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## **Perceptions of Adolescents: The Contribution of Environmental Factors and Individual Factors on East Malaysian Adolescent Adjustment Outcomes**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Most studies investigating the association between family functioning, school environment, and adolescent outcomes have been done in western country, which mainly with European American families. Recently, attention has focused on minority families, such as Korean families, Indian families, and Chinese families. In an effort to contribute to scholar knowledge on minority families and adolescents, the proposed research is aimed to produce a conceptual model of research which is able to explain how family and school environment and individual factors are associated on the behavioral, socio-emotional and academic adjustment among East-Malaysian adolescents. A cross-sectional study will be conducted among secondary school students, aged 13-18 years. The focus of the present study is on the associations between attachment relationships (father-adolescent and mother-adolescent relationship), authoritative parenting (involvement, strictness and autonomy granting), social relationship (peers and teacher relationships), discipline climate (rules/safety and counseling service), and adolescents' individual factors (self-esteem, self-efficacy, and mental health literacy) on their adjustment outcomes (behavior problems, emotional components, social competence, and academic performance). Other variables such as demographic factors, socio-economic status, and parents' marital status will be interpreted as the moderators. These variables are therefore will be interpreted as the significant components in predicting the developmental of adolescent adjustment. The proposed research will provide a much-needed window on the important issues of adolescents, especially in Malaysia context. Implications for conducting the present study will be discussed.

**Keywords:** *adolescent development, attachment, parenting, family and school environment.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a transition period between childhood and adulthood that has recently attracted widespread among the researchers, especially in the field of childhood and adolescence development. The age boundaries of adolescence are not easy to define, given the complex biological and psychosocial developmental processes, as well as the lengthy transition from childhood to adulthood (Ernst, Daniele, & Frantz, 2011). Of course, it will be no longer easy for adolescents to know when they have made the transition to adulthood. Normally, the adolescents legally become adult at different ages, which depend on the armed services, buying a drink or cigarette, driving, voting or get married.

According to Hall (1904), the period of adolescence is a stage where adolescents are more likely to swing back and forth between happiness and sadness, overconfidence and self-doubt, dependence and independence. This period is a necessary part for the adolescents to go through the processes of mood swings, conflicts with parents and rebel against their parents' values in order for them to make the transition to adulthood.

However, adolescence needs not to be a time of "storm and stress" which the contemporary theorists no longer see adolescents as "troubles or problem maker". Some theorists seeing adolescence as a period when biological, cognitive, social and emotional functioning is reorganized (Smetana, 2011). Thus, it is more useful to try to understand adolescents' problems and find ways of helping them cope. Adolescents who believed adolescence is time of "storm and stress" will have a way of making adolescence become stormy and stressful (Buchanan & Hughes, 2009).

Even the definitions of adolescence are varying widely by institution or research field. For example, adolescence is defined as the period of age 11 to 21 by The Maternal Child Health Bureau (MCHB), or 12 to 24 by The World Health Organization (WHO). Yet, the psychologists consider that adolescence starts at age 12 to 18 years, which divided into three phases, such as early adolescence (age 12 to 14 years), middle adolescence (age 14 to 16 years), and late adolescence (age 16 to 18 years) (Persike & Seiffge-Krenke, 2011; Sontage et al., 2011).

In our society, adolescents are neither children nor adults. Adolescents may be old enough to reproduce and may be as large as their parents, yet they are required to remain in school through age 16 or 17. Adolescence is a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, usually seen as being bounded by puberty at the lower end and by the assumption of adult responsibilities at the upper adult (Rathus, 2014).

Some theories argue that the concept of adolescence as a period of storm and stress marginalizes adolescents (Smetana, 2011). Seeing young people as "troubled" encourages adults to take an eye on them. It is more useful to try to understand adolescents' problems and find ways of helping them cope (Buchanan & Hughes, 2009).

Adolescence is often marked by declines in academic performance due to the changes in developmental processes, family relationships, teacher-student relationship, peers relationship, and the transition from primary school to secondary school (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Much of the research has examined children's experiences as they move from primary school to secondary school. The transition to the new school setting often is accompanied by a decline in grades and the participation in school activities (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Students may

also experience a drop in self-esteem and increase in psychological distress (Crosnoe, 2011; Rudolph & Flynn, 2007).

On the other hand, completing high school is one of the most critical developmental tasks facing by adolescents. The consequences of dropping out are most likely to exhibit problem behaviours, including delinquency, criminal, substance abuse, and self-injury or suicide (Donovan & Wells, 2007; Wald & Losen, 2007).

Over time, the issue of adolescent's internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems has received attention from researchers in the field of developmental psychology (Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995). It has been found that internalizing behaviour problems like anxiety/depression and withdrawal tend to have maladaptive emotional outcomes, such as negative perceptions of self-worth and depression (Boivin *et al.*, 1995; Rubin *et al.*, 1995). In contrast, adolescent with externalizing behaviour problems such as aggression and delinquency are associated with a variety of social and life adjustment difficulties including school failure and juvenile.

According to the 2010 Malaysia Millennium development goals of report from Unicef, the drop-off in secondary school enrolment can be linked to other threats such as substance abuse, which poses a risk to some adolescents. Statistics from the National Drug Agency (ADK) show that 65% of drug users detected in 2009 had only completed their secondary school education up to the age of 15.

Therefore, we can noticed that without correct information and skills to cope with growth to adulthood, adolescent will increase their risk of unwanted behavior problems such as pregnancy, drug abuse, unprotected sex, self-injury or suicide, and others. In addition, adolescents with lack of life-skills also contribute to other social problems, such as runaway from home, school dropping, vandalism and bullying in school, and juvenile delinquency.

### ***Problem Statement***

Although many important aspects of variables contribute to the experience adolescents' adjustment outcomes so far, a closer investigation of previous studies reveals several gaps. The questions of how personal, family and school environment factors shape adolescents' self-regulation and behavior problems remain unanswered. In order to complement the snapshot results of current issues, numerous authors or researchers suggested the need for longitudinal research that would capture the dynamic process of adolescents' behavior problems.

It is difficult to estimate the magnitude of the adolescents' behavior problems because these phenomena may predicting by personal factors (self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-motivation, sense of belongingness, anxiety/depressed, happiness or loneliness), family factors (parent- adolescent relationship, marital status, maternal/paternal interaction, or attachment), schooling factors (teacher-student relationship, peers interaction, or school environment). Whereas, other risk factors include confusing in self-identity and group identity, poor problem-solving ability, bullying and dissatisfaction with school environment.

Parental involvement is one of the key factors in helping adolescents make the transition to secondary school, not only with the adolescent but also with the school (Hurd et al., 2012). The researchers found that parental involvement in education especially during the period of adolescence is generally positively correlated with children's academic progress and also help to reduce negative behavior.

Among the various types of parental involvement, the most important component was communication and close attachment in parent-child relationship in order to reduce child behavior problems. It was expected that parent attachment would be more influencing to explain behaviour problems in adolescent (Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000).

However, it was argued that adolescents need peer relationship since information or support from parents may no longer be so relevant (Cotterell, 1992), and may not be able to help them to establish their identity by comparing opinions and views with others, especially in school context (Laghi, Pallini, D'Alession, & Baiocco, 2011). Adolescents increasingly turn to friendships with peers for emotional support during stress, but this did not mean that adolescents no longer rely on their parents support (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992).

Apart from that, the normative trajectories of quality of attachment during adolescence have varied method of assessing attachment constructs, sample characteristics and length of longitudinal follow-up (Scott, Whalen, Zalewski, Beeney, Pilkonis, Hipwell, & Stepp, 2013). In general representation of attachment security, it normally assessed by interview methods with questionnaire which remain relatively stable during adolescence in low-moderate risk samples (Allen, McElhaney, Kuperminc, & Jodl, 2004; Ammaniti, van Ijzendoorn, Speranza, & Tambelli, 2000; Zimmermann & Becker-Stoll, 2002).

While other evidences suggested that global attachment security may be less stable across developmental stages (such as, from childhood to adolescence, and from adolescence to adulthood), especially in high-risk samples (Beijersbergen et al., 2012; Weinfield, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2000; Weinfield, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004).

Adolescents' self-reported quality of attachment to parents and peers may be less stable than their global sense of attachment even among low-risk samples, especially when attachment is assessed over longer period (Buist, Dekovic, Meeus, & van Aken, 2002). For example, adolescents who aged 11 to 17 years showed linear decline on perceived quality of attachment of their same-sex caregiver; but, showed non-linear with most rapid decrease in early adolescence (ages 11 to 14 years) on perceived quality of attachment of their opposite-sex caregiver (Buist et al., 2002). In short, this phenomenon may be explained by the simply reflect increasing autonomy, and de-idealization of parents and increase reliance on non-parental attachment, such as peers relationship especially in early adolescence (Scott et al., 2013).

In term of cultural context, majority of the previous studies focused on adolescence rapid developmental changes (such as, cognitive, behavioural and psychosocial functioning) in Western country, especially among Europe and American families. And, of course, there will be a few studies that focus on Asian context but not that specific in Malaysian context.

In general, western studies proposed that Asian Americans as a "model" in minority group by some researchers because of their low crime rate and their overall academic achievement (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). But, other researchers suggested that Asian American adolescents are more depressed and socially isolated than European American in which the adolescents tend to exhibit more internalized emotional problems and display less externalized behavioural problems (Lorenzo, Pakiz, Reinherz, & Froist, 1995). While there is a growing body of research suggesting that various environmental factors are predictive of adolescents' adjustment outcomes, there has been a lack of research which has examined the combined effects of different predictors.

### ***Rationale of Study***

Understanding school and home cultural in the expression of risk factors for adolescent's behavior problems is important as it will help researchers and clinicians to develop strategies that can effectively identify and treat adolescent who are at risk in Malaysia, especially in East-Malaysia. Furthermore, this is a new study to directly and empirically examine adolescents in state of Sabah and Sarawak; although there maybe few previous studies found in other countries.

Perhaps, the current study may provide amount of empirical data that demonstrated the emerging of adolescent adjustment outcomes, such as at high risk of behavior problems, social and emotional competence. Although our government did pay attention on mental health problem especially among the teenagers; but yet there still much more work that the professionals may need to do for more proactive prevention methods and risks identification strategies, and also the cultural tolerance of mental health services for young people.

In addition, universities may need mental health professionals to educate school teachers, students, and administrators on how to adapt, implement, and evaluate the use of evidence-based behavior problems prevention strategies for adolescents. Particularly, maybe a large portion of models can be formulated to predict the adjustment outcomes, such as behavior problems, academic performance, social and emotional competence among adolescents.

### ***Research Objective***

The aim of this study was to examine the contribution of environmental factors (parents- adolescent relationship, teacher-student relationship, peer interaction, and school environment) and individual factors (self-efficacy, self-esteem, and mental health literacy) for the prediction of adolescents' adjustment outcomes (behavior problems, emotional components, social competence and academic performance). The present study enable the researcher to explore and discuss the mechanics of creating conceptual model that able to call for more in-depth understanding of prediction of adjustment outcomes.

To the extent that the present study represents overlapping and correlated dimensions of the environmental factors and individual factors, it could be hypothesized that: a) family and school factors are the indicators of a more general factor representing the overall environmental factors; b) the association between the general environmental factors and adolescents' adjustment outcomes are mediated by the individual factors; c) the general demographic variables moderated the association between environmental and individual factor and the various adjustment outcomes reviewed above.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Attachment Relationships***

The association between attachment quality to parents and psychosocial adjustment in adolescence has been documented in several empirical studies (Laghi, D'Alessio, Pallini, & Baiocco, 2009; Tambelli, laghi, Odorisio, & Notari, 2012).

It is established that positive perceptions of self and others in attachment relationships with parents are associated with numerous indicators of psychosocial adjustment in adolescence (Laghi, D'Alessio, Pallini, & Baiocco, 2011; Simons, Paternite, & Shore, 2001), negatively with problem behaviour (Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000), low perception of social support (Larose & Boivin, 1998), feelings of loneliness (Stevens, 1996) and psychological distress (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998).

Attachment quality has been positively related to self-esteem (Cassidy, 1988; Clark & Symons, 2000; Verschueren, Marcoen, & Schoefs, 1996), feelings of competence (Papini & Roggman, 1992), perceived social support (Blain, Thompson, & Whiffen, 1993; Larose & Boivin, 1998), and a sense of mastery over their worlds (Paterson, Pryor, & Field, 1995).

During adolescence, attachment behavior is also directed toward non-parental (non-caretaking) figures (Goodvin, Meyer, Thompson, & Hayes, 2008), especially peers, who may be considered such on a situational or temporary basis. Particularly peers may become new sources of trust, and it was argued that adolescents need peers relationship since information or support from parents may no longer be so relevant and can't help them to establish their identity by comparing opinions and value with others (Laghi et al., 2011; Cotterell, 1992).

Although, a particularly important aspect of adolescent peer attachment is the peer's ability to support and encourage the adolescent's assumption of growth-promoting challenges, researchers have confirmed that adolescents continue to rely on their parents for emotional support and advice (Byers et al., 2003; Gottfried, Gottfried, Bathurst, Guerin, & Parramore, 2003; Nickerson & Nagle, 2005) and that attachment security with parents predict an individual's well-being across the lifespan (Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996).

Some theorists (Laible et al., 2000) have argued for hierarchical organization in which the child's representation of the most salient attachment figure is the most influential and therefore the most predictive of developmental outcomes. Parents directly structure and select their children's peer contacts, and parents indirectly influence norms and beliefs about appropriate social behavior and the relationship models based on attachment experiences (Carson & Parke, 1996; Laghi, Liga, Baumgartner, & Baiocco, 2012; Whitbeck, Conger, & Kao, 1993; Zimmermann, 2004).

### ***Authoritative Parenting***

There is considerable evidence suggesting that parenting behaviours substantially influence the development of positive developmental outcomes in adolescents. A range of parental interactional behaviours related to warmth, patterns of punishment and reward, expectations, verbal techniques, directiveness and control have been found to be associated with academic achievement and psychosocial development in adolescents (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991; Steinberg et al., 1994).

Generally, studies over several decades have shown that authoritative parenting is associated with positive outcomes (such as school performance and psychosocial development in a range of areas) for adolescents, whereas authoritarian parenting, and permissive parenting are associated with negative outcomes in these areas (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991).

Steinberg (1990) suggested that in adolescence, three specific components of authoritativeness could be identified, which is acceptance/involvement; strictness/supervision; and psychological autonomy granting. Findings from the research of Steinberg and his colleagues have indicated that adolescents raised in authoritative homes have advantages over other young people with regard to psychosocial competence, academic competence, internalised distress, and problem behaviours. Moreover, these advantages are stable over time and generalized across various ethnic, socioeconomic, and family structure groups (Lamborn et al., 1991; Steinberg et al., 1991).

What is not clear from the body of literature on parenting styles is the contribution of parenting behaviours to the development of adjustment outcomes in young people. Specifically, authoritative parents have been found to raise adolescents who perform better in school and who are socially well-adjusted. High demandingness is likely to set parameters early on for the development in both academic outcomes and prosocial behaviour (Purdie, Carroll, & Roche, 2004). Therefore, in the present research was predicted that adolescent of authoritative parents would be higher self-regulators than adolescent of non-authoritative parents.

### ***Self-Regulation***

According to social cognitive theory, the development of self-regulation is related to personal, environmental, and behavioural factors that operate separately but interdependently (Bandura, 1986). Central to the process of self-regulation are individuals' judgments about their self-regulatory abilities (Bandura, 1997; Schunk, 1990), commonly referred to as self-efficacy beliefs. Judgement of one's efficacy has been shown to exert a strong influence over human development and adaptation by shaping goals, goal commitment, and level of motivation in both social and academic contexts. For example, the self-efficacy beliefs that young people have about their academic, social, and self-regulatory capabilities have been shown to predict academic achievements as well as aggressive, antisocial, and delinquent behaviours (Bandura, 1996a, b). Adolescents who doubt their capacities for SR of academic and social success are more likely to lower their academic goals, are more prone to feelings of futility and depression and are more likely to engage in antisocial and problem behaviours (Bandura, 1996b).

There is uncertainty about the links between academic and non-academic self-regulation. For instance, Bandura (1997) proposed that self-regulation is multifaceted and that it is differentiated across distinct realms of functioning. On the other hand, control theorists suggest there is a generalized ability to regulate one's own behaviour (Kuhl, 1985). Whilst previous research has established that a complex set of factors operates to make young people more or less self-regulating in their academic learning behaviours (Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie, 1996; Purdie & Hattie, 1996; Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996), as well as in their non-academic risk taking behaviours (Carroll, Hattie, Durkin, & Houghton, 2001a; Carroll, Houghton, Hattie, & Durkin, 2001b), little is known of the link between academic and non-academic self-regulated behaviour. Hence, another purpose of this study was to explore these links.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To answer the research questions, a combination of quantitative survey and semi-structural interview will be conducting to understand family background, school environment and individual factor in predicting adjustment outcomes among adolescents. Criteria for participant selection and choice of instruments are based on issues identified in the literature reviews and theories. The procedures for data collection and data analysis will be presented.

### ***Research Design***

Research design for this research is quantitative survey with semi-structural interview by using questionnaires. The selection of questionnaires or instruments is based on issues identified in the literature reviews and theories. The sampling method used in this study was purposive sampling. The purpose of this research is to identify the influences of environmental (family and school setting) and individual factors on adolescents' adjustment outcomes. In the same time, this study also aimed to investigate the mediating effect of individual factors on the relationship between environmental factors and adolescents' adjustment outcomes. Moreover, the present study is also

aimed to determine the moderating effect of demographic variables in the association of environmental and individual factors on adolescents' adjustment outcomes.

### ***Research Participants***

Adolescents aged 12 to 18 years old will be recruiting as the participants in the present study. The age groups of adolescence will be divided into three, which is early adolescence (12 to 14 years old), middle adolescence (14 to 16 years old), and late adolescence (16 to 18 years old). In the adolescence stage, adolescents choose to communicate more with significant others (such as parents, teachers and peers) in order to received more social support from others so that their relationships lasted longer.

Besides that, adolescents have known to experience difficulties in parents and peers relationships, such as being accepted less and being rejected more by significant others (parents, teachers and peers). In the transition of adolescence, although the family or parents continue play a key role in socializing the adolescents, thus peers and teachers also play a greater role in predicting the adjustment outcomes (such as behaviour problems, social and emotional competence) among adolescents (Carr, 2011; Grusec, 2011).

### ***Research Locations***

This research will be conducted in secondary schools in the area of East-Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) in which included rural and urban areas of school.

### ***Research Instruments***

The criteria for instruments selection are based on related issues that have been identified through the previous valuable studies and theories. The proposed measures have adequate psychometric properties and are appropriate to study population. The summary of the suggested questionnaires or instruments were shown in appendix.

### ***Research Procedures***

Before the research is being conducted, approval to conduct research in secondary schools will be obtained from the Malaysia Higher Education Ministry, Sabah and Sarawak Education Department. After approvals are obtained, researcher will be going to distribute the permission letters to all schools in Sabah and Sarawak. Once the permission is obtained from the Secondary school principals, research will be conducted. The process of data collection occurred at a convenient time during the school hours.

After all, pilot study will be conducted before the main study. A semi-structural interview with questionnaires will be proceeded in order to complete the data collection. After completing the stages of data collection, all the participants will thanks for their participation with an honourable present for their willingness to participate in the present study. Finally, the data will be key-in to Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), and analysis will be done.

## **CONCLUSION**

In spite of the possible limitations that might be occur in present study, this current study did highlight some important risks factors that might be helpful in the prediction of adolescents' adjustment outcomes, especially among East-Malaysia adolescents. Apart from that, the current study also may provide some supportive empirical evidences that used to reduce the previous research gaps which could have important implications for either the academic field or the public awareness of mental health issues in Malaysia.

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