



Loneliness, the search for meaning, and the psychological well-being of economically disadvantaged Chinese adolescents living in Hong Kong: Implications for life skills development programs

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ABSTRACT

Assuming a relational basis of meaning-making, we examined ways in which the search for meaning and loneliness relate to the psychological well-being of economically disadvantaged adolescents. Using a survey with a sample of 366 economically disadvantaged adolescents and 304 non-economically disadvantaged adolescents recruited from 10 schools in Hong Kong, we observed that the search for meaning had a positive association with self-esteem, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction only among economically disadvantaged adolescents, whereas loneliness had a negative association with those indicators of psychological well-being in the entire sample. We also identified an interaction effect between the search for meaning and loneliness on life satisfaction among economically disadvantaged adolescents. Our results partially supported our hypotheses by showing that loneliness and the search for meaning jointly affected the development of economically disadvantaged adolescents, whereas loneliness was a more significant predictor than the search for meaning. Given such functions of the search for meaning and sense of belongingness in the development of young people amid economic hardship, practitioners and educators should initiate meaning- and relationship-oriented life skills programs in the formal and non-formal learning contexts, as well as facilitate young people's search for meaning in the informal learning context.

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1. Introduction

The search for meaning in life ranks among the most significant developmental issues for adolescents, whose stage in life almost always involves identity formation (Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). The search for meaning is also an important protective factor in school-to-work transitions of young people (Fry, 1998; To & Sung, 2016; Yuen & Yau, 2015). Although researchers have begun to study the patterns and impacts of adolescents' explorations of meaning in life, very few studies have addressed youth with economic disadvantages. However, such research is essential, for economic disadvantage creates an ecological context that imposes adverse effects on the development of young people and their transition to adulthood (Berzin & De Marco, 2010). Furthermore, economic disadvantages can induce feelings of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and identity confusion among young people, which can in turn prompt maladjustment and risk-taking behavior (Phillips & Pittman, 2003; Shek & Tsui, 2013). Extensions of recent investigations of adolescents' search for meaning in life into youth with economic disadvantage can address part of that gap in the research.

Along with the search for meaning, in this study we focused on economically disadvantaged youths' sense of loneliness. Accumulated research results have shown that young people who grow up under unfavorable socioeconomic conditions are more likely to experience social isolation and loneliness (Chen & Chung, 2007), which relates to negative self-evaluation, mental health problems, and antisocial behavior (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). Other than limited opportunities and resources, poor adolescents often encounter difficulties in building social networks and enhancing social capital (Ngai et al., 2013). Some even exclude themselves from social interactions with peers due to feelings of inferiority (Phillips & Pittman, 2003), which can give way to strong sense of loneliness. However, although Western literature has shown the negative influence of loneliness on adolescents' well-being, very few studies have addressed the ways in which loneliness affects Chinese adolescents in general and those with economic disadvantages in particular.

Whereas previous studies have focused on the search for meaning and the sense of loneliness separately in terms of their associations with psychological well-being, the possible primary and interaction effects of the two variables remain mostly unknown. This research gap needs closure, particularly in Chinese culture. Harter (2012) pointed out that while the Western conception of self emphasizes the autonomous pursuit of personal goals and self-differentiation, its East Asian

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counterpart highlights the strengthening of social ties and the achievement of social harmony. Based on a relational conception of self, Chinese people's explorations and reflections regarding human existence presumably arise from their perceived social relationships. Arguably, different levels of loneliness thus strengthen or weaken any positive outcome of the search for meaning. A salient topic for researchers is thus to investigate how Chinese economically disadvantaged adolescents' search for meaning and sense of loneliness interact to affect their psychological well-being. Of particular interest are (1) whether a strong association exists between the search for meaning and psychological well-being, (2) whether a strong association exists between loneliness and psychological well-being, and (3) whether loneliness can moderate the association between the search for meaning and psychological well-being. A comparison of research findings on those associations in a sample of economically disadvantaged adolescents with those in a sample of non-economically disadvantaged adolescents can also yield useful ideas about the development of life skills programs that are more effective and responsive to the needs of youth who face economic hardships.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. The search for meaning and psychological well-being

Search for meaning in life refers to "the strength, intensity, and activity of people's desire and efforts to establish and/or augment their understanding of the meaning, significance, and purpose of their lives" (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008, p. 200). As a construct, a crucial point of conceptual clarity is to differentiate the search for meaning from the construct of *presence of meaning in life*, or "the degree to which people experience their lives as comprehensible and significant, and feel a sense of purpose or mission in their lives that transcends the mundane concerns of daily life" (Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, & Otake, 2008, p. 661). On the whole, research findings about those two aspects of meaning in life have indicated that the presence of meaning and the search for meaning are two distinct but modestly related constructs (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Steger, Kashdan, et al., 2008). Nevertheless, empirical evidence on the relationship between the constructs remains mixed. Whereas numerous studies conducted in Western societies (e.g., the United States and Australia) have indicated an inverse relationship between the presence of meaning and the search for meaning (e.g., Cohen & Cairns, 2012; Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010; Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Kashdan, et al., 2008; Steger, Kawabata, et al., 2008), several studies conducted in China and Japan have shown a positive relationship between them (Chan, 2014; Liu & Gan, 2010; Steger, Kawabata, et al., 2008). One factor that might account for such diverse research findings is culture's influence on how people perceive meaning in life. According to Steger, Kawabata, et al. (2008), the presence of meaning and the search for meaning are not separate in East Asian culture, but addressed together from the holistic dialectical perspective on the nature of life. Holistically and dialectically oriented people harmonize oppositional aspects and thus view the search and presence of meaning as cyclically intertwined, as well as accept that presence of meaning is obtainable with continuous efforts to search for it (Chan, 2014; Steger, Kawabata, et al., 2008). Such thinking can explain why the search for meaning and the presence of meaning correlate positively in the findings of studies conducted among East Asian people.

Given diverse findings on the relationship between the presence of meaning and the search for meaning in Western and non-Western societies, it is logical to predict different directions of associations between the search for meaning and the components of psychological well-being in different cultures. For instance, in samples of people in the United States, the search for meaning showed a negative association with life satisfaction, purpose in life, and subjective happiness, but a positive one with negative emotions (Steger, Kashdan, et al., 2008; Steger, Kawabata, et al., 2008). However, in samples of Chinese and

Japanese people, the search for meaning corresponded positively with future-oriented coping, positive affect, and purpose in life (Liu & Gan, 2010; Steger, Kawabata, et al., 2008). Although most of those studies targeted college students instead of adolescents in general and economically disadvantaged youth in particular, empirical evidence supporting the positive association between the search for meaning and psychological well-being in East Asian samples can shed light on the formulation of our first hypothesis:

H1. The search for meaning will positively associate with the psychological well-being of Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong with economic disadvantages.

Apart from adopting a cultural perspective to explain the different directions of associations between the search for meaning and psychological well-being, researchers have investigated the potential influence of the presence of meaning on the search for meaning and psychological well-being (Cohen & Cairns, 2012; Park et al., 2010). Park et al. (2010) indicated that whereas the search for meaning had an overall negative relationship with psychological well-being, it can also lead to greater life satisfaction, increased happiness, and less depression among people who already exhibited substantial meaning in their lives. Cohen and Cairns (2012) also confirmed the negative relationship between the search for meaning and subjective well-being, as well as showed the moderating effect that presence of meaning had on happiness scores when individuals were searching for meaning. Such findings support the argument that the search for meaning generates positive life outcomes among people who perceive their lives as meaningful (Park et al., 2010). Given those findings, to test the actual influence of the search for meaning on psychological well-being, researchers should exclude presence of meaning's possible influence from data analysis.

2.2. Loneliness and psychological well-being

Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 497) postulated that every person has "a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships." Failure to do so can induce a state of loneliness, characterized by sad or aching feelings of emotional and social isolation (MacEvoy, Weeks, & Asher, 2011). Adolescence is a particularly sensitive period in which people encounter loneliness (MacEvoy et al., 2011), as adolescents face the significant developmental task of preparing to separate from their parents, learn to build intimate relationships, and struggle for autonomy and individuation, which often pave the way to greater awareness of the self as separate and, hence, of existential and other forms of loneliness (Fry, 1998). Since loneliness relates strongly to perceived separateness or isolation of the self, it is unsurprising to find considerable empirical support for negative relationships between loneliness and psychological well-being, including evidence from self-evaluation (Sippola & Bukowski, 1999) and psychological health data (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). Although people of different socioeconomic backgrounds experience loneliness, it is understandable that those living in low-income families are at a greater risk of suffering from it (Chen & Chung, 2007; Phillips & Pittman, 2003). Our second hypothesis is thus that:

H2. Loneliness will negatively associate with the psychological well-being of Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong with economic disadvantages.

2.3. The potential moderating effect of loneliness on the search for meaning

As a third aspect of our study, we sought to examine the interaction between the search for meaning and the sense of loneliness on low-income adolescents' psychological well-being. We premised this

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