition, Informant 7 asserted about working tirelessly to make a living when she was young and it was the right time for her to concentrate on religion. She had also saved a bit of money for her use and to help others. She too, felt a sense of responsibility to improve the *pondok* since she had been there since it was established.

I want to stay here because thinking of being old. I have resources Allah gave me... so, I do not have to search for a living anymore. We have done that since younger days until we are old.... Thus, I intend to do good things in worshipping God here. To spend the old age and to improve [the *pondok*] together here. Hence, this place will prosper.

Although her children invited her to stay with them, she refused to do so. As long as she still had the strength, she would remain in the *pondok* because she would be able to perform congregated prayers and attend religious classes as she wished.

Moreover, as for Informant 8, he owned an oil palm plantation and due to the tough nature of the work he discontinued. He perceived moving to *pondok* as beneficial and since he was also not that conversant on religious subjects, the move was the right choice to enable him to learn as a preparation for the Hereafter.

I am, in reality, there (the plantation), could not do any more work. Since I could no longer work, what should I do? Thus, we search for something. Since I did not know much, this is considered searching for the preparation for the Hereafter.

He also admitted that his children were too busy with their own family and none of them was interested to continue his work. On the other hand, for Informant 9, she had never joined any external activities and just kept with the ones inside the *pondok* because of her illness. Even back then, she did not participate in any programmes or gatherings because she and her husband had always had persistent health problems. She had been taking care of her husband long before his passing and her move. She deliberated that, "I did not have the chance to go... anywhere. Even if I want, do not go.... Back then too, I did not get because...we were not well, my husband also....

[I] want to leave [him] too, is difficult.... Leave just to work. Thus, I did not [go], stayed at home.” The arrangement continued for which she could not go far and join some activities even when she wished to. Nonetheless, she was grateful to be in the *pondok* because she could practice religion as her wish due to the close proximity of and access to the *surau*.

Quite a number of elders wanted to move to or were already in a *pondok* somewhere else like Kelantan, Perak or Pahang before moving there. However, since the distance could pose a problem of visitation for the children who were mostly lived in Klang Valley or the uncomfortable condition of the *pondok* itself, they decided to search somewhere nearer and relatively better which is Jeram *Pondok*. Informants 10, 12, 17, 19 and 20 had the experience of staying in other *pondoks* but only Informants 17, 19 and 20 came directly from the previous *pondok* as their last living arrangement before moving to Jeram. For example, Informant 17 described his experience of moving, “I asked for early retirement, after that I stayed in Kuantan in a rented house.... After that, I went to stay and learn in Temerloh (a *pondok* in Pahang), eight months. After that, I went to search for a place in *pondok*, I saw my sister was here, hence I ran to this place.”

All informants one way or another attributed their decision of moving to religion. It is either to practice religion or to have the opportunity to learn religion and subsequently for both reasons. It is understandable since *pondok* is a religiously value laden entity associated with educational institution rather than as an institution for the elderly. All the literature on *pondok* living irrespective of whom it caters for, young or old people, religion has always been the primary interest (Haliza & Shamsuddin 2008; Salma & Fuziah 1998; Arena 2002; Zainab et al. 2012; Nor Aisah & Novel 2015). Hence, all elders realised one way or another that their decision to move to *pondok* would entail religious commitment which is not a preconceived feature of other congregated living arrangements.

- **Relationship with Family Members and Friends**

Almost all informants in one way or another have a close relationship with either family members or friends or both. In terms of relationship with children, in order to avoid disagreement, the elders tried not to interfere with their lives especially when parenting style is involved. Informant 7 admitted the existence of a generation gap in terms of raising grandchildren. She was very strict when she raised her daughters, thus, there was the tendency to do the same with her grandchildren. However, her parenting approach was different from her daughters’. In order to avoid any rift between them and disharmony in the house, she chose *pondok* living.

I do not like to stay in my children’s house... if stay with them I could not get congregated prayers... to listen to talks, I could not get... freedom is different too with children. At the same time, we are old... I really do not prefer too modern people. I did not like it from back then... I controlled my daughters... when it comes to my grandchildren... my children did not do anything. I could not keep mum.... Mom this is the present era... [you] want to think of your era... I could not just ignore... want to advise.... When we say something, children talked back, we could not take it.... We feel disheartened.

In addition, the main reason of living in *pondok* for Informant 10 were not wanting to become a burden and to avoid carrying a burden of looking after grandchildren. She explained the apprehension and inconvenience of doing so.

If I were to stay at home, I did not have anything to do. When they gave birth, we have to take care of their children... I do not need to do that. We had struggled to raise them (her children)... We could not avoid (the children live around her house)... Mom, take care of this grandchild, she said. Hence, we are compelled to care for them. I have taken care of two, three grandchildren. I do not want anymore.

Additionally, she also mentioned that the children and grandchildren posed too many interruptions when she wanted to perform religious activities at home. She could not learn and practice religion at ease for which she had the freedom to do what she wanted on her own time in the *pondok*, "... it is just about learning, to improve, to learn. It is really about learning and not to do any work... If I did not come here, I have to take care (even great grandchildren). That was why I did not want. I ran here." In spite of all these, she was happy that her only daughter visited her regularly. As she was closer to her daughter than sons were, she deliberated that, "...daughter, my sons are quite quiet. They follows their wives (laughed). Only one I can depend on, the daughter... number three... The one who always repeatedly visits me, the daughter. Sons, always have something, once a while they come."

At first, Informant 4 was uncertain about staying in *pondok* but in order to get away from her stepchildren, she decided to do so. It was a difficult decision because she had been living with them for more than four decades from raising the young ones until having two of her own. Since a gap of more than thirty years between her and her husband, the relationships with the stepchildren had never been favourable. Basically, she was not in good terms with them. She even insinuated that they would not take care of her because she had never been considered as their mother especially by the older ones.

It is enjoyable staying here from the paddy field; it was not enjoyable at all... never stopped working... Income, after deducting here and there... covering a hole, opening another hole (always in debt)... I will do the covering (paying off debt) until I die... Said my son-in-law, Mom you had better stay in Jeram... If I stay there who is going to pay for my expenses? There will be your sustenance, he said... My husband's land, I did not hold the money... did not get the money... RM200 or RM2000, I did not hold... His children hold everything.

Furthermore, one of the rules for Jeram *Pondok* admission is fairly healthy elders, who could live independently. On the contrary, Informant 6 left her workplace because of her poor health and moved to the *pondok*. Fortunately, a friend she knew, also the employer's neighbour came to the rescue. At the same time, since she had served the family for more than two decades, thus they too helped her move to the *pondok*.

I was admitted and surely, they had to amputate my toes. So, my mind was frantic. Where to stay? Who could accommodate me? How about income? It was a headache, but I said

Allah gave me, my *ustazah* (female religious teacher)... I went to see her.... She said, do you want to stay in *pondok*? I said anywhere would do.... Bought, this [house], she bought for me... RM 23,000.

Even though she experience multiple health issues, she was still able to take care of herself and thus, accepted to be in the *pondok*. She did not want to disturb her siblings' families and be a burden to them. She considered this as an opportunity to start anew, and 'you reap what you sow' condition because she had always had good relationships with others and she received the assistance back in times of need. On a different note, she always talked about the uncomfortable or awkward relationship rather than a stressful one with her siblings and their families since she was single. As she was the eldest, she did not have time to get married because she was busy working to help her mother raising her other siblings. She gave up school, took care of them and gave them better education until they managed to be independent. When she resigned from her job, she stayed with and took care of her mother in the *pondok* until her passing. As she herself had many health problems, the bit of help that she received from the siblings was reluctantly accepted for example, staying in their house before doctor's appointments or when she was too sickly. However, if she could do it otherwise, she would try to find other avenues first instead of burdening them and feeling indebted afterwards. Nowadays, she had come to terms with herself and tried to use whatever time left for her constructively in the *pondok*.

A number of elderly informants lived alone before staying in the *pondok*. In the case of Informant 9, she left her house because she had no one to live with her and the son who decided to look after her passed away because of pneumonia. Her other children have their own work and family and many of her elderly neighbours too had already passed away. She said that,

... like me,... the neighbours... are gone, we stay alone, next door neighbour passed away, on this side passed away, in front passed away... better for me to be here.... Since I am alone, my husband passed away, children were not there (they had their own families).... I had one that I hoped, [he too] passed away.... That is why I moved here.... He really wanted to look after me...he even stopped working, to take care of me, he said, Mom did not have a friend to be with, he also was gone... pneumonia.

Previous studies showed that family relationships could be precarious and uncertain, nevertheless family members are the closest relationship that a person has especially when old age and dependency are concern (Angelini et al. 2011; Jorgensen et al. 2009; Nihtilä & Martikainen 2008; McCann et al. 2011; Wong & Verbrugge 2009). Having someone at home with them or having someone for that matter is important in ensuring that elders could remain at home. However, for most of these elderly informants moving to *pondok* was not about ill health, care or dependency, it is about personal choice and life satisfaction. In fact, almost all of them could have had stayed with any of their children if they wished to but they turned down the offer.

- **Forging new relationship**

Informant 2 decided to stay in the *pondok* because she could make more friends. She felt that she would be lonely if she stayed alone. Coincidentally, her daughter who used to study and at present

a teaching staff at the attached *tahfiz* school could stay together with her. It was just a matter of time that the daughter would leave her for higher education. However, since she was in the *pondok*, she was not that worried. Similarly, after the passing of her mother, Informant 3 could not stand to stay alone at home, “If I were to be at home, I would be crying alone...since I am here I was not reminded at all.” Thus, being surrounded by others especially those who had similar experience with them, prompted the elders to make the decision to move. Moreover, Informant 3 described the relationships between *pondok* friends that, “with friends, we are like family.... No [arguments].... Can consider close to everybody... the nearest (neighbours)... the [closest].” She felt that they were like her family and they looked after each other although she felt nearer to her neighbours in the *pondok*. Other residents would always ask of someone’s whereabouts or health, if the person did not turn up in the *surau* several times. Informant 1 explained how the *pondok* elders took care of each other. She said that,

“[We] have to take notice with next door neighbours. Two, three days did not go to the *surau*, two, three times (prayers), must realise the reason. The neighbour with diabetes, have to pay a visit, what can eat what cannot eat, we send (food). Cannot send sweet cakes, we ask, beef, chicken, anchovies (suitable diet). Just like this morning, fried rice did not put anything. Afraid that because of us giving, there are effects”.

Although the relationships between the elders are not always pleasant, the leadership and other residents would always help to keep the harmony in the *pondok*. Informant 7 mentioned that she was aware that many elderly residents came from different background and they needed time for adjustment. In the end, she revealed that there were arguments that were difficult to settle. However, other elderly residents would try to be mediators and settle the disagreement. They were always reminded of their reasons coming to *pondok* to learn, that necessitated good relationships with others. Informant 6 further elaborated that any disputes were not taken to heart and both parties immediately apologised after prayers or people made effort to reconcile amicably. “It is normal... that is why I said, after (prayer), we did not have old enemy. After that afternoon, this evening, if pray, we shake hands... that is all.... After that, if someone shows sour face, just greet....”

It seems that those people who the elderly informants talked about a lot apart from their family members are considered having the most influence in their relationships and well-being. It appears that the elders are more concern with the people, who are in their immediate contact and surrounding (Nihtilä & Martikainen 2008; McCann et al. 2011; Chen & Feeley 2014), in this case their *pondok* friends. In reality, their relationships are also based on kindness, generosity and mutual trust that encourage the cooperative environment in the *pondok*. The elders help one another to make sure that they could remain there for life because they understand the reasons for their move is to reside in a religious environment.

- **Exercise of Independence/ Autonomy and *Pondok***

Even though the elders were not concern about the issue of independence before moving to *pondok*, they were aware that they had to manage themselves there. Nevertheless, it was also found out that they were adamant about making their own decisions concerning their lives. Autonomy or freedom is viewed in terms of the elders’ ability to exercise free will. It could be related to certain factors

like financial ability and health condition. However, from the interviews, it was revealed that it was not just linked to objective and physical capacities. It was very much subjective, as a state of mind of being able to exert even the smallest competency of making a decision of what and when to carry out certain things. Therefore, autonomy is not about total freedom in doing what they want but it is more about making a choice of whether they want to do it even though it is out of necessity, for example asking help to do certain errands.

At the same time, autonomy is also seen as a negotiation with the surrounding environment and people whom the elders came into contact with in exercising certain power. It is not about exerting absolute power but a negotiative skill in getting what they want. Furthermore, in exercising autonomy the elders were very persistent in being independent especially in terms of performing their daily activities and their capacity for self-care. For the informants, they were contented that they were able to exercise a certain kind of freedom in the *pondok*. Informant 16 expressed her desire to have her last day in the *pondok* and she always insisted of voluntarily going to the surau early and coming back late. Asking about the rules and regulations in the *pondok*, she did not see them as restricting. She felt that she was free to do what she intended.

Furthermore, getting medical services (consultation, tests, prescription and check-up) is a problem to the elders who are not mobile and need constant medical attention. In most occasions, it is not because the elders did not have the financial support, but it is more about not wanting to disturb their children who actually were willing to do the task. It is also more of their own concern about needing to exercise their independence. Nevertheless, there is a genuine case of Informant 6, who was single. To her, getting an assistance from children was more about not wanting to be a burden, but getting assistance from siblings, relatives or friends could create an awkward situation. It is because of a different kind of relationship from a parent-child relationship, which is bound by filial piety. Then again, this challenge is not restricted to the elderly alone but to people from all walks of lives who face similar situations, sick, immobile or poor in their effort to exercise autonomy.

Exercising autonomy could be seen in terms of the simplest choice made in day-to-day affairs. Informant 15, the oldest resident in the *pondok* explained that,

Many said that [I am] still healthy [for my age].... [I have] always dreamt of staying here.... I ask, pray every time after prayer, give me healthy body Ya Allah...I want to stay here, want to recite Qur'an, want to read *kitab* (religious books), pray in congregation...ask from God.... As long as I am healthy I want to stay alone, but this is how it looks. [I am] staying alone. The house is not cleaned neatly. It is up to me (she laughed). This is how it looks.... If I were to stay with them, they cook I cannot just lie down. I later, came back from *usrah* (religious class), bum (sleep) first.... Once I am fresh, no more tiredness, I will [do what I want].

The ability to make a choice of whether to cook, lie down or sleep is crucial to her. It seems to be a simple decision, but the implication is independence or the ability to control her own actions. Even though most elderly residents are financially secured, there are those who receive financial assistance through *zakat*. In spite of receiving *zakat*, they were still able to exercise a freedom of choice in terms of how they used the financial aid. In most cases, regardless of needing it themselves, they still donate a small amount every week to the *pondok* apart from the fee and other

charities. This shows that living in *pondok* involves minimal financial implication. More importantly, this indicates that the elders are very concern more about the spiritual compensations rather than the physical rewards that they gain with money.

Being in a congregated living arrangement could be restrictive due to its structured and regulated management. A number of studies (Stadnyk et al. 2017; Shippee 2012; Salma & Fuziah 1998; Arena 2002) have pointed to this direction. At the same time, they also acknowledged the importance of autonomy for elders' well-being and the possibility of experiencing one in this arrangement. Nevertheless, the elders in *pondok* experienced more freedom due to their relatively healthier status and the management's readiness and cooperation to include and sometimes to let them make decisions regarding their well-being. However, its lack of facilities and services and its private ownership status, too much freedom afforded to them seems to create a kind of concern. Too many responsibilities taken by a few elders in taking care of not just themselves but their fellow elderly residents have to a certain extent generate a need for a more stable and planned services especially in handling health issues. Even though they seemed to be satisfied with the freedom experienced as individuals, there must be a mechanism to help them run the *pondok*. At present, it is still a workable system. However in the future, a certain form of formal assistance should be seriously considered.

- **Death and *Pondok***

In reality, the topic on death was not part of the researcher's attention, however, it had been brought up by all informants throughout the interview. They talked about it casually and death is not seen as something that they fear about. Possibly, they viewed it as something inevitable and being in *pondok* is seen as positive decision to prepare for the eventuality. All informants wished that they could have their last day in the *pondok* and they would not get too sick that they had to be sent home. Informant 9 talked about death. She said that she would not live long and hence, it would be better for her to learn religion in the *pondok*. "I think I would not live long, I left my house, it is better to be here. Here I could learn." In the case of Informant 16, she compared herself with her neighbours who were fetched back home by their children. They were not able to take care of themselves anymore. She realised that her time would come, but as for now, she would do what she could and wanted. "There are those who were not able anymore...the children took them in... I tomorrow will be like that... I want to pray...when I die I want to be in Jeram." Hence, she expressed her desire to have her final day in the *pondok*.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, the elderly informants gave various reasons about staying, but one thing for sure they came to like living in *pondok*. This is proven when the shortest duration of stay was 2½ years and all of them wished to live there until their passing. Decision to stay in *pondok* in most occasions involved a long process of intermittent thoughts and real action of the stay itself. This is related to the elders' long life and history that each of them went through to ultimately make the decision. Therefore, their decisions involved an interplay of myriad of information and events that they have experienced and individuals that they have come across in their lives. Simply put this is

a lived experience, a reflection of these elders of their thoughts in an attempt to explain their experience in *pondok* as a social reality. Furthermore, the understanding of elders' decision to move from the perspective of social actors' experience is essential to at least comprehend their needs in an effort of improving their lives in the society. *Pondok* living arrangement could give an alternative to the elders in the future for the responsibilities of taking care of the elders by the society and the government could be lessened (National Population and Family Development Board 2016; Mohd Fazari 2017). Although private sector has been making effort in providing services especially to the elders with debilitating illnesses, but they are expensive, scarce and scattered. (Mohd Fazari 2017). Government financial burden could be eased because most of *pondok* elders are financially stable or the expenses in the *pondok* are a bare minimum, but they seem to be happy and are well assured there. However, the societal assistance is still needed because the *pondok* is still dependent financially on the public contributions. Therefore, more conscious undertakings are still wanting especially in the policy making decisions that would affect their lives in the future.

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Nor Aisah Areff
PhD candidate,
School of Social, Development and Environmental Studies,
Faculty of Social Science and Humanities,
National University of Malaysia
norareff@yahoo.com

Novel Lyndon
Associate Professor,
School of Social, Development and Environmental Studies,
Faculty of Social Science and Humanities,
National University of Malaysia
novel@ukm.edu.my