Family Communication, Sibling Position and Adolescents’ Sense of Responsibility

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Abstract: One of the core developmental tasks in the adolescents’ stage is building the sense of responsibility. This study examined the relationship of sibling position and family communication to the sense of responsibility among 903 Malaysian adolescents, using The Malaysian Adolescents’ Responsibility Inventory, Parent-Adolescent Communication Inventory and interview protocol. Sense of responsibility was found to be related to Family communication but not to sibling position. The interview revealed that middle born children can be responsible when they are given responsibilities. This study suggests adults’ participation in encouraging young people to inculcate sense of responsibility.

Key words: Responsibility • Adolescents • Family Communication • Sibling Position

INTRODUCTION

Sense of responsibility refers to one’s positive attitude and obligations towards the fulfillment of tasks directly or indirectly assigned to him or her. Sense of responsibility is a product of social interaction, which begins in early childhood, becomes critical during teenage years as it solidifies and appears in various aspects of life during adulthood. The concept of responsibility perhaps can be explained by the early works of Alfred Adler regarding “lifetasks”. Adler’s Individual Psychology Theory highlighted two prepositions: (i) that social interaction starts early in the family, with children playing the roles of family members according to their psychological birth positions and (ii) that individuals are faced with at least three significant life tasks inclusive of work, friendship and love [1]. Adler’s work was continued by Mosak and Dreikurs [2] who identified the fourth task as spirituality and universal values and the fifth task as responsibility towards self.

The process of cultivating the sense of responsibility rests upon the earliest social interaction that children come upon, usually with their family members; especially with parents and siblings. The quality and pattern of family communication have been shown to impact adolescence in making responsible life choices. Better family communication hinders teenagers from delinquency and help with better coping strategies in sexual behavior decision, academic achievement, decision making, health care management [3, 4, 5] and becoming more responsible and autonomous in substance and religious practices and financial tasks [6, 7, 8]. Better family communication includes parental understanding, reassurance, tangible assistance, guidance, emotional support, monitoring practices, clear rules and modeling.

The influence of birth order on a child’s character has long fascinated social scientist and parents alike. Even though experts cautioned that countless factors interact in determining the children’s characters, parents simplistic expectations have led to unrealistic expectations and parenting pitfalls when comes to sibling position. Adler’s [9] classic theory proposed how sibling position or birth order and it’s accompanying variables such as age distance between siblings and gender similarity affects personality. First borns, middle borns, last and only children have been connected to unique personalities and most experts believe it’s influenced by age difference, gender societal role expectations and the differential parental treatment and expectations [10]. Parents tend to give more responsibilities, attentions and expectations to the first borns. Earlier born offsprings especially those from large families may be more behaved because their parents are bound to reprimand them on risky behaviors so as to set example for the later borns [11]. Interestingly, middle children, especially those with the average spacing of their immediately adjacent siblings is two years, were deprived of those wonderful interactions that facilitates status, recognition and
attention by parents and other siblings [12]. Adler described this as second child/middle child syndrome. Consequently previous studies found that middleborn children have a significantly lower self-esteem than firstborns and lastborns and were also found to be most depressed compared to children in other sibling positions [13]. Current empirical research however tend not to find systematic differences in responsibility and other personality traits across birth orders [14].

Adler also hypothesized that all behaviors serve a purpose [1], thus social ills may reflect adolescents’ goals to be acknowledged, to belong, or just to express themselves in creative and unique ways. As described earlier, when children do not receive appropriate adult support and guidance, their efforts to adjust appear as misfits, or in Adler’s words, misconceptions, or mistaken beliefs and goals [16]. Previous studies by Hasimah [17] and Johari [18] showed that one of the biggest contributors towards Malaysian adolescents’ attitudes is parental involvement in the children upbringing. Teenagers who receive negative feedback from their parents will feel inferior, unsure of themselves and have to find alternative ways to feel better about themselves [19].

Sibling position is an important aspect in Malaysian families. In some families, siblings used position related tittles to address each other in everyday conversation. In the National Language the eldests are called Abang Long or Kak Long (Eldest Brother or Eldest Sister), the middle siblings are called Abang Ngah or Kak Ngah (Middle Brother or Middle Sister), the youngests will be called Adik (Small Brother or Small Sister). The tittles come with responsibilities of their own, where the eldest brothers or sisters are expected to do harder, more complicated family chores and become the role models for the younger ones. The younger siblings are expected to respect the older ones. Despite being well intended, traditional values which bind the family communication practices may also leave negative impacts. For example, extreme unfairnessness in division of household responsibilities can cause stress for older siblings and spoil the younger ones. Extreme respect and complete obedience towards their older family members may shape children into shy and inexpressive individuals.

Studies regarding children-parent communication in Malaysia highlighted another important issue related to the Malaysian adolescents: They appeared to have problem discussing very personal information with their parents [19]. This was found to be related to the cultural practices that stresses one way communication from parents to children [19]. Since familial relationships are significant in the Malaysia culture, this study seeks to understand how adolescents’ development (in the aspect of their sense of responsibility) are related to and explained by the familial relationships (family communication and birth order). Specific objectives of this study are to (i) Examine the profile and description of sense of responsibility among Malaysian adolescents (ii) Explore the role of sibling position in relation to the sense of responsibility among adolescents (iii) Determine the relationship between family communication and sibling position to the sense of responsibility among Malaysian adolescents.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study uses both quantitative and qualitative procedures of data collection. The quantitative data was obtained through the Malaysian Adolescents Responsibility Inventory (MARI) [21] and the Parent-Adolescent Communication (PACI) [22] on 903 Malaysian adolescents (401 males, 502 females) of the age range between 15-16 years old from 8 secondary schools in central Malaysia. From this group, 10 high and medium scorers in the MARI were interviewed to get a detailed description of the tested variables. Those respondents with MARI mean score of 3.5 and above are considered high responsibility respondents and those with MARI mean score lower than 3.5 are considered medium responsibility respondents. From the 903 randomly selected respondents, there were 289 eldest, 389 middle and 225 youngest and only children.

The MARI was built based on the Wheel of Wellness model by Myers et al. [23] through structured interviews with Malaysian adolescents aged 13 until 18. This is a 35 item, Likert scale questionnaire with six constructs namely 1) Spiritual, 2) Self-Regulation, 3) Physical Care 4) Relational, 5) School and leisure and 6) Environmental Concern. The Cronbach alpha value was found to be .90 in this study. Hasimah et al. [21] found agreement in the Malaysian population with Myers, et al. [23] regarding the types of tasks that define responsibility among adolescents. However, some varieties in the descriptions of tasks appeared in accordance with the context of current Malaysian lifestyles. This questionnaire asked students to rate their frequency of the responsibility in following aspects: spiritually (eg. attending religious functions, practicing religious teachings), self regulation (eg.making good decison, disciplined), physical Care (eg.eating right, exercising) Relational (eg.caring for
families, friends) School and leisure (e.g., doing homework, spending time), Environmental Concern (e.g., noise pollution, cleanliness). The PACI [22] is used to measure family communication. This is a 20 item, Likert scale instrument which shows an alpha value of 0.75 in this study. The third instrument was a focus group interview protocol. The interview questions included understanding of the concept responsibility, descriptions of activities in daily life tasks, role of sibling position and how parents can influence teenagers to become more responsible.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile and Description of the Sense of Responsibility: Figure 1 shows mean score of each domain in the MARI. The two highest of responsibility domains are a) spiritual (m=4.08), b) relationship (m=4.06), followed by c) physical care (m=3.93), d) self-regulation (m=3.91), e) environmental concern (m=3.69) and finally f) school and leisure (m=3.58).

The highest scored domains; spiritual, reflects the role of religions among Malaysian teenagers in developing their sense of responsibility. The different religions such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism in their own ways positively influence and shape the culture and lifestyle of society members. The students also scored high on relational domain. According to Brody and Stoneman [24], Hartshorne, [25] Brody, et al. [26] teenagers are responsible to relate to significant others like their family members, friends and teachers. For the Malaysian teenagers scoring high on this domain may also indicate that they still practice the traditional Asian values such as respect for elders and giving priority to societal harmony.

The lower mean scores in the MARI were physical care, self-regulation and environmental concerns. This result may be an indicator of the lower level of concern that Malaysian teenagers have for these domains in their everyday lives when compared to the earlier mentioned domains. The least scored domain of the MARI among the Malaysian students were school responsibilities. This is quite intriguing since Malaysian students spend a lot of their time at school and high emphasize is given to academic achievement. This may reflect the weakness of the education system which too much focuses on the role of school as preparation for national examinations[17] and lacking in activities which inculcate sense of responsibilities.

Environmental concern domain did not come out as theme in the question for definition in the interview. Examples of adolescents’ definitions of responsibility were “Following religious teachings” (religion), “taking care of family name” (relational), “making good choices and practicing healthy lifestyle” (self regulation, physical”). Environmental concern domain only comes up when the students were probed with the question “what kind of responsibility you have at home?”. The answers of “I clean (environmental) and cook”, “helping my mum wash and pick up clothes” (environmental) shows that the students’ environmental concern is limited to their personal surrounding (home) and very much associated with relational responsibilities (helping mum).

To get a better descriptions of the sense of responsibility, 10 students who scored high and medium for total MARI score were interviewed. The interview differentiated the highly responsible adolescents from their lesser responsible peers. The high responsibility group reported holding various significantly prestigious
responsibilities at school such as prefect, club presidents, classroom monitors, head editors of school magazine, student body leaders and sport captains. They were also able to mention responsibilities at home. These students take their responsibilities seriously, proudly and accountably. The other group (medium MARI scorers) reported that they were not holding much significant responsibilities at school but may or may not have responsibilities at home. The later’s group involvement at school is limited to ordinary club members, but not representing any position in the classroom. However, both groups describe their responsibility as making good choices, practicing healthy lifestyle and taking care of family name. Among the responses given are:

“We should be responsible to decide our own directions. In life we have a lot of choices and we need to make the best choice”.
“IT is our responsibility to follow our religious teaching”.
“We need to take care of our behavior, do not skip prayers, self image, dignity and family name.”
“I have to take care of myself from getting into trouble and not smoke, or do “ramp it.”

The finding will assist teachers, counselors and parents to better understand the development of teenagers and find ways of inculcating responsible behaviors in them. Counselors and teachers need to make adolescents understand that among reasons that cause them to behave in irresponsible ways is when they do not feel important or reliable.

Sibling Position and Sense of Responsibility: MANOVA test was conducted to find out if certain demographic locations especially sibling position influence the difference in amount of responsibility. Only location and gender showed significant difference. Even though the result showed that the mean in responsibility was scored highest by first born children, this result is not significant. Thus, sibling position or birth order did not show any influence on the difference of responsibility. This result supported earlier research (Guastello & Guastello, 2008) that rejected the influence of sibling positions in personality. Data from the interview showed more interesting and perhaps helpful evidences to understand the role of sibling position.

Description of Responsibility and Sibling Positions:
Most eldest children felt that they were very responsible people. The following statements support this notion.

“I am the eldest in my family. I have a lot of responsibilities. I take care of my younger siblings. As a student, I have to do well at school so as to be exemplary to my younger siblings. As an assistant class head, I care how my classmates behave.” - (Girl, High Group, First Born).

“As student leader, I am entrusted to lead the students in this school. So, when I accepted this responsibility I must be accountable.” - (Girl, High Group, First Born)

“When my younger siblings have problems, in their studies, they ask me. Sometimes they ask our parents, but most of the time, they ask me. I am the eldest girl.” - (Girl, High Group, First Born)

“I solve problems…my parents, my siblings, I solve most problems.” - (Girl, High Group, First Born)

“I should be the most responsible in the family. I am the eldest and I am my family’s hope.” - (Girl, High Group, First Born)

However, one middle child think that his oldest sibling are responsible.

“My eldest brother…even though married, knows his responsibility towards our family. He comes to see us 3, 4 times a week to make sure if everything is okay. When my parents are out stationed, he controls everything. My Mum would cook for 2 or 3 days supply (before leaving town), but he (my eldest brother) fed us. He knows everything…” - (Boy, Medium Group, Middle Born).

The interview contributes to the much needed clarification of the sibling position concept. This study suggests that sibling position is relevant to the understanding of human behavior from the individual psychology theory which gives importance to social interaction. It is not simply the birth order that influences a child’s character but the contributions of other interactions experienced by the child that will give meaning to the child’s behavior, thereby interpreting his position.
"In my family I don't have much responsibility since I am the youngest." - (Boy, Medium Group, Last Born)
"I am the only child in the family, so I don't have much responsibility." - (Girl, Medium Group, Only Child)

Interestingly, non first born children are able to bear responsibilities when called for. The excerpts below explain this situation:

"I am the head editor of the school magazine, I have to make sure that my editors do their job, other wise I will be in trouble. At home, all my brothers and sisters have worked and some are married, so I have to take care of my younger sister, clean and cook." - (Girl, High Group, Middle Born)
"As class monitor, I have big responsibility to take care of my classmates. But at home I don't have that much responsibility because I am one of the youngest." - (Boy, High Group, Middle Child)
"My job is to study, help my mum and take care of my younger siblings." - (Boy, Medium Group, Middle Born)
"I have quite a big responsibility at home, because my sister and brother have gone to college. I have a little sister, my father always comes home late because he commutes. So I help my mom wash, pick up clothes." - (Boy, Medium Group, middle born)

Middle borns indicated that they contribute because "they want to help the parents", "the older siblings are not around", or "the school has given them trust". This differs from the first born children who do things because of "I am the eldest, thus, it is my responsibility", statements. This finding supports Kidwell [12] and Putter [13]'s views regarding the low self esteem of middle born children resulted from lack of recognition. Listening to the middleborns in this study talked about their responsibility in passionate and caring manner, gave indication to the researchers that the adolescents felt positively about being able to help and to be needed by their families. Thus we can suggest that the act of bearing important roles and responsibilities is a good way to increase self esteem among middle born children. Middle born children can be as reliable when entrusted with responsibility. If significant people in their lives do not recognize this ability, middle born children may be inhibited from learning about responsibility. The deprivation of recognition of their abilities may delay middle born children to fulfill their potentials as responsible people.

"Teenagers do no like to be scolded. They need to be advised using psychology. If parents talk rough, they will fight back. Adults need to control temper and not get too angry. Teenagers wont listen if they get scolded"
"My parents will tell their experience. They tell me what is good or bad, what I should do or not do. So, I became a more responsible person.."
"My dad takes me to wedding feasts, neighborhood "gotong royong"(cleaning the neighborhood area together)."
"Teenagers need a lot of guidance from adults. They need to hold on to something.. like a strong rope...because they still do not know where to go or how to do something in life.."

This study highlighted the importance of early significant relationships in shaping human being's personality, in this case the importance of family relationships in the building of responsible behaviors. At the same time, parents need to be educated in learning the

"The Relationship of Family Communication and Sense of Responsibility: Pearson Correlation found significant relationship between responsibility and family communication ( n=903, r = .464, p=.000). The importance of family relationship in instilling responsible behavior among children is proven in this research which found correlation between family communication and sense of responsibility among Malaysian adolescents. This finding supports previous studies that stress the significant relationship between those two variables [3,4, 5].

Our interviews revealed that teenagers believe parents should guide them into becoming responsible people through open and respectful communication as well as modeling responsible behaviors. Participants suggested that parents play a big role in helping adolescents become responsible people. This can be done through giving responsibility to their children at the young age, as Malay proverb stated that “melentur buluh biarlah dari rebung” (translated “to bend a bamboo, do it from the young shoot”) which implies that children should be encouraged and guided to be responsible from an early age. In addition, parents should communicate effectively, share their experiences, provide guidance to their children, as well as modeling responsible behaviors. The following statements represent the ideas on how adults can influence adolescents to be responsible people:
skills of relating to their children so that the children feel significant, thus feeling excited about becoming responsible. Parents also need to learn how to transmit positive behaviors that can be modelled by the children.

**CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that Malaysian adolescents in secondary students do have a good level of sense of responsibility. They were able to define their responsibility in different domains and that their sibling position does not totally influence their sense of responsibility. This study also confirmed that family communication is an important element in inculcating the sense of responsibility among the adolescents. This paper suggests schools and that agencies concerned with family development and community services develop a specific programs to help parents improve relationship and create better communication with their children in order to encourage the children to be more responsible people.

**REFERENCES**


