



Meaningful life and happiness: Perspective from Malaysian Youth[☆]



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ABSTRACT

As suicide rates among young people are rising globally, a mixed-mode research was conducted to investigate the perception of young people in Malaysia of what is meant by "Meaningful Life", and its association with "life is determined by myself". Two hundred and seventy young people aged 15–24 were recruited in this cross sectional survey. A thematic qualitative approach was used to analyze open-ended questions and the findings reveal that happiness, relationships with family members and friends and having specific goals in life were the top three contributors to meaningfulness in young peoples' lives. The Chi-square test for independence showed significant association between the coded variables and gender. Females perceived life to be meaningful when the people around them were happy and males perceived life to be meaningful when having good relationships with people around them, and both thought that having goals in life make it meaningful. The result also showed that there was a significant association for females between "life is determined by myself" and "meaningful life". Present findings suggested that meaningfulness in life is not a pure individual affect or personal construct but a relational concept; it is related to the meaningful activities in which young people engaged. Future researcher may further explore the relationship between youth perceptions of meaningful life and autonomous environments, among the immediate ecological systems of family, peers, and school surroundings.

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1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO; Hendin et al., 2008) has found that over the last 50 years, global suicide rates have increased by 60 percent. It is alarming that suicide is the second commonest cause of death among people aged 25–40 and the third commonest cause of death for young people whose age range is from 15 to 24 (Toussaint,

2006). The statistics in Malaysia are consistent with the report from WHO as the Malaysian Health Ministry has identified those aged 16–25 as being the highest suicide risk group. These two groups of young people, adolescents (15–19 years of age) and emerging adults (20–25 years of age) have been identified as being most vulnerable to suicide attempts (Hendin et al., 2008; Tam, Lee, Har, & Chan, 2011).

As a social issue, it has increasingly become a worrying sign for the society in Malaysia where previously traditional values, such as religion and family, viewed as protective factor against suicide, have weakened (Wong, 2011). Adnan (Wong, 2011) has used Durkheim's "Anomic" suicide framework to attribute the high suicide incidence among youths in Malaysia to a lack of regulating systems

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due to social change. According to this etiological framework it seems that young people are in need of the security of a protective and regulating external structure or system.

This concept of regulation seems to suggest that the young people in Malaysia are less autonomous, needing regulation by external norms (either by an authoritarian or authoritative governance or parenting systems) so that they will not feel lost in life. Malaysia is a multicultural society, with majority Malays being known as *bumiputras* (“sons of the soil”), other ethnic groups include Chinese and Indians. It was found that responsiveness-attributed parenting style like authoritative and permissive, but not authoritarian, seem to be beneficial (Goh, 2013). Moreover, due to advanced technologies that allow frequent exposure to a complexity of various cultures, the extent to which the influence of traditional culture has on young people in Malaysia remains unsure. Haque and Masuan (2002) had noted that the overall Malay culture is eclipsed by a strong religious influence. They view religion as ‘superior to scientific analysis’ and they abide firmly on the religious guidance, ‘do not question Islamic principles’ (Haque & Masuan, 2002, p. 278). Therefore it is assumed that there is an emphasis on life being determined by God or religion but in reality do young people prefer life to be determined by religion instead of self-determination?

Besides the predominant Malay culture, the traditional values for Malaysian Chinese and Indians emphasize collectivistic community as opposed to individual values. Chinese families mostly adopt Confucian values based on the learning of Yili Xue (the principles of righteousness for the society and nation; Deng, 2011). Chinese family oriented values are highly hierarchical, with a fixed role distribution. Normally young people in families have to show respect and filial piety, while autonomy, freedom or self-deterministic values might be secondary.

Similarly, traditional Indian culture emphasizes the Caste Systems and a deterministic approach towards life. However, according to Snyder (2002) it is of the utmost importance for human beings to feel in control of themselves, their life direction and also the environment around them. Snyder held that when people think they have the ability they begin, or continue movement on selected pathways so that that can achieve goals in life. This goal-directed theory gives hope and meanings to life. Self-determination theory (SDT) supports the notion that autonomy helps in the development of intrinsic motivation and thus enhances well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Empirical research showed that being able to exercise autonomy and be self-determined is related to higher level of satisfaction and optimal life experience in terms of happiness or well being (Bassi & Fave, 2012; Darwall, 2006; Knafo & Assor, 2007). It was also found that offering of choice (autonomy) will be more effective when the needs of our young people are met (Katz & Assor, 2007). However, SDT has been developed from a western society, and the psychological needs posit by SDT (Robak & Nagda, 2011) may not be sufficiently describe the needs of Malaysian youths.

What makes so many of our young people want to end their lives? Do they feel hopeless and incapable of controlling or navigating their lives? Or are they so unhappy or take so little satisfaction in life that they prefer to die? It

is important to discover what young people consider to be worthwhile and meaningful in life. The views of our young people, who are still adolescent or just emerging into young adulthood, are important to help researchers to understand their internal landscape of perception, feelings and thinking.

1.1. The meaning of life

Meaning of life was understood as “the sense made of, and significance felt regarding the nature of one’s being and existence” (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006, p. 81). Baumeister and Vohs (2002) believed that the meaning of life related to a sense of purpose, value, efficacy and self-worth. The meaning created or discovered in life gives a sense of coherence, Edwards (2007) described as sense of order, reason for existence, and the purpose in life can be understood as a mission in life. The construct of meaning-in-life is frequently translated as the pursuing of goals.

Viktor Frankl, the founder of existential logotherapy, a Holocaust survivor, suggests that searching for meaning is fundamental for human existence (1963). For Frankl, “the will to meaning” is quite similar to the spiritual dimension and he holds that meaning is a motivation of life and is a fundamental part of the make-up of human being. Frankl believed that meaning is discovered when man is able to self-transcend and a meaningfulness life can be attained by directing one’s energy towards others instead of focusing on oneself. This is very different from Freud’s concept that focuses on “pleasure” (sensation of happiness).

Their concept of meaningfulness in life is multi-dimensional. Feldman (2005) studied hope and the meaningful life and he found that there were correlations found between the two variables. Brassai, Piko and Steger (2012) held that searching for meaning in life help to promote the development of adolescents’ identity. Since the development of identity is an important task during this critical stage, therefore the search for a meaningful life for young people is of the utmost importance. Failing to do so will be detrimental for young people. This issue might be relevant to the current increased suicide incidences. Many researchers found that achieving this “meaningfulness of life” is related to “positive” aspects of life (“meaningfulness of life” which almost equals Gratitude, “worthy of honor and celebration” and “sustainable” quality of life) human being will be able to sustain even “enduring in the face of suffering and death” (Mainey, 2003).

1.2. Meaningful life and happiness

According to Andy Hines (Burgess, n.d.), a director of the Custom Project for social Technologies, a leading research and consulting firm in USA, teenagers often pursue happiness with three distinctive purposes, namely, “the pleasure of the moment, relationships with family and friends, and the long term search for meaning and purpose”. This portrays that teenagers’ pursuit of happiness depends not only on transient happy feelings, but that they are also intentionally goal-oriented. For teenagers, goals with purpose and meaning will bring happiness. In order to make an evaluation or a judgement whether a life is meaningful or worth

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