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Family values and psychological distress among adolescents. Is there any association? A comparison study in Malaysia.

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Abstract

Background: Adolescence is a critical transition phase in the life of an individual to be independent and to mould their own identity. Family dynamic is the most influential factor in adolescent mental health. Objectives. This research aimed to analyse the differences of family values, psychological distress and its associated adolescents living in a long-term residential care as compared to adolescents in an ordinary school.

Method: A cross-sectional study was carried out with 150 respondents using clustered random sampling. The Asian Family Characteristics Scale was used to assess the family values. The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale was used to measure the mental state of the respondents.

Results: Children in long-term residential care showed significantly lower family values in all domains and higher in levels of stress, anxiety, depression. Findings show that there is significant association between psychological distress and family values.

Conclusion: Family dynamic has a strong ramification to behavioural and psychological aspects of adolescents. Preventive measures and policy maker should be advocated in order to minimize psychological problems among adolescence in this country.

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1. Introduction

Components of family dynamic include the patterns of relating, interaction between family members, cohesion, conflict resolution, and expression. (Becvar & Becvar, 2013) The issue regarding association of family characteristics and adolescent's well-being has been widely documented.

Past studies have demonstrated a clear association between adolescent distress and disruption to family values. According to many studies, they reported that the risk factors that may lead to development of psychological distress in adolescents include variation in family characteristics such as family structure, family processes and also household income. For example, psychological distress in adolescents can be correlated

with divorce and separation (Myklestad, Røysamb, Tambs, & epidemiology, 2012), lower socio-economic class (Frigerio et al., 2009) and lower family income. (Ijeoma, Omolara, Oluwatosin, & Counselling, 2016; Oshodi, Aina, & Onajole, 2010)

Adolescents are susceptible to development of psychological distress; as at this age there are times when they are exposed to strain and stress due to a number of problems. (Landazabal, 2006) In a study conducted by Lahey (Lahey, 2009), he described psychological distress as emotional state or mood which has been characterized by feeling of tension, anxiety, irritability, sadness and self-consciousness. According to Garaigordobil (Landazabal, 2006), the distresses which are commonly comprised of depression or anxiety occur as adolescents struggle to be independent from parents and strive to be included in the community. It can also be due to poor skill in the process of learning the real world. (Landazabal, 2006).

There are various possible causes of psychological distress among adolescents. The developmental outcomes in adolescents with single and social-parent families was far worse than in two biological-parent families (Amato, 2006; Wood, Goesling, & Avellar, 2007). Recent analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that single and social-parent family structure is adversely associated with emotional adjustment, depression, adolescent delinquency, cognitive skills, school engagement, school problems, and grade point average. (Brown, 2006; Cavanagh, 2008; Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Manning, Lamb, & Family, 2003)

The next theme is conflict and centric. Conflict in the family is not a rare thing and it is normal to have some conflicts. However, it depends on how we manage the conflict. If the conflict was successfully solved by all members of the family in a good way and without arguing, it shows that the family has a good value. The last theme is about religiosity and traditional practice. The implementation of religion in the family is very important as it is a standard concept among all religions to be a good person and behave in a respectable way.

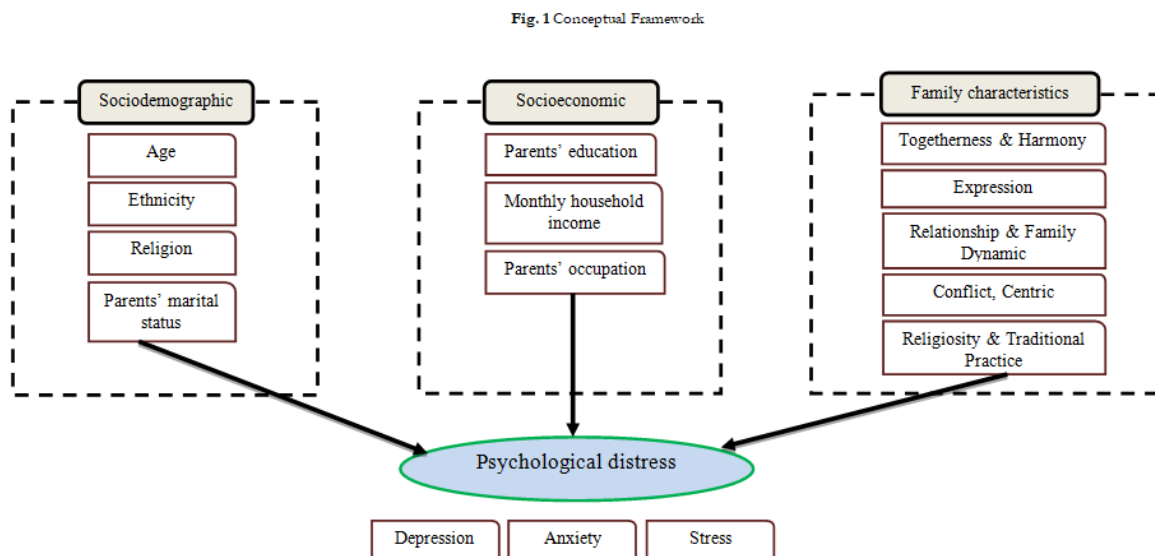
In this research, we aimed to assess the association between psychological well-being and family characteristics among adolescents in two different settings. Although family role has been proven to be one of the important factors contributing to poor mental health, however not much research has truly explored its role in mediating mental health in adolescent. In this current research, we specially looked into family function encompasses of cohesion, expression, conflict, dynamic and religiosity and their association with adolescent's mental health.

We hope this would be a preliminary finding to find the association of poor family values to psychological impacts among adolescents. This could cast some light to find the causes of increasing trend of misconduct in this range of age was significantly contributed by underlying poor mental health. Eventually this study could help the nation to resolve the issue.

Some of the aspects such as religion and culture were not been studied widely. We would like emphasize that family values are different between Western and Asian cultures and that’s why we are using Asian Family Scale questionnaire which is more competent with the culture of Asian people.

The objectives of this study are to analyze the differences of family values and compare the level of psychological distress between 2 groups of adolescents and to determine the associated factors of psychological distress among children of a long-term residential care.

Fig. 1 Association between sociodemographic, socioeconomic and family characteristics with psychological distress



2. Methodology

2.1 Study population

This is a cross sectional study which was carried out from July to September 2017 at Asrama Budak Laki-Laki Tun Abdul Aziz (ABLTA) and SMK Paya Rumput (SMKPR). Both schools are situated in Melaka. This study was approved by the International

Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) Research Ethics Committee. (Reference no IREC 2017-044).

ABLTAA is a male boarding school occupied by a total of 60 adolescents from 13 to 17 years old. Most of them suffer from difficult family problems such as being abandoned, involved in child abuse or are under supervision of Department of Welfare Melaka due to poor family economic conditions. All of the occupants do not live with their families and almost half of them have not met their parents or families for years. We included all the adolescents from ABLTAA aged older than 13 years old. In term of racial distribution, 85% of students were Malay, while 10% were Chinese and 5% others. The parents of the students were widely distributed from being a government employee, to some of the parents are unable to work due to imprisonment or disability with income ranged from (RM 0 to RM10 000). Most of the occupants have been living in hostel for 3 months to 4 years.

A total of 277 male students participated from SMKPR which is a secondary school consisting of approximately 800 students from Form 1 to 5 (Age range from 13 years old to 17 years old). All of the participant were living with their parents or grandparents.

2.2 Sampling Method

Based on permission given by Melaka educational Department, the study could only conducted among form 1, 2 and 4 students. Form 3 and 5 are reserved as they were in the midst of landmark examinations for Form 3 and 5. We included all students in form 1, 2 and 3 and from ABLTAA. The respondents were given the questionnaire earlier to get the consent from their parent or guardian as they are under age respondents. The respondents and their parent or guardian who agreed to participate in this survey had signed a written consent form. They were informed regarding the study objectives and confidentiality that the information.

Inclusion criteria for participation were those able to understand and communicate in Malay or English. All male adolescents age between 13 to 17 years old. The exclusion criteria were female adolescents, and all male adolescents age below 13 years old and above 17 years old.

The total number of male students in form one, two and four in both SMKPR and ABLTAA were 316. Based on sample size calculated, 150 students were chosen randomly by using clustered random sampling technique. 150 students were picked from two selected institutions which participated in this study. Calculation of sample size was based on estimated prevalence rate of adolescent psychological distress of 15% conducted by Taiwo.(Taiwo, 2011) There were 60 students in

RBLTAA. All students of Form 1,2 and 4 are chosen to participate and all 25 students of Form 3 and 5 are totally excluded.

2.3 Study Instruments

In this study, psychological distress of the respondents was measured by using the validated Malay version of Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS 21) (Musa.R 2011) to assess the levels of depression, anxiety and depression symptoms. This screening and outcome measure reflects the experience of negative thoughts of the person over the period of 7 days. The validated Malay version of DASS-21 (Musa.R 2007) which was a 21-item instrument designed to measure the three-related negative emotional symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress and it is validated with Cronbach's alpha 0.84, 0.74 and 0.79 respectively. This scale has been designed and validated locally.

The family characteristics of the respondents in this study is assessed by using the validated Malay version of the Asian Family Characteristics Scale (AFCS) (Musa, 2013). The questionnaire is designed specifically for Asian family and it is validated locally with Cronbach's alpha 0.9.(MA & MA, 2015) This scale has 5 domains which consists of togetherness and harmony, expression, relationship and family dynamic, conflict centric and religiosity and traditional practice. In each domain, there are 6 items. In order to get the total scores of all domains, the scores need to be sum up from each item in that respective domain. The total scores will reflect the family categories, in which, scores less than 75 shows low family value, scores from 76 to 99 is normal and scores more than 100 shows high family value which means good.

There are several themes that being focusing in this research in order to assess the family value of the adolescent. The first theme is regarding togetherness and harmony. Togetherness can be evaluated by assessing the cooperation between the family members in doing work or in solving a problem. The harmony will come when all the family members respect each other and sharing similar value which create sense of bonding between the family members.

Next, we also will focus on the theme of expression. In this research, the expression is the understanding of others' feeling and how they react upon a problem that arises in the family. The theme of relationship and family dynamics will also be emphasized in this research. A good relationship between the family members will create good atmosphere among them. Good relationship can be showed by having respect to each other, cares about family members and lend a hand to needy family members.

2.4 Statistical Analysis

Data was analysed by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Windows version 24.0 (SPSS). Most of the comparisons such as demographic variables and family values between the 2 groups were analysed by using Chi-square test. We used 95% confident interval and p value of < 0.05 as statistically significant.

3. Results

Sociodemographic profile of the subjects.

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics between adolescents of ABLAA and SMKPR.

| | ABLAA | SMKPR | p-value |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|
| | No (%) | No (%) | |
| Age | 13.9 (3.73)* | 13.7 (3.71)* | 0.83 |
| Ethnicity | | | |
| Malay | 32 (91.4) | 94 (81.7) | 0.15# |
| Non-Malay | 3(8.6) | 21 (18.3) | |
| Religion | | | |
| Muslim | 33 (94.3) | 94 (81.7) | 0.05# |
| Non-Muslim | 2 (5.7) | 21 (18.3) | |
| Parent's marital status | | | |
| Married | 9 (25.7) | 109 (94.8) | 0.01# |
| Divorced/ Single parent | 26 (74.3) | 6 (5.2) | |
| Father's occupational status | | | |
| Government employee | 7 (20.0) | 40 (34.8) | 0.75# |
| Non-government employee | 17 (48.6) | 61 (53.0) | |
| Retired/ | 11 (31.4) | 14 (12.2) | |
| Unemployed | | | |
| Father's education level | | | |
| Primary education | 6 (17.1) | 7 (6.1) | 0.10# |
| Secondary education | 18 (51.4) | 66 (57.4) | |
| University level | 11 (31.5) | 42 (36.5) | |
| Mother's occupational status | | | |
| Government employee | 4 (11.5) | 28 (24.3) | 0.65# |
| Non-government employee | 20 (57.1) | 24 (20.9) | |
| Retired/ Housewife/ | 11 (31.4) | 63 (54.8) | |
| Unemployed | | | |
| Mother's education level | | | |
| Primary education | 5 (14.3) | 8 (7.0) | 0.11# |
| Secondary education | 21 (60.0) | 70 (60.8) | |
| University level | 9 (25.7) | 37 (32.2) | |
| Monthly household income | | | |
| Low-income (RM < 3000 per | 20 (57.1) | 49 (42.7) | 0.01# |

month)
 Middle & High-income 5 (14.3) 66 (57.3)

* Mean (SD)

Chi-square

Table 1 shows the sociodemographic and socioeconomic profile of 35 respondents from RBLTAA and 115 respondents from SMKPR with median age of about 14 years old. Majority in both groups were Malay (91.4% and 81.7% respectively). Majority of them were Muslim (94.3% and 81.7% respectively). For respondents in RBLTAA, more than half of their parents were divorced or single parent (74.3%). Meanwhile, parents' marital status for respondents in SMKPR were mainly married (94.8%). Majority of fathers' occupational status of respondents are non-government employee which are 48.6% and 53.0% respectively. For mothers' occupational status, there were more in non-government sector (57.1%) in RBLTAA and for SMKPR, most of them were either retired or housewife or unemployed (54.8%). Most of the parents of respondents had up to secondary educational level for both RBLTAA and SMKPR. Low income group was predominant among respondents which 57.1% and 42.7% respectively followed by high-income group and middle income group. The only variables statistically different are ABLTAA has more parents with divorce or single status and lower income.

Table 2 Comparison RBLTAA and SMKPR on family characteristics according to domains.

| Total score of values on; | RBLTAA No (%) | SMKPR No (%) | p-value |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Togetherness and harmony | | | |
| Low | 15 (42.9) | 20 (17.4) | 0.003 |
| Normal | 20 (57.1) | 95 (82.6) | |
| Expression | | | |
| Low | 21 (60) | 29 (25.2) | 0.001 |
| Normal | 14 (40) | 86 (74.8) | |
| Relationship and family dynamic | | | |
| Low | 10 (28.6) | 8 (7.0) | 0.001 |
| Normal | 25 (71.4) | 107 (93.0) | |
| Conflict and centric | | | |
| Low | 15 (42.9) | 24 (20.1) | 0.012 |
| Normal | 20 (57.1) | 91 (79.1) | |
| Religiosity and traditional practice | | | |
| Low | 13 (37.1) | 13(11.3) | 0.001 |
| Normal | 22 (62.9) | 102 (88.7) | |

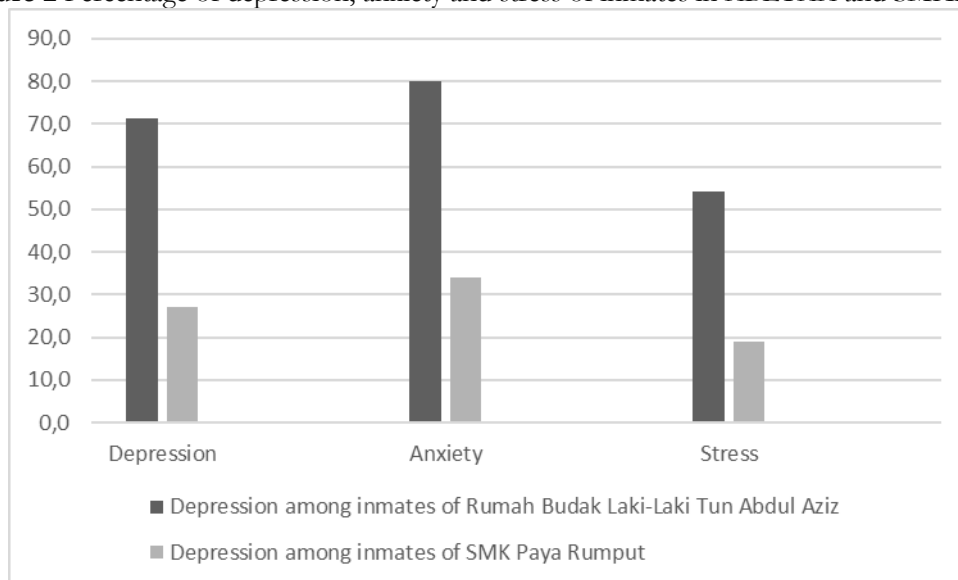
All analyses are using Chi-square

Table 2 shows that the prevalence of low family values in all domains are higher in students from RBLTAA compared to students from SMKPR (p -values < 0.05).

Prevalence of Psychological Distress among Adolescents

Percentage of depression, anxiety and stress of inmates in ABLTAA and SMKPR

Figure 2 Percentage of depression, anxiety and stress of inmates in ABLTAA and SMKPR



Based on Figure 2, the prevalence of depression, anxiety and stress were significantly higher among the inmates of RBLTAA compared to adolescents in SMKPR ($p < 0.05$, means comparison).

Factors Influencing Psychological Distress among Adolescents

Table 3 shows association of sociodemographic, socioeconomic and family values with psychological distress. No significant difference was observed of ethnicity, religion, both father’s and mother’s educational level, father’s occupational status with psychological distress. It shows that there is association between socioeconomic and family value with psychological distress. Those whom their parents are divorced and those whom one of their parents died are significantly associated with depression, anxiety and stress compared to those whom their parents are still married. ($p = 0.05$ for each respectively). The percentage of depression, anxiety and stress were significantly higher ($p < .005$, $p < .007$, and $p < .035$ respectively) among those whom their mother are working as non-government employees compared to those whom their mothers are working in government sector or unemployed, housewife or retired. Apart from that, 44.9% of those with depression are significantly associated with family with low income ($p < .012$) compared to those with middle and high family income (36.7% and 17.1%) of depression rate. Furthermore, those with low family value were significantly associated with depression, anxiety and stress ($p < .05$) compared with those with normal and high family value. However, there were no significant difference was observed of ethnicity, religion, both father’s and mother’s educational level, father’s occupational status with psychological distress.

Table 3 Univariate Analysis of Sociodemographic, Socioeconomic and Family Value with Psychological Distress

| | Depression | | p-value | Anxiety | | p-value | Stress | | p-value |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|
| | Yes N (%) | No N (%) | | Yes N (%) | No N (%) | | Yes N (%) | No N (%) | |
| Ethnicity | | | | | | | | | |
| Malay | 45 (35.7) | 81 (64.3) | 0.348 | 58 (46.0) | 68 (54.0) | 0.441 | 36 (28.6) | 90 (71.4) | 0.436 |
| Non-Malay | 11 (45.8) | 13 (54.2) | | 9 (37.5) | 15 (62.5) | | 5 (20.8) | 19 (79.2) | |
| Religion | | | | | | | | | |
| Muslim | 45 (35.4) | 82 (64.6) | 0.258 | 58 (45.7) | 69 (54.3) | 0.562 | 36 (28.3) | 91 (71.7) | 0.513 |
| Non-Muslim | 11 (47.8) | 12 (52.2) | | 9 (39.1) | 14 (60.9) | | 5 (21.7) | 18 (78.3) | |
| Parent's marital status | | | | | | | | | |
| Married | 32 (27.1) | 86 (72.9) | 0.001* | 42 (35.6) | 76 (64.4) | 0.001* | 24 (20.3) | 94 (79.7) | 0.001* |
| Divorced/ Single parent | 24 (75.0) | 8 (25.0) | | 25 (78.1) | 7 (21.9) | | 17 (53.1) | 15 (46.9) | |
| Father's occupational status | | | | | | | | | |
| Government employee | 20 (42.6) | 27 (57.4) | 0.377 | 21 (44.7) | 26 (55.3) | 0.698 | 10 (21.3) | 37 (78.7) | 0.235 |
| Non-government employee | 25 (32.1) | 53 (67.9) | | 33 (42.3) | 45 (57.7) | | 21 (26.9) | 57 (73.1) | |
| Retired/ Unemployed | 11 (44.0) | 14 (56.0) | | 13 (52.0) | 12 (48.0) | | 10 (40.0) | 15 (60.0) | |

Father's educational level

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-------|-----------|-----------|-------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| No studies/ Primary education | 6 (46.2) | 7 (53.8) | 0.056 | 7 (53.8) | 6 (46.2) | 0.716 | 4 (30.8) | 9 (69.2) | 0.839 |
| Secondary education | 37 (44.0) | 47 (56.0) | | 38 (45.2) | 46 (54.8) | | 24 (28.6) | 60 (71.4) | |
| University level | 13 (24.5) | 40 (75.5) | | 22 (41.5) | 31 (58.5) | | 13 (24.5) | 40 (75.5) | |

Mother's occupational status

| | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-----------|---------------|
| Government employee | 11 (34.4) | 21 (65.6) | 0.005* | 14 (43.7) | 18 (56.3) | 0.007* | 9 (28.1) | 23 (71.9) | 0.035* |
| Non-government employee | 25 (56.8) | 19 (43.2) | | 28 (63.6) | 16 (36.4) | | 18 (40.9) | 26 (59.1) | |
| Retired/ Housewife/ Unemployed | 20 (27.0) | 54 (73.0) | | 25 (33.8) | 49 (66.2) | | 14 (18.9) | 60 (81.1) | |

Mother's educational level

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-------|-----------|-----------|-------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| No studies/ Primary education | 8 (61.5) | 5 (38.5) | 0.123 | 7 (53.8) | 6 (46.2) | 0.625 | 5 (38.5) | 8 (61.5) | 0.599 |
| Secondary education | 34 (37.4) | 57 (62.6) | | 38 (41.8) | 53 (58.2) | | 23 (25.3) | 68 (74.7) | |
| University level | 14 (30.4) | 32 (69.6) | | 22 (47.8) | 24 (52.2) | | 13 (28.3) | 33 (71.7) | |

3. Discussion

Based on the results, most parents of long-term residential care adolescents were divorced or single parent. Most of them were from low income group. The levels of depression anxiety and stress were also higher among adolescents of the long-term residential care.

Analyses of this study revealed that there are 3 significant variables associated to high depression, anxiety and stress levels. The 3 variables are adolescents with divorced or single parents, non-government employee mothers and those with low family values based on total scores of Asian Family Characteristics Scale. .

Higher levels of psychological distress among divorced and single parents is consistent in studies done by Fabricius et al (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007) and Barrett et al (Barrett, Turner, & Behavior, 2005). They also reveal that those from family with single parents had higher levels of depressive symptoms. Other studies also found that children from divorced families are at a higher risk for a variety of emotional and behavioral concerns such as anxiety and depression.(Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Myklestad et al., 2012) Children with inadequate parenting or physically absence may develop a particular type of distress which is known as emotional insecurity. The emotional insecurity involves the lack of parental love and inability to care for them.(Davies & Cummings, 1994; Musa, 2013)

Based on the results, the significant socioeconomic variables associated with high depressive, anxiety and stress levels are adolescents with mothers' occupational status and low family income. While previous studies showed that there was no significant association between paternal employment status and adolescent mental health problem. (Contoyannis & Li, 2013; Kachi, Abe, Ando, Kawada, & Psychiatry, 2017)

We believe that the type of maternal occupation could be mediated by the family income. However, only depression was significantly associated with family with low income. Thus, it can be concluded that family income was a strong associated factor for psychological distress among adolescents. This result is contradicted with the research conducted by Reiss(Reiss & medicine, 2013) that shows low economic status was a strongly associated with adolescent's mental health. Other previous evidence that inconsistent with our result which conducted by Kwon *et al* (Kwon, Wickrama, & Adolescence, 2014) stated that adolescent psychological distress affected by low economic status through material hardship such as inadequate food, clothing and also housing. According to Fryers *et al* (Fryers, Melzer, Jenkins, & epidemiology, 2003), there was several mechanisms that increase risk of family with lower income to develop

psychological distress. It may include hunger, violence, overcrowding and also decreased in capacity to afford physical health problem.

Another very important finding from this study is that low family value is significantly associated with depression, anxiety and stress. This result is supported by another research that mentioned family function would result in poor psychological outcome among adolescences. (Everri, Mancini, Fruggeri, & Studies, 2015; Shek & Li, 2016) Being with the fact that adolescence is a period recognized by turbulence of emotion, the rate of depression and anxiety were predictably high. (Sawyer, Miller-Lewis, Clark, & Adolescence, 2007) This transition period in adolescence presents with challenge of becoming an adult such as increase studying pressure and future career decision. In this study, it is found that family characteristic of an adolescent was significantly associated with depression, anxiety and stress. According to a research, interaction and good communication with father may dampen the effect of psychological distress. (Sun & Shek, 2013) In this study, we measured five main important domains in family. They are namely Togetherness and harmony, Expression, Relationship and family dynamic, Conflict and centric and finally Religiosity and traditional practice. Religiosity and traditional practice is the unique domain which was been studied in the past.

Lack of family values in all five domains contribute to higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress. Life satisfaction and hopelessness are affected by family value (Sun & Shek, 2013). A satisfied life may help the adolescent to have a good coping mechanism, eventually reduces the susceptibility of an adolescent to stress and its risk. Apart from that, good parent-child communication may dampen the effect of hopelessness (Barrett & Turner, 2005; Contoyannis & Li, 2013). This clarifies more why family value may affect the psychological distress as shown in this study.

This study has shown that the highest two domains that contribute to poor family value are “expression” and “conflict and centric”. A study in the past drew a conclusion that parental monitoring that emphasize on open parent-child communication further enhance the positive effect of family functioning (Everri., Mancini, & Fruggeri, 2015). Thus having a good communication and quality expression within family may reduce psychological distress in adolescent. Conflict in family also found to give a negative effect towards adolescents.

Recall bias may be one of the limitations in this study. However psychometric properties of DASS and Asia Family Characteristics Scale among subjects between 12 to 17 years old are good (MA & MA, 2015). Another limitation that we identified in this study is there could be other possible confounders which were not been measured such as adverse life events. To

have more robust data, we recommend the similar methodology of study could be conducted to bigger number of schools and settings to gain robust evidence.

4. Conclusion

We may conclude that family value or family dynamic has an association with adolescent mental health apart from socioeconomic factors. With that in mind, in order to ensure an adolescent attain a satisfactory healthy life style, family intervention must always be included in any attempt to ensure children's wellbeing. The need to protect an adolescent against undiagnosed mental problem is seen to be very important given now there is an increase in criminal cases related to adolescent involvement. Ironically, those people may have an underlying and undiagnosed personality disorder and may opt to cope their stress in unhealthy ways such as drug abuse, vandalism and bullying. The findings of this study could be an eye opener to our policy makers to enhance the basic society institution; that is the family.

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