



Sense of meaningfulness, sources of meaning, and self-evaluation of economically disadvantaged youth in Hong Kong: implications for youth development programs

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 July 2014

Received in revised form 18 October 2014

Accepted 20 October 2014

Available online 27 October 2014

Keywords:

Meaning in life

Sources of meaning

Self-concept

Youth

Low-income families

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the direction of youth development programs for economically disadvantaged youth by examining how their sense of meaningfulness and sources of meaning were associated with self-evaluation. Based on a survey design of 373 low-income Chinese adolescents recruited from five schools located in districts with the highest percentages of low-income households in Hong Kong, the results indicate a positive association between their sense of meaningfulness and self-evaluation. The findings also show that the intrinsic sources of meaning (individualism, collectivism, and self-transcendence) were positively associated with self-esteem. The results suggest that extrinsic aspirations were not a major source of positive self-evaluation of Hong Kong Chinese adolescents living in low-income families. On the contrary, they derived life meaning from various intrinsic sources. Their perception of the intrinsic sources of meaning and sense of meaningfulness worked jointly to affect their self-evaluation. Given the value of existential meaning in youth development under economic hardship, practitioners and educators should work with low-income adolescents' life process of awareness in order to bring them to the possibilities for richer and deeper experiences for personal development, relationship enhancement, community participation, and spirituality enrichment. They should also initiate comprehensive life skills training in all formal, nonformal and informal learning contexts.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a period of identity formation and self-development (Erikson, 1968; Harter, 2012). The key developmental task for adolescents revolves around answering such questions as who they are, what they believe in, and how they wish to live (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Fry, 1998; Shek, 2012). The answers to these questions often involve the exploration of meaning in life. While academia has increasingly recognized the importance of examining the patterns and impact of adolescents' ascription to existential meaning (e.g., Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2011; Damon et al., 2003; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010), this increasing trend is incompatible with the limited number of related studies that have involved economically disadvantaged youth. The endeavor to address this research area can be justified on the following grounds. First, in view of the current era of financial insecurity and fluctuating economic cycles, the issue of youth development under economic hardship has garnered much public

attention (Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). In Hong Kong, there are approximately 280,000 people aged from 6 to 24 living in low-income families, representing 24.36% of all persons in low-income households (The Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 2013). Second, while economic disadvantage has been found to adversely affect different areas of youth development (Reiss, 2013; Yoshikawa et al., 2012), previous research suggests that adolescents' perceived meaning in life is a significant protective factor on the individual level (Shek, 2001, 2012; Shek, Lam, Lam, & Tang, 2004; Shek, Lam, Lam, Tang, & Tsoi, 2003). Specifically, meaning in life has been found to provide the existential purpose, courage, and resilience needed in coping with adversity (Maddi, Khoshaba, Harvey, Fazel, & Resurreccion, 2011; Park & Folkman, 1997). Third, by studying meaning in life among adolescents experiencing economic disadvantage, we can understand how meaning in life shapes their identity formation and coping behavior, which offers valuable reference materials for developing effective prevention programs and policies that can benefit children and youth from low-income families.

Meaning in life can be defined as "the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment" (Reker, 2000, p. 41). The findings of accumulated research have demonstrated the importance of the pursuit of meaning in life for human functioning (such as having a sense of directedness) and well-being (such as achieving

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authentic happiness) (Debats, 1999; Morgan & Farsides, 2009; Schnell, 2009; Shek, 2012; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). As a construct, one of the important points of definitional clarity is to differentiate between its two distinct but inter-related components, namely sources of meaning and meaningfulness (Schnell, 2009). Sources of meaning can be understood as different value orientations of life from which meaning is derived (Schnell, 2009). Sense of meaningfulness refers to the extent to which people perceive their lives as significant, coherent, belonging, and directed (Schnell, 2009). Both sense of meaningfulness and sources of meaning are assumed to be beneficial to youth development. Theoretically, when young people are engaging in various sources of meaning that provide them with cognitive frameworks with which to set their life goals and plans, they will tend to perceive their lives as fulfilling these sources and experience this fulfillment as a feeling of contentment (Damon et al., 2003; Fry, 1998). As a result, their self-concept, life commitment, and life satisfaction will be enhanced (Brassai et al., 2011; Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). Nevertheless, empirical evidence on the relative strength of the effect of sense of meaningfulness and sources of meaning on the developmental outcomes of young people is largely lacking. Even though a recent study conducted by Garcini, Short, and Norwood (2013) indicates that an increased sense of meaning was positively associated with having diverse sources of meaning among university students, few attempts have been made to perform a comprehensive assessment of the interaction between sources of meaning and sense of meaningfulness in adolescent samples. An important research topic is thus to investigate adolescents' perceived meaning in life by explicating the roles of these two meaning-related variables. It is also worthwhile to extend the research to adolescents with economic disadvantage because meaning in life appears important in confronting deprived backgrounds and stressful circumstances (Shek et al., 2003, 2004).

In addition to meaning in life, this study also focuses on adolescents' self-evaluation. Previous studies showed that young people who lived under low socioeconomic conditions were more likely to exhibit negative self-evaluations, which might hamper their school performance, lead to disengagement from school activities, and result in poor mental health (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003; Jessor, Turbin, & Costa, 1998; Reiss, 2013; Yoshikawa et al., 2012; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). As argued by Harter (2012), self-evaluation is an essential construct in one's working model of self, which can be defined as how one consciously reflects upon and evaluates one's characteristics in a manner that he or she can verbalize. Tsang and Yip (2007) also pointed out that positive self-evaluations have a profound influence on identity formation and the resultant cognitions, emotions, and behavior. Based on an existential perspective of identity formation (Bilsker, 1992), the present study will demonstrate how adolescents' perceived meaning in life constructively influences two general dimensions of self-evaluations, namely self-esteem and self-efficacy. Self-esteem can be understood as an individual's appraisal of his or her own self-worth (Rosenberg, 1979). Self-efficacy refers to an individual's beliefs in one's capability to produce an intended effect or to make a difference (Bandura, 1997). These two dimensions of self-evaluation can be used to assess adolescents' identity status and development (Tsang, Hui, & Law, 2013). They have also been frequently emphasized as targets of psychosocial change in youth development and empowerment literature (Morton & Montgomery, 2013). While a series of studies conducted by Shek (2001, 2012) and Shek et al. (2003) have shown that perceived meaning in life was positively associated with self-esteem and self-efficacy among adolescents with economic disadvantage, how their perception of sources of meaning and sense of meaningfulness work jointly to affect their self-evaluation awaits further investigation.

The purpose of this article is to present research findings based on a survey of economically disadvantaged youth in Hong Kong, analyzing and demonstrating the differential contributions of sense of meaningfulness and sources of meaning on self-evaluation. Of particular interest are (1) whether there would be a positive association between sense of

meaningfulness and self-evaluation, (2) whether there would be a positive association between sources of meaning and self-evaluation, and (3) whether sources of meaning would moderate the relationship between sense of meaningfulness and self-evaluation. Findings of this study can contribute to the relative paucity of studies on the existential meaning and self-concept of Hong Kong adolescents living in low-income families. It is also anticipated that youth work practitioners and policymakers can draw implications from this study that can help promote positive youth development and life skills programs for this target group.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

This research seeks to examine the ways in which sense of meaningfulness and sources of meaning interact to affect the self-evaluation of economically disadvantaged youth. Our basic premise is that adolescents' sense of meaningfulness and perceived sources of meaning exert different main effects on self-evaluation. Furthermore, it is predicted that the individualistic source of meaning, collectivistic source of meaning, and self-transcendent source of meaning would moderate and amplify the impact of sense of meaningfulness on self-esteem and self-efficacy. The relationships between the variables are shown in Fig. 1. The literature and hypotheses supporting this premise are stated below.

2.1. Sense of meaningfulness and adolescent well-being

Frankl (1963) postulated that every person has a "will to meaning," an inborn drive to ascribe meaning to his or her life. Across the life span, adolescence is marked as the starting point of and arguably the most salient period in this meaning-making journey due to the enhanced abstract thinking ability and the preoccupation with self-definition (Erikson, 1968; Fry, 1998; Harter, 2012). Failure to discover meaning in life may result in an "existential vacuum," a state of emptiness and purposelessness. Empirical supports for the relationship between presence of meaning and psychological well-being are abundant. For instance, it was found that presence of meaning was positively associated with positive personality traits (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Schnell & Becker, 2006), satisfaction with self (Steger et al., 2008), and satisfaction with life (Schnell, 2009; Steger et al., 2008). Echoes could also be found in youth studies in Hong Kong. Findings suggested that sense of meaningfulness was positively related to adolescents' self-esteem, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction (Ho et al., 2010; Shek, 2001, 2012; Shek et al., 2003). However, it is important to note that apart from the studies undertaken by Shek, most of the existing research targeted college students and emerging adults rather than adolescents in general and disadvantaged youth in particular. Despite that, the extensive empirical supports for the positive association between sense of meaningfulness and psychological well-being can still shed light on the formulation of the first hypothesis of this study, which is stated as follows:

H1. Sense of meaningfulness will be positively associated with self-evaluation (self-esteem and self-efficacy) among the adolescents with economic disadvantage.

2.2. Sources of meaning and adolescent well-being

Frankl (1963) contended that only through the pursuit of things beyond self-interests can one achieve true meaningfulness. His stress on the superiority of self-transcendence has triggered research on levels of sources of meaning. Self-transcendence can be defined as the meaning orientation towards an immaterial, cosmic power or the life commitment to objectives beyond one's immediate needs (Schnell, 2009). Based on Frankl's argument, Reker (2000) proposed a four-level model of sources of meaning. Self-preoccupation is the lowest-level,

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