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A Study of Meaning and Purpose as a Citizen among Public University Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

A patriotic citizen is one of the qualities of a good citizen. To be patriotic, it requires the individual to understand the meaning and purpose of being a citizen and aware of moral and nationalistic duties for the country. There were some concerns about the purpose and meaning of youth as citizens of Malaysia when mass media and past studies often highlight the low spirit of patriotism among the youth in Malaysia. How they view their meaning and purpose as a citizen of Malaysia? This study aims to describe the meaning and purpose in life among public university students as citizens of Malaysia. The study was conducted among ten selected public university students in Malaysia through a descriptive quantitative methodology. The finding shows that the majority of the students have a high level of meaning and purpose in life. By having a positive virtues about life meaning and purpose, the study concludes that Malaysian university students have the quality of being good citizens.

Keywords: Citizen, Patriotism, Youth, University Students, Malaysia

Introduction

A citizen refers to someone who lives and legally belongs to a particular country. Being a legal citizen is insufficient to be called a patriotic until the person has a strong attachment or sense of belonging for the country. The status as a citizen includes special moral and nationalistic duties to care and sacrifice for a country. Patriotism or love for the country is manifested through the value of loyalty, care, devotion and sacrifice (Ikuenobe, 2010). To be loyal, devoted or sacrifice for a country requires a citizen to understand the meaning and responsibility of being a citizen. One way to develop a sentiment of patriotism is through the establishment of a positive self-concept and moral values. When people understand their meaning of life, their attitude towards the surroundings would change positively including to the country and society (Surbaryana, 2016). Scholars in spirituality suggest that understanding the meaning of life is essential to provide a purpose and value for living as a human being (Frankl, 1953; Frankl, 1985; Graber, 2004). Having a meaning in life serves a basis for well-being, happiness, and health for a human being, hence to “develop” a sense of

belonging to a country it requires an individual to understand his meaning and purpose in life as a citizen.

There are not many studies focusing specifically on the meaning in life and citizen (Ikuenobe, 2010; Duffy, 2017) while most studies on citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Pykett et al., 2010; Li & Tan, 2017; Nurdin, 2017; Kennedy, 2019) emphasize on civic education and values as the fundamentals in shaping behavior of a good citizen. So, the quality or characteristic of a good citizen depends on the positive meaning and the purpose of life. The debate among the scholars in spirituality tend to focus on the relationship, differences or interconnection of meaning, purpose, and feeling or life satisfaction in understanding the meaning of life (Lerner et al., 2006; Shek, 2013). The absence of meaning in life or often called an existential vacuum (by Frankl) would happen when the meaningful life experiences or feelings are nonexistent (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). The mood or emotional stability may not be reached if there is no purpose in life, and the presence of a meaningful life will be attained if there is no personal strength and life goals.

The discourse about the quality or characteristics of a good citizen has been discussed since the Aristotle era. Past studies show that a good citizen is described in multi-ways and from multi-dimension. Denters et al (2007) describe good citizenship includes civic virtues such as rationality, moral obligation to pursue the common good, social engagement and political activism. Villalobos, Morel and Trevino (2021) describe that the quality of a good citizen involves values, norms, ethical ideals, behavior and expectations of participation. These definitions suggest that the conception of a good citizen involves two components, firstly act and behavior; and secondly, values, norms and belief. The demonstration of the civic virtues and patriotism acts such as sacrifice and care for the country or engagement in community welfare works may not be committed or performed if the citizens do not embrace or guided by positive values, norms or beliefs. In other words, the act of a good citizen is a manifestation of a meaningful and purposeful life.

The definition of a good citizen is different between countries. The value of a citizen is a construction of few factors such as social-political values, tradition, historical background and policy orientation by the government (Morris & Cogan 2001; Print 2000). In Malaysia, the conception of citizen is a composite of the values of multiethnic and religious society with a structured political system and unique traditional historical experience. The discourse of Malaysian citizens is often related to the identity of multiculturalism and the diverse social structure of ethnicity of the society (Daniels, 2005; Abbott & Franks, 2007; Ting, 2013; Shafizan, 2017; Bee Piang Tan et al., 2018). However, to what extent that the young generation are aware and obliged to this context of being a Malaysian citizen?

In recent years, youth in Malaysia often reported as lacking the spirit of patriotism (Ku Hasnita, 2007; Ku Hasnita & Haizam, 2009; Pakeer et al., 2011; Hasnah et al., 2015; Ayuni & Anitawati, 2016). The youth also received negative perception as a generation with eroding patriotism and unwilling to fulfil the country aspirations. From another point of view, it is important to note that today the young are facing different challenges than the older generation. They are living in the era of high information technology and social-economic transition with many opportunities and accessibility. The exposure and high interest in hedonism, foreign and Western culture also believed to be infiltrated the mind of the youth

and hinder them to embrace the uniqueness of Malaysian tradition, heritage and values. Therefore, there is a concern about the meaning and purpose of youth as the citizen of Malaysia. How do they view their life meaning and purpose as Malaysian citizens? This study was conducted to explore the meaning and purpose of life amongst public university students as the citizens of Malaysia. This article aims to shed lights on the meaning and purpose of being a citizen of Malaysia in the context of patriotism.

Methodology

The instrument used in this study is based on the test called Purpose in Life (PIL) by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964) inspired by the idea of Victor Frankl (1953) to measure a personal experience of meaning and purpose of life. The PIL test is the most studied questionnaire in assessing the life purpose and meaning; and to measure the factors contributing to the meaning in life which include active, emotionally stable, goal-oriented, and positive direction of life (Davies & Klaassen, 2014). PIL test has been used in other fields of study particularly in psychology (Steger et al., 2006) and quite significantly among the young generation (Molasso, 2006; Ishida, 2008; Pizzolato et al., 2011) but not much in the context of citizenship and patriotism. The PIL test focuses on the three main aspects, 1) life satisfaction (mood or feeling) (e.g. bored, neutral, exuberant, enthusiastic), 2) address life goals (e.g. no goals or aims at all, neutral, clear goals and aims), and 3) meaning of life itself (e.g. personal existence is utterly meaningless without purpose, neutral, very purposeful and meaningful (Dufton & Perlman, 1986; Davies et al., 2014). These three aspects are inter-related and complement each other in understanding the meaning and purpose of life.

The research instrument consists of 20 questions with five semantic differential scales between positive and negative statements. This study made a minor amendment to the questions to suit the citizenship context and reduced the scale from 7 to 5. A pilot study was conducted to test the reliability of the instrument with the result of Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was 0.930. Respondents were required to provide a judgement to the questions/statements along an ordered dimension of five points (1 = negative and 5 = positive). An example of question/item in the instrument in the questionnaire, "I am usually..." and followed by the choices between "bored" as a five-point scale to "enthusiastic" (positive) on the other side as shown in the structure below:

	<i>[negative]</i>	1	2	3	4	5	<i>[positive]</i>
I am usually:	bored						enthusiastic

In terms of the study sample, this study involved students of selected public universities in Malaysia i.e. Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Teknikal Malaysia (UTEM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UiTM), Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UMS) dan Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UNIMAS). A stratified cluster sampling was applied in the selection of five zones (Northern, Central, South, East Coast and East Malaysian Zone) and ten universities targeting a total of 2000 respondents. The study used purposive quota sampling, to choose the respondents by the study stream, sex and ethnicity for each universities. As a result, 2056 completed questionnaires were successfully collected and analysed. In this article, the data is analysed and presented descriptively.

The distribution of the respondents is based on the universities as follow. For the northern zone, 9.7% of respondents were from UUM, and 9.7% were from USM. In the central zone, 10.1% students from UM and 9.7% students from UKM. In the southern zone, 9.7% of students are from UTEM and 9.7% students from UTM. For the east coast zone 10.9% of students from UMT have participated, and 10.6% students from UMK. Finally, 9.7% of students UNIMAS students and 10.2% of UMS students have represented the east Malaysia zone. Of all the respondents, 53.0% were from science and technology backgrounds, which is 46.4% more than social sciences and humanities. 0.6% of respondents did not specify their faculty. Female respondents (61.3%) have a higher percentage than male respondents (38.2%), and 0.4% did not answer. A total of 54.9% representing Malay ethnic, 23.7 consisting of ethnic Chinese, 11.2% ethnic Indian, 6.1%, Bumiputra Sabah and 1% comprising Bumiputra Sarawak. 0.1% did not state their ethnicity. In summary, the Malay ethnic were the majority in this study with 54.9% of the total respondents.

Findings and Discussion

Developing and exploring the youth spiritual development at university or higher education level is important for at least two reasons. Firstly because of the age transition of the students is critical for them to develop their purpose in life. Secondly, university is the place where students are taught and trained to be ready for the next phase of life and their future. Pfund et al. (2020) highlight that university life provides a unique opportunity for students to experience the “purpose development process” which consists of the process of purpose exploration and purpose commitment. In other words, the process refers to how the individual learn and explore the aspects that suitable to them and later embrace a particular way for them to shape their life goals.

As explained earlier, this article aims to identify the meaning and purpose in life of the respondents as citizens. Table 1 shows the score level of the Purpose in Life (PIL) test. The PIL scores in this study were divided into three levels, which is low (1.00-2.33), moderate (2.34-3.67) and high (3.68-5.00). The three levels indicate the degree of the meaning of life and purpose of the respondents from low or lack of meaning and purpose of life, moderate and a high degree of meaning and purpose of life. The data shows that the majority of the students (72.4%) has a high degree of meaning and purpose in life. 25.1% has a moderate level, and only 2.5% have a low level. The data suggest that the majority of the students have a high level of meaning and purpose in life. Past studies show that youth with meaning and purpose in life have higher self-esteem and moral commitment (Bronk 2005; Pfund et al., 2020). Having a positive virtue about their life meaning and purpose depicts that the respondents have the quality of good citizens for the country.

Table 1: The Score Level of Purpose in Life Test

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Low (1.00-2.33)	51	2.5%
Moderate (2.34-3.67)	517	25.1%
High (3.68-5.00)	1490	72.4%
Total	2056	100%

Min= 3.96 SD= 0.661

Source: Data collection 2017

To understand further the respondent view of their life meaning and purpose as citizens, the discussion centred around the three aspects of the PIL test questions, 1) life satisfaction, 2) life goals, and 3) meaning of life itself. The analysis is descriptive based on the frequency of the total rating of positive scales 4 and 5. For the first aspect, regarding the life satisfaction, there were five related questions. Overall, the pattern of their life satisfaction is not high as the other two aspects (all questions have below 80%). First, just slightly more than half of the respondents (54.5%) think that they are usually enthusiastic and within this 35.7% of them are neither bored nor enthusiastic. However, 69.9% view that life is completely exciting, and meanwhile 72.1% of the respondents think that their life is running overexciting things. The excitement of their life probably related to the fact that 66.6% of them are optimistic to see that every day is constantly new and different. Facing their daily task as a student, 67.8% of them see it as a source of pleasure and satisfaction. Finally, 66.9% of them think their life is under their control. In all items in life satisfaction, the second-highest answers are at the scale of 3 (neutral), and total answers of scales 1 and 2 are below 10%.

Measuring life satisfaction is important to understand the state of life experience as students. In general, the data suggest that the respondent life satisfaction are good and at a positive state, although inclined to a moderate level. The moderate level may be related to the transition from the youth to adulthood phase that may result in instability of their positive and negative emotion and personal feeling (Bailen et al., 2019). Other past studies (Bronk et al., 2009, Park et al., 2010) highlight that at a young age there is a tendency to have a lower life satisfaction due to the transition phase from adolescent to adulthood in searching for purpose in life. Past studies (Lerner et al., 2006; Lerner et al., 2008; Kanwal, 2017) suggest this age transition phase among youth is crucially critical for their spirituality to develop a positive state. They need a conducive environment setting by the family, community and relevant social institutions to help them build confidence and stable emotion and to understand their life purpose.

Four questions were categorised under life goal, the second aspect of the instrument. In general, 78.8% of respondents believed that they have goals in their life. In more specific, majority of the respondent (84.7%) also think that in achieving life goals they have holistically thought of themselves, their family and the country. This data is interesting to highlight that most respondents include their family and the country as part of their life goals and journey. This data is consistent with one nature of a good quality of a citizen as highlighted by Pickett et al (2010) when an individual set their specific life goal along with the purpose of the community. In other contexts, as students, the respondents seem optimistic about their life after graduation when aiming to do exciting things for themselves (83.5%). This data confirms that the students have definite goals for their life and the university has provided a suitable place for them to grow their life purpose as good citizens.

With regard to be an agent of change, 67.7% of the respondents think that they are well prepared and are not afraid of any consequences. It shows that most of them are ready to face challenges in life. Finally, if they would be allowed migrating to other countries to earn a better life, 70.7% of the respondents choose to take the opportunity full of joy. This kind of choice may not be good quality as a loyal citizen to a country. In understanding the concept of a "good citizen", the value is not only based on the "status" of citizenship, but the most important thing is the "act" or "attitude" of being a citizen (Ikuenobe, 2010; Pykett et al.,

2010). Such choice might contribute to phenomenon of brain drain in the future. Nevertheless, the data confirm that most of the respondents are definite about the life choice in seeking better opportunities in life.

Finally, the last aspect is about the meaning of life itself. There were ten questions about this aspect, and the responses revealed that the respondents are inclined to the positive meaning of life. 78.8% of the respondents believe that their life is purposeful. This data is consistent with the other question that most of them (80.9%) believe that their personal existence is meaningful, and they (80.8%) have discovered a satisfying life purpose. In considering the freedom to choose, 66% of them believe that human is totally free to make life choices. Despite that, the majority of them are happy with their existing life when 79.4% believe that if they could choose, they would want more lives like the existing one. This pattern of data describes that majority of the respondents have a clear purpose in their personal life and to some extent, they are satisfied with their purpose in life.

Furthermore, in thinking about their life as Malaysians, 68.3% always see good things why they were born Malaysians. It is unsurprising when 72% of them regard their ability to find purpose in life as good Malaysian citizens as very great to achieve. Having a clear understanding of their purpose as Malaysian, so from the point of view as a student, 67.9% of them wish if they could graduate today, they would feel that their life has been very worthwhile to serve the country. This perspective may connect with the fact that 76.8% of them would like to think that they are a very responsible person. Moreover, 60.4% of the respondents agree that the world's current scenario in relations to their life is very meaningful to them. The data shows that most of the students have a clear direction and meaningful life and essentially, as a person they are responsible and responsive to their roles as student and citizen of Malaysia.

Overall, the data from the three aspects of life satisfaction, life goal and the meaning of life shows that most of the respondents possess the quality or characteristic of good citizen. The data on their view about life satisfaction may not be desirable as other indicators, but still showing some attributes of life satisfaction about their life as a person and as students. For example, their optimism and excitement about their daily routine, and the confidence their life is under control are part of the values of good citizenship as self-conscious (Denters et al., 2007) and fall under the criteria of affective citizenship (Hung, 2010; Villalobos et al., 2021). The data from the life goal also indicate that the respondents embody the quality of good citizen when they have a certainty about their goals in life to achieve in the long term. Their aim to achieve a better life show their commitment to engage with their surrounding and this is an important aspect in citizen civic engagement (Araujo et al., 2014; Kennedy & Kuang 2021).

Finally, the data from the meaning in life items have strengthened the findings that the respondents have a meaningful and purposeful life as a person, students and Malaysian citizens. The whole idea about understanding the meaning and purpose in life has to be assessed together with all three aspects or items in the instruments. This is based on the findings in past studies (Shek, 2013) suggesting that the existence of meaning in life is related to the existing life goal and emotion or satisfaction of life. In brief, the two aspects of life satisfaction and purpose in life are interrelated in providing meaningfulness in the life of the

respondents. Cogan and Derricott (2014) listed five attributes of citizenship category 1) a sense of identity, 2) the enjoyment of certain rights, 3) the fulfilment of corresponding obligations, 4) a degree of interest and involvement of public affairs, and 5) an acceptance of the fundamental societal values. Based on the responses to the questions on the meaning of life, most of the attributes category of citizenship by Cogan and Derricott (2014) is consistent with the data. It depicts that the students have a good orientation and value of being a good citizen of Malaysia.

In general, the finding shows that the students have a clear meaning and purpose in life, embrace the fundamental values to be patriotic citizens, care for their life interests and at the same time care for the welfare of the community and country. Yet, some attention needs to give to first, their emotional stability for the students to be more confident, proactive, and independent; second, to their awareness of the importance of a sense of belonging or attachment to the country. In this context, they require a conducive environment and reliable support system to nurture, foster and 'drive' them based on Malaysian social-political setting and values.

A good citizen of Malaysia must have a strong attachment to the country. In fostering the youth with a sense of belonging to the country, they must be equipped with an in-depth understanding of the country's history, mastering the fundamental element of the federal constitution, embracing the values of the multiethnicity and multicultural society. No doubt this kind of effort has been initiated in the education system, however, a critical assessment must be taken to improve the implementation. This effort shall include reviewing the approach in delivering civic education at primary and secondary schools (Ibrahim, 2008; Balakrishnan, 2010; Fazwan & Azrina, 2011).

Conclusion

The Purpose in Life Test may not be the best instrument to measure the purpose and meaning in life. (Morgan & Farsides 2009; Schulenberg et al., 2011). Nonetheless, it is able to provide insights into the level of people's meaning and purpose in life. For this study, the data provide a good overview of life meaning and purpose as a citizen among the students, from the perspective of patriotism, which is less studied in Malaysia. Yet, further study is needed because the low spirit of patriotism remains a critical issue among the Malaysian youth.

Each country may have a different approach and focus in defining a good citizen but, the elements such as morals, values and beliefs are fundamental or prerequisite to the development of the characteristics of a good citizen. Being a patriotic citizen may not be fully manifested into action if the individual life meaning and purpose is unclear and non-existence. In maintaining the stability of the political system and moving towards a mature democracy, Malaysia requires a patriotic generation with a strong value and belief system based on its societal values, tradition and national identity. As future leaders, the quality of the morals, values and spirit of the youth is crucial to be assessed and given serious attention by various parties and institutions, not only at the university level but also at non-educational and informal institutions. This kind of assessment is important for the government and other stakeholders to review and improve the existing social and education policy to be more effective in educating the young generation and for a better civic-minded society in future.

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