

Sadness from the Perspectives of Adolescents in Malaysia

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Abstract. Sadness is a normal emotion that can make life more colorful. Sadness always accompanies loss. When we say goodbye to a loved one, we usually feel sad. The sadness is even deeper if a close relationship has ended or a loved one has died. Sadness also makes us appreciate happiness. When our mood eventually changes from sadness towards happiness, the sense of contrast adds to the enjoyment of the mood. It is common for late adolescents to change their moods or emotions and become overwhelmed by school, peers, and family obstacles. Late adolescents go through phases which can be categorized as “growing pains” and are often taken lightly. This study aims to examine the sources of sadness between male and female of late adolescents in Malaysia. The data was collected from 1021 undergraduates’ students in one of the higher education institution in Malaysia. The respondents were asked to complete a set of open-ended question to elicit information on sadness. Data were analyzed using the indigenous psychology approach through categorization, open coding, and axial coding. Through this study, the difference perspectives of sadness between male and female of late adolescents can be identified. Implications of findings will be discussed.

Keywords: Sadness, negative emotions, late adolescents, gender, indigenous psychology.

1. Introduction

Emotions, often called feelings, include experiences such as love, hate, anger, trust, joy, panic, fear, and grief. Emotions are related to, but different from, mood. Emotion theorists agree that emotion is composed of three related components-*behavior*, *physiology*, and *cognition* (Durand & Barlow, 2009). Emotions are specific reactions to a particular event that are usually of fairly short duration. Mood is a more general feeling such as happiness, sadness, frustration, contentment, or anxiety that lasts for a longer time.

The emotion of sad is a subjective feeling of unhappy, a strong motivation for behavior (escaping or fighting), and a complex physiological or arousal response. To define emotion is difficult, but most theorists agree that it is an *action tendency* (Lang, 1985, 1995; Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 1998); a tendency to behave in a certain way (for example, fighting), elicited by an external event (loss) and a feeling state (sadness) and accompanied by a (possibly) characteristic physiological response (Gross, 1999, in press; Gross & Munoz, 1995; Izard, 1992; R. S. Lazarus, 1991, 1995).

The present study seeks to understand the sadness from the perspective of late adolescents in Malaysia. Late adolescent will have a time of great challenge and uncertainty during the period of emerging adulthood (Berk, 2012). During this period, many young people make frequent changes in educational paths, jobs, and love partners and all these will influences their state of emotion directly or indirectly. Emotional conflicts such as anger and sadness, is one of the strongest emotions that take part in the adolescents’ life. The function of sadness is to regulate as well as communicate the need for social support (Sullivan et al., 2008).

One of the study that examined the underlying concept of Indonesian male and females’ perception on sadness showed that sadness as one of 7 main categories: life lesson, disruption, self-reflection, motivation, life obstacles memorable moments and as a spiritual lesson (Putri et al, 2011). In general, these categories divided into 2 main approaches; positive approach and negative approach. Those who view sad moment as a positive approach tend to have high resilience.

Sadness is also associated with depressive symptoms in late adolescence. Findings revealed that respondent with depressive symptoms and will report high sadness experience (Chaplin, 2006). There are gender differences regarding perception on sadness that indicated both Indonesian male and female adolescent mainly took a positive perception as a life lesson (Putri et al., 2011). In previous research showed

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that boys endorsed higher levels of sadness inhibition than did girls, and girls endorsed more frequent disinhibited sadness displays than boys (Perry-Parrish & Zeman, 2009).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Location

Nine hundred and ninety four (994) undergraduate students in one of the higher education institution in Malaysia participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 20 to 24 year, 765 (77.0%) were female and 229 (23.0%) were male.

2.2. Measures

The study was based on a set of open-ended question to elicit information on students' sadness. One of the questions "What do you consider to be the most important life event trigger to your sadness?" was analyses to answer the purpose of the study.

2.3. Statistical Analysis

The data was analyzed in the steps listed by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis and Chi square test was conducted to investigate the association between adolescents' gender and their perception on life events that trigger emotion sadness.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Sources of Life Events That Trigger Emotion Sadness

Table 1: Categories and Sub-Categories of Life Events that Trigger Sadness Emotion Generated from the Data

Main categories	Sub-categories
Death and Loss	Death and Loss (undefined) Death or Loss of Parents Death or Loss of Grandparents Death or Loss of Member Of Family Death or Loss of A Loved One (Lover, Pet, Or Material)
Family Problem	Family Hassles Parents' Divorce Financial Problems Family Health Problems
Undesirable Behavior	Guilt Feeling Unfulfilled Goal Attitude
Negative Life Events	Separate And Apart Hassle Stress Disagreement/Argument Academic Problem Feel Hurt By Others Behavior Not Valued And Trusted By Others

The analysis on life events that trigger the adolescents' sadness emotion revealed four main categories: death and loss, family problem, undesirable behavior, and negative life events (refer Table 1). The losses that trigger Malaysian adolescents' sadness emotion included: the end of a relationship whether by death or loss of parents, grandparents, member of family, the death of a loved one (Lover, Pet, Or Material) and undefined death or loss. The Family problem consisted: family hassles, parents' divorce, financial problem and family health problems. The category of undesirable behavior composed of three subcomponents: Guilt feeling (cause of misbehave that hurt family feeling), unfulfilled goal, and attitude. The category of negative life events consisted: separate and apart, hassle stress, disagreement/argument, academic problem, feel hurt by others behavior and not valued and trusted by others.

Off all sources, death and loss of loved ones was identified by the Malaysian adolescents as the main sources that trigger their emotion sadness. The results explained the culture in Malaysia that the family is considered the center of the social structure. In Malaysian culture, there is a great emphasis on unity, loyalty and respect for the elderly, and family is the perfect shelter where the individual can be guaranteed both emotional and financial support.

3.2. The Association between Gender and Their Perception on Life Events That Trigger Emotion Sadness

The Association between Gender and Their Perception on Death and Loss That Trigger Emotion Sadness

Table 2. Association of the Gender of Students with Their Perception on Death and Loss That Trigger Emotion Sadness

Gender of Students		Male			Female			χ^2	p
		Frequency	Expected Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Expected Frequency	Percentage (%)		
Death and Loss									
a	Undefined death/loss	13	12.3	16.5%	26	36.7	15.3%	7.694	.103
b	Death/Loss of Parents	15	17.6	19.0%	55	52.4	23.4%		
c	Death/Loss of Grandparents	18	12.3	22.8%	31	36.7	13.2%		
d	Death or Loss of family member	20	17.1	25.3%	48	50.9	20.4%		
e	Death/Loss of A Loved One (Lover, Pet, or Material)	13	19.6	16.5%	65	58.4	27.7%		

Table 2 shows the association of the gender of students with their perception on life events that trigger emotion sadness. The result showed that there was a non-significant association between gender and perception on life events that trigger emotion sadness ($\chi^2 = 7.694$, $df = 4$, $p > .05$). In the observed cell frequencies, it showed students' perception on five sub categories of death and loss that trigger emotion sadness were similar between male and female students. The results indicated the close family ties among family members regardless of their gender.

Table 3. Association of the Gender of Students with Their Perception on Family Problems That Trigger Emotion Sadness

Gender of Students		Male			Female			χ^2	p
		Frequency	Expected Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Expected Frequency	Percentage (%)		
Family Problems									
a.	Family Hassle	9	8.2	29.0%	25	25.8	25.5%	5.116	.163
b.	Parents' Divorce	1	3.4	3.2%	13	10.6	13.3%		
c.	Financial Problems	5	2.6	16.1%	6	8.4	6.1%		
d.	Family Health Problems	16	16.8	51.6%	54	53.2	55.1%		

The Association between Gender and Their Perception on Family Problems That Trigger Emotion Sadness. The Chi Square test showed that there was a non-significant differences between the observed and expected frequency of male and female students in their perception for the four sub categories family problem ($\chi^2 = 5.116$, $df = 4$, $p > .05$). In the observed cell frequencies, it can be concluded that students' perception on four sub categories of family problem that trigger emotion sadness were similar between male and female students (refer Table 3). In Malaysian family, when one member of the family suffers a financial setback, the rest of the family will contribute what they can to help out.

The Association between Gender and Their Perception on Undesirable Behavior That Trigger Emotion Sadness

The results showed that there was a non-significant differences between the observed and expected frequency of male and female students in their perception for the four sub categories family problem ($\chi^2 = 5.116$, $df = 4$, $p > .05$). The results described that students' perception on three sub categories of undesired behavior (Guilt Feeling, Unfulfilled Goal, and Attitude) that trigger emotion sadness were similar between male and female students (refer Table 4).

Table 4. Association of the Gender of Students with Their Perception on Undesirable Behavior That Trigger Emotion Sadness

Gender of Students		Male			Female			χ^2	p
Life Events that Trigger Emotion Sadness	Frequency	Expected Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Expected Frequency	Percentage (%)			
Family Problems									
a. Guilt Feeling	7	4.5	26.9%	9	11.5	13.6%	3.115	.211	
b. Unfulfilled Goal	13	12.7	50.0%	32	32.3	48.5%			
c. Attitude	6	8.8	23.1%	25	22.2	37.9%			

The Association between Gender and Their Perception on Negative Life Events That Trigger Emotion Sadness

The results showed that there were a significant association of the gender of students with their perception on negative life events that trigger emotion sadness ($\chi^2 = 12.364$, $df = 4$, $p < .05$). In the observed cell frequencies, it can be concluded male adolescents perceived hassle stress (30.2%), feeling hurt by others behavior (26.0%) and academic problems (17.7%) were the major negative life events that trigger their emotion sadness, but for female students perceived feeling hurt by others behavior (30.3%), separate and apart (21.5%) and disagreement/argument (18.2%) were the major negative life events that trigger their emotion sadness. The summary of the results showed in Table 5.

Table 5. Association of the Gender of Students with Their Perception on Negative Life Events That Trigger Emotion Sadness

Gender of Students		Male			Female			χ^2	p
Life Events that Trigger Emotion Sadness	Frequency	Expected Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Expected Frequency	Percentage (%)			
Negative Life Events									
a. Separate And Apart	13	19.0	13.5%	78	72.0	21.5%	13.355	.030	
b. Hassle Stress	29	18.8	30.2%	61	71.2	16.8%			
c. Disagreement/Argument	12	16.3	12.5%	66	61.7	18.2%			
d. Academic Problem	17	13.6	17.7%	48	51.4	13.2%			
e. Feeling Hurt By Others Behavior	25	28.2	26.0%	110	106.8	30.3%			
f. Not Valued And Trusted By Others	6	5.9	5.9%	22	22.1	5.7%			

4. Conclusion

This study had identified four (4) main sources of life events that trigger Malaysian adolescents' emotion sadness. The sources consisted death and loss, family problem, undesirable behavior, and negative life events. The results indicated male adolescent and female adolescent reported similar sources that trigger their emotion sadness except for negative life events. Male adolescents reported perceived hassle stress, feeling hurt by others behavior and academic problems were the major negative life events that trigger their emotion sadness, but female adolescent reported that perceived feeling hurt by others behavior, separate and apart and disagreement/argument were the major negative life events that trigger their emotion sadness.

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