

Exploring Family Communication Gap From The Perspectives of Adolescents

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Abstract

The study is conducted to explore family communication issues from the perspectives of adolescents in Malaysia. Qualitative approach was used for the study. Data collection was completed using in-depth interview and observation with five high school students. The analysis highlighted themes like communication issues, family involvement and group counselling. The study also looks at family communications pattern theory (FCPT) to help develop the understanding of family schemas. Counsellors in Malaysia should be equipped with the necessary skills and trainings to further resolve communication issues as addressed by adolescents. Awareness on the importance of family counselling must be highlighted in great emphasis in order to develop healthy generations of Malaysians. The family institution is vital in predicting the wellbeing of an individual, therefore the field of family therapy in Malaysia must be progressively developed.

Keywords: Malaysia, Generation Gap, Family, Family Counselling, Communication Issues

Introduction

The family institution is the first social system an individual was introduced to since birth, it is a system where family members seek for social and emotional support from their parents, sibling and at times to extended family members (Chu et al., 2019). Adolescence is a crucial period of one's life where youth seek for validation from family and friends, parents play such important roles in nurturing their children with full of love and care, this can be a protective factor against developing depression symptoms at such a young age (Zhou et al., 2022). In order to improve the parent-child relationship, healthy parenting styles and good family setting will set the precedence to adolescence at preparing themselves to grow into healthy adults later on. In Malaysia, adolescents were found to have communication struggles with their parents, especially when they are at a crucial transitioning phase, looking for identity formation and a sense of belonging (Pauzi et al., 2023). Hence, by understanding the Asian culture in Malaysia, taking into consideration familial values and the differences of culture from the west, this study aims to explore the communication gap as understood and explained by the Malaysian adolescents receiving education in secondary school of Putrajaya.

Generation gap refers to differences in values, attitudes, and communications styles, this is because both parents and adolescents belong to different generations that shape various thinking and worldviews (Choi et al., 2020). This generation gap leads to challenges such as communication breakdowns within the family, it is vital for parents and children to understand each other and create a common ground that respects both traditional and modern values. Family counselling is an avenue to provide guidance in navigating these challenges.

Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) developed the family communication patterns theory (FCPT), a family communication theory that uniquely explores how families develop schemas for social interaction. It explores how families create a shared social reality through parent-child interactions, educating children different orientations to communication through social interaction and conformity orientation. However, it is important to note that the FCPT theory is only mentioned in this study to widen our understanding of family communication patterns but this theory will not be applied in this study of Malaysian adolescents.

In the context of family counselling, family members are encouraged to seek professional insights from counsellors when there are malfunctioning communication that occurs between family members, this is important as without healthy communication, family members is at risk of feeling unhappy and it may disrupt the flow of a functioning family unit as a whole. In this study the parent-adolescent communication is explored deeply from the adolescents perspectives. Previous studies mostly shed light about the struggles and challenges faced by parents when it comes to addressing family communication issues. However, limited studies were found that take into account adolescents lived experiences, their thoughts and feelings pertinent to family communication, especially in the Asian context in Malaysia.

Literature Review

In the context of family, communication is the exchange of ideas, information, thoughts and feelings between family members. It serves as a crucial role on the overall functioning and wellbeing of the family unit. According to Kapetanovic et al (2019), poor communication is often linked to behavioural problems and maladjustment issues. This finding is also supported in the adolescents age group by Lipu and Siibak (2019) a study that emphasized the importance of obtaining consent from children before parents choose to share content related to their children online. Additionally, positive communication between parents and adolescents promote healthy development and acts as a predictor of good mental health for both adolescents and parents. Zhou et al (2022) explored adolescents' mental health and found that communication between parents and their children determine the early onset of depression in adolescents, emphasizing that adolescents are found to be vulnerable during this period and seeks validation from their parents related to their identity formation.

Family communication is essential to adolescents as it plays a vital role in their development, wellbeing and creates a sense of belonging essential for their survival. There are many reasons why adolescents view family communication as important such as for emotional support, building trust, identity formation and decision making. When it comes to building trust, effective communication between family members is vital for their wellness. Open communication will promote good trust with their parents and good behaviour is likely

to follow. A study by Libu and Siibak (2019) in Estonia looked at teenagers' perspectives on how they feel about their parents' social media sharing behaviour. The study found that when parents communicate well with their children on respecting their rights to privacy, the children were found to trust their parents more. For example, the children felt embarrassed when their mother posted an ugly photo of them on Facebook, feeling as though their opinion as a child did not matter to their parents (violation of privacy). However, when their parents asked for consent, the children felt respected and validated, this promotes better communication within the family system and foster good trust which is essential to both parents and adolescents as a whole. The FCPT helps one to understand how families interact with one another by following a set of schemas developed through social interaction. Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) defined the FCPT as a family communication theory that uniquely explores how families develop schemas for social interaction. It looks at how families create a shared social reality through parent-child interactions, educating children different orientations to communication by exploring the two elements of conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Moreover, family communication acts as a remedy to adolescents' fear of being unloved.

A study by Zhou et al (2022) explored these two elements of conversation orientation and conformity orientation in order to predict depression among their adolescents' participants. Firstly, it was found that conversation orientation protected adolescents against depression while conformity orientation is a factor that worsen depression symptoms in adolescents. This means, as children grow older into their teenage years, it is important for parents to have open communication with their kids, especially when it comes to matters such as granting more access to their own autonomy. In today's technology, parents can even text their children and engage in deep conversations that instil good and positive parental values, this acts as a buffer against youth emotional and behavioural problems by focusing on their strengths instead (Chu et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2020).

The first element in the FCPT that helps one to understand about family communication is conversation orientation, it is defined as "the degree to which families create a climate where all family members are encouraged to participate freely in interaction about a wide array of topics" (Fitzpatrick, 2004, p. 173). In brief, conversation orientation encourage family members to get involved in decision makings and problem solving related to their family. Families with high conversation orientations encourage communication as an essential and enjoyable part of family life, whereas those with low conversation orientations generally avoid open discussions among family members on a variety of topics (Koerner et al., 2018). Likewise, families high in conversation orientation freely interact with one another, share ideas, and make decisions together, whereas members from families low in conversation orientation interact less frequently, share fewer private thoughts, and make decisions individually (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002).

Conformity orientation is the second element that makes up the FCPT. It is defined as "the degree to which families create a climate that stresses homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs" (Fitzpatrick, 2004, p. 173). On the other hand, conformity is used to understand and be understood by family members. Families high in conformity orientation tend to prefer traditional family structures where parental authority reigns supreme and children are expected to adopt their parents' values and beliefs, whereas families low in conformity

orientation encourage the individual growth of all family members (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Typically, high conformity orientation families stress the importance of family harmony, a cohesive set of family values and beliefs, and hierarchy, whereas families low in conformity orientation tend to focus on individuality and independence of family members (Koerner et al., 2018), this promotes individual growth of all family members.

In addition, group counselling is a great avenue for individuals with shared life experiences to seek support with other group members under the supervision of a counsellor. It is a therapeutic intervention that involves the sharing of thoughts, feelings and experiences with other group members (Çalık & Çelik, 2019). In this study, group counselling is applied to a group of adolescents in Malaysia in hope that these individuals are able to explore their thoughts, emotions and behaviour related to family communication with their peers in a supportive and structured environment. According to Al Ali and Bataineh (2021), group counselling has several benefits for adolescents including peer support where adolescents feel more comfortable sharing about similar struggles to their peers. Next, adolescents can practice valuable social skills within a group setting, this includes conflict resolution, learning to be an active listener and showing empathy by understanding their group members better. Lastly, through group counselling, adolescents can feel empowered as they develop self-confidence and are able to make informed decisions about their lives (Genç et al., 2023). In this study, art therapy and play therapy were applied as part of the group counselling interventions. Group art therapy is a type of therapy that uses art materials or art activities during session, participants are allowed to express their emotions in the form of creative means (Huang et al., 2021) while play therapy is an emotional approach that can be applied to adolescents to share their feelings and emotions (Thorpe et al., 2020).

Thus, this study hopes to achieve outcomes such as to build strong communication skills, fostering empathy, and actively working on understanding parent-child perspectives that can help improve family communication and strengthen relationships. This study aims to understand the rising communication issues between parent and teenagers caused by generation gap. Below are the research objectives

1. To explore parent-child relationships in adolescents
2. To explore adolescents understanding of family communication issues
3. To explore significant childhood memories from the perspective of adolescents

Methodology

A module of family communication from the perspectives of adolescents was created, it includes weekly module such as briefing session, art therapy, bridging the gap and play therapy with different themes on a span of four weeks. This study used a qualitative approach through group counselling sessions. The sample included were five male students of age fifteen and are currently attending school at SMK Putrajaya Presint 9(1). The participants were selected via purposive sampling, the students were previously the researcher's participants of a career group counselling, the students consented to participate in this study by understanding that the group members possess similar characteristics and experiences. In total, there were three group counselling sessions and a briefing included prior to the sessions. All sessions covered the five basic components of counselling, which are: 1) Rapport building; 2) Assessing presenting problems; 3) Identifying and setting goals as a group 4)

Implementing interventions/alternatives; and 5) Planning, termination and follow-up. The data were thematically analysed.

Research Design

The research design used a narrative qualitative approach. The participants' perception of family communication and lived experience was explored by using one model per week, in total this study used three different models in a span of three weeks.

Research Sample

A total of five form three students from SMK Putrajaya Presint 9(1) attended the group counselling session. Respondents were recruited from a career development program at SMK Putrajaya Presint 9(1) on the 13th of May 2023 through purposive sampling method. The main criteria for selection of students are; 15 year olds and male. Five male students of age 15 and of the Malay ethnic were selected and attended a total of three counselling sessions. In terms of sibling positions, only one respondent is the eldest sibling, respondent A, two respondents are the second child, respondent B and E, while the other two are middle child, respondent C and D. Moreover, respondent A, B, and C reported having a close relationship with their mother compared to their father while respondent D reported not having any close relationship with either his mother or siblings and respondent E was neutral, not close with either his mother or father. According to Malhotra and Baker (2019), group therapy consists of one or more mental health practitioners who lead a group of five to fifteen members and usually they meet about an hour or two on a weekly basis. In this study, five participants were selected and lead by one trainee counsellor.

Procedure

The present research was performed according to the established code of ethics by the Malaysia Board of Counsellors. The group counselling session was conducted once a week, for 90-minutes, over the course of three weeks. In order to build good rapport, the group was closed after the first session, this helps maintain trust and openness among group members. For every session, each group had five participants and one trainee counsellor. However, for the third session, there was only four participants and one trainee counsellor. A briefing session, consisting of a psychoeducational approach was conducted prior to starting the first group counselling session. This briefing was used to discuss about informed consents, reviewing confidentiality, introducing group members and forming group expectations. Informed consents were collected from all participants as they agreed to participate voluntarily. No incentives were given to any participants throughout the sessions.

Session one was conducted based on the first module using art therapy with the objective of exploring participants' relationship with their parents. Each student was given an A3 drawing paper, colour pencils, marker pens, pencils and pens. Students were instructed to draw how they spend their free time with family under 20 minutes. The remaining 30 minutes were followed by a group discussion and art interpretation.

Session two focused on understanding family communication issues through technology. A total of five old phones (e.g., Nokia and Sony Ericsson) were brought by the trainee counsellor. The objective of this activity is to help the participants to understand communication issues by using technology as a communication medium with their parents.

Session three involved the application of play therapy. The participants were instructed to enter the counselling room and choose their desired miniatures based on the given theme of family. Each participant was given the privacy to enter the room one by one followed by the trainee counsellor for observation purposes. The participants returned and shared about the reasons behind their chosen miniatures.

Data Analysis

A thematic technique was used to analyse the transcripts. Weekly notes consisting of group member experiences, conclusion upon each session, and what the participants learnt after each session were recorded. These were subjected to open coding to find relevant themes and match those themes with the participants' lived experiences.

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore three main objectives; 1) to explore participants' relationship with parents, 2) to understand participants' perception of family communication via technology, 3) to explore significant childhood memories from the perspective of adolescents. The findings of this study are based on the themes analysed to uncover the experiences and perceptions of the selected participants. Findings of all three sessions were based on their feelings and thoughts before and during the group counselling intervention. Pseudonyms were used to conceal participants' identities, thus, to protect their privacy and maintain confidentiality. The findings of the analysed data included three main themes that were present across the data collected from every participant: 1) Relationship with parents, 2) technology and family communication, and 3) childhood memories.

Relationship with Parents

Busy Parents, Less Attention Given. All participants agreed that if either parents or both parents are busy with work, less attention is given to them as children, resulting in feeling distant, not being able to express their concerns to parents and causing communication issues to rise.

"When he's working, he's working at night, night shifts. So, it's hard to see him. Uh I rarely see my dad at night." (Participant A, 15 years old, male)

"It's hard when my mom is not home, especially when she's off to work"(Participant C, 15 years old, male)

"Uh so this is my art, during school holiday, I'll just sit at home, either I watch tv or play with my phone. Mom is busy with work, even when she's home everyone seems to be doing their own thing" (Participant D, 15 years old, male)

Demand from Parents. A participant reported that he feels pressured to set a good example to his siblings as the first-born child.

"For example, when I messed up, like when I come home late, my dad will say "why did you come home late, how are you going to set a good example to your brother, if this behaviour keeps on repeating, sooner or later your brother will be just like you" because I'm the eldest" (Participant A, 15 years old, male)

Technology and Family Communication

The participants reflected on the use of technology to family communication, they were able to identify how technology is incorporated in their daily communication with parents and

how quality time is better spent without using technology. Through exploring the theme of technology and family communication, three subthemes arose; (a) physical communication is superior to technology; (b) technology helps the communication to be more effective; and (c) communication problem with technological advancement.

Physical Communication is Superior to Technology. Most participants concluded that when it comes to expressing their emotional concerns, it is better to communicate physically with their parents rather than calling or texting.

"I think family communication is better without the presence of a phone, it's because you are able to detect feelings, and when you share stories it's better face-to-face" (Participant A, 15 years old, male)

Technology helps the communication to be more effective. However, the participants also viewed technology to create better communication amongst family, creating another theme. Most participants talked about the use of WhatsApp, an instant messaging application and social media that allow for quick and convenient communication.

"If there is a phone, we ask our parents what they are up to. When we are outside, we use our phone but if we're at home or anything it's better to ask face-to-face"(Participant A, 15 years old, male)

"Sometimes I use WhatsApp, when she's in her room and I'm outside, I use WhatsApp cause your phone is always with you right"(Participant B, 15 years old, male)

"If I want to ask for something, I use WhatsApp as I don't dare to ask physically, I'm scared my mom will nag me. Uhh for example when I want something like asking for a topup, I prefer asking her through WhatsApp, she doesn't nag as much via text" (Participant D, 15 years old, male)

One participant showed mixed results, with no stance on technology and family communication.

"I don't mind as long as my family members are talking. But when when we're on family holiday, it's better without phones" (Participant E, 15 years old, male)

Communication problem with technological advancement. One of the participants pointed out that technology can easily make an individual distracted with the constant presence of smartphones and other devices that may interfere during family time. Screen time leads to reduced engagement and meaningful conversations within the family.

"We are easily distracted with our phones. Unlike in the old days, we couldn't play much with anything, not even with a phone, so we tend to talk more with our parents" (Participant B, 15 years old, male)

Childhood Memories

During the last session, the participants were exposed to play therapy, the participants were instructed to pick any toy(s) or miniatures that reminds them of their family, each participant entered the room one by one with no distraction. The table below depicts the quantity and

toy preference as well as the symbol of childhood memory based on the chosen toy(s) by all four participants. It is noted that participant B did not attend the last session.

Table 2

Respondent(s) Choice of Toy(s) via Play Therapy

Respondent	Quantity, type of toys chosen, and symbol of childhood memory		
A	Toy(s) Quantity	Type of Toy(s)	Symbol of childhood memory
	3	Tiger, soldier & car	Relationship with his little brother
B	-	-	-
C	2	Turtle & ultraman	Going back to hometown with family and companionship during childhood
D	1	Ultraman	Transitional object
E	2	Motorbike & car	Memory with father

Connection to family memories in the past. Most participants picked more than one type of toys that reminds them of their childhood memory with either their parents or siblings.

“Okay first umm soldier, back then when I was either standard 4, 5 or 6 I always play with stuff like this. I used to buy soldier miniatures at a Rm2 shop. During that time, I always buy something, just like this tiger. This tiger used to be my brother’s favourite toy and when he asked me to play with him, we will always play together. My brother is the youngest sibling. Next is cars. I used to play with cars a lot when I was little. I enjoyed collecting cars and make a collection out of them”(Participant A, 15 years old, male)

“Ultraman was already around when I was little. This show was my companion. When I got bored, I watched Ultraman, it was great. Back then, it was fun to watch a kids show, I started watching Ultraman when I was 6, it was called Ultraman Mebius. This turtle reminds me of my mother, she’s from Terengganu, that’s why I picked up this turtle. Plus, I haven’t seen a turtle in person before, back in Terengganu I only went to the wet market and the beach, but never had seen a Turtle”(Participant C, 15 years old, male)

“Okay for me, I took this bike miniature cause it reminds me of my dad. At home, we have a bike but my dad doesn’t really use it so he lets me use the bike so I can go anywhere, either for work or wherever I want. I don’t really play with cars as toys when I was small, I was more into outdoor activities, like football. But I took this car as it reminds me of a recent event where I sneaked out and drove my dad’s car, whenever I look at the car, it brings me back those memories” (Participant E, 15 years old, male)

Transitional object. Only one participant picked one toy from the play therapy session compared to the other participants who at least picked two different toys. The participant also informed that he still does watch ultraman even at the age of 15, this means that ultraman is his childhood memory symbol of a transitional object.

“I got confused on what to pick as there were too many miniatures and toys, I didn’t know what to pick, but then I saw this Ultraman, it was part of my childhood. Like my friend here watched Ultraman Mebius right, but I watched Max, Ultraman Max then Ultraman Zero, that’s about it. I still watch Ultraman now when I got bored at home” (Participant D, 15 years old, male)

Discussion

Group counselling has been found to benefit the adolescent age group, by applying group counselling to adolescents, counsellors can help them to be more self-aware and acknowledge that they are not alone in their struggles as they progressively make sense of their individual emotional experience. Family communication plays an important role in the development of adolescents. In this study, group counselling was carried out on a sample of Malaysian adolescents to discover the issues surrounding family communication. In brief, this study aimed to explore participants’ relationship with parents. Based on the results of this study, there were three main themes that appeared; 1) relationship with parents, 2) technology and family communication and, 3) childhood memories. Firstly, in explaining the participants’ relationship with parents, the participants engaged with group art therapy, where they were instructed to draw how they would spend their free time with their family. Some of the participants were having difficulty in expressing their thoughts when talking about their family, the participants reported that the art therapy session has helped them to engage in personal and emotional process, allowing them to express their creativity on a piece of paper without the fear of judgment. This finding is consistent with a study by Harpazi (2020) which found that school-based art therapy benefit adolescent clients where students reported art therapy gave them the avenue to destress and relax after a hectic day at a school. Next, a participant from this study reported feeling pressured by the demand of his parents in setting a good example to his siblings as a first-born child. This finding can be connected to the authoritarian parenting style, a type of parenting that is rigid and strict when interacting with children, this causes several negative effects including shattered self-esteem, insecurity issues and communication problems (Costantini, 2022; Fitriani, 2019; Yaffe & Serroussi, 2019). This shows that healthy parenting is significant in the mental development of adolescents, parents are encouraged to adopt the authoritative parenting style where parents are nurturing, communicates well with their children and attempt to explain their children’s behaviour by reasoning instead of punishments.

The second theme revealed a connection between technology and family communication. It was found that when it comes to sharing about their day, a physical interaction with parents is better rather than talking over the phone. Face-to-face communication allows individuals to pick up on non-verbal cues and understanding another person’s body language, therefore this helps parents and adolescents to understand each other better. Additionally, there was conflicting results about whether technology makes the communication effective. Most of the participants in this study had reported that using WhatsApp acts as an effective medium to communicate with their parents, this contrasts with

another finding where a participant expressed that the use of technology can distract family members from spending quality time together. To explain this, it is not just the direct impact of social media on family communication that needs to be explored but it is also important to understand how confident the family members are in managing their daily struggles to foster open and healthy communication with their family members (Procentese et al., 2019). This means, family members are suggested to communicate through their expectations of social media use, when family members are confident to handle family tasks and challenges, this can create a shift in perspective whereby advanced technologies can be perceived as a great tool to interact, organize, and promote better family unity rather than seeing technology as harming the family cohesiveness.

The last theme is childhood memories, it is explored through play therapy. It was found that when the participants were instructed to pick miniatures that reminds them of their family, most of them relate the experience to their siblings and parents. On the other hand, only one participant revealed dependency on a transitional object. Using play therapy enabled the participants to communicate smoothly with each other on their family experience. This is consistent with a study by Nazri et al. (2022) that has seen the positive effects of group play therapy in fostering better communication skills among adolescents.

Conclusion

In conclusion, all three sessions were successfully completed with good cooperation from the group members. The participants showed better understanding on the importance of family communication. This study has helped us to understand the issues of family communication from the perspectives of adolescents. For future research action, female adolescent samples should be included to broaden our knowledge related to this field.

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