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Perceived Parenting Style and Adolescents' Social Anxiety in Selangor, Malaysia

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Abstract

Anxiety, especially social anxiety, is the most common mental health issue among Malaysian adolescents, and parenting styles have been suggested to play a crucial role in the development of adolescents' anxiety symptoms. Therefore, this paper investigates the relationship between Malaysian adolescents' perceptions of their parents' parenting styles and their measured level of social anxiety, including differences by age and race. A total of 327 adolescents from international and national secondary schools in Selangor participated in this study. The Parental Perception Questionnaire and Kutcher Generalized Social Anxiety Disorder Scale for Adolescents were used to measure the adolescents' perceptions of parenting styles and social anxiety, respectively. The results showed no significant correlations between parenting styles and social anxiety. In addition, parenting styles did not significantly predict the adolescents' social anxiety. However, there were significant racial and age group differences in the categories of parenting style and levels of social anxiety. In conclusion, the parenting style received by Malaysian adolescents was not significantly related to their social anxiety. Interventions should focus on high-risk groups of adolescents (i.e., Malay adolescents and those aged 15–16 years old) to reduce their social anxiety.

Gaya Mengasuh Anak dan Kecemasan Sosial di kalangan Remaja di Selangor, Malaysia

Abstrak

Kecemasan adalah masalah kesehatan mental yang paling umum di kalangan remaja Malaysia, terutama kecemasan sosial. Pola pengasuhan memainkan peran penting dalam perkembangan gejala kecemasan di kalangan remaja. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk melihat hubungan antara pola pengasuhan yang dirasakan remaja dan kecemasan sosial serta perbedaan budaya yang ada di Malaysia. Sebanyak 327 remaja dari sekolah menengah internasional dan nasional di Kuala Lumpur berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini. Kuesioner persepsi pola asuh orangtua dan skala gangguan kecemasan sosial umum untuk remaja digunakan untuk mengukur persepsi pola pengasuhan dan kecemasan sosial. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tidak ada korelasi yang signifikan untuk pola pengasuhan dan kecemasan sosial. Selain itu, pola pengasuhan tidak secara signifikan memprediksi kecemasan sosial remaja. Namun, ada perbedaan ras dan kelompok usia yang signifikan pada pola pengasuhan dan tingkat kecemasan sosial remaja di Malaysia. Kesimpulannya, pola pengasuhan yang diterima oleh remaja mungkin bukan penyebab utama kecemasan sosial mereka di Malaysia. Intervensi harus lebih fokus pada kelompok remaja berisiko tinggi (Melayu dan mereka yang berusia 15-16 tahun) dalam mengurangi kecemasan sosial mereka.

Keywords: adolescent, age, parenting style, race, social anxiety

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1. Introduction

According to the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2017 (NHMS 2017), the prevalence of anxiety among Malaysian adolescents was 39.7% (Institute for Public Health, 2017), placing it as the most common mental health issue for Malaysian adolescents, followed by

depression (18.3%) and stress (9.6%) (Institute for Public Health, 2017). Social anxiety symptoms are more apparent in adolescents due to the developmental changes that occur during the period of adolescence (Mousavi, Low, & Hashim, 2016). Hence, public attention should be given to anxiety issues, especially social anxiety. Therefore, it is important to investigate

the factors associated with adolescents' social anxiety in Malaysia.

Many theoretical frameworks have proposed that parenting styles play a crucial role in the development of anxiety disorders among children and adolescents (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998; Rapee, Schniering, & Hudson, 2009). This suggests that parenting styles might play a crucial role in the development of adolescents' social anxiety symptoms as well. Moreover, past studies revealed a significant relationship between parenting styles and adolescents' anxiety levels (Knappe, Beesdo-Baum, Fehm, Lieb, & Wittchen, 2012; Smokowski, Cotter, Bacallao, & Evans, 2015). For example, in Smokowski et al. (2015), a negative parenting style was associated with significantly higher levels of anxiety, depression, and aggression, and lower levels of school satisfaction and self-esteem among adolescents. In Knappe et al. (2012), a negative parenting style was significantly associated with social phobia among adolescents. In short, negative parenting styles may be associated with poor mental health for adolescents. Therefore, this study investigates the role of the two main dimensions of parenting style (responsiveness and demandingness) in the development of anxiety symptoms among Malaysian adolescents.

Responsiveness (or affection) and demandingness (or parental control) are the two basic dimensions commonly recognized by researchers who study parenting styles. According to Weaver and Prelow (2005), responsiveness is defined as parents' sensitivity, commitment, and acknowledgment of their children, whereas demandingness is their supervision, demands, and requirements of their children. The different levels of these two dimensions can be combined to produce four parenting styles: (a) authoritative (high demandingness and responsiveness), (b) authoritarian (high responsiveness and low demandingness), (c) uninvolved (low demandingness and low responsiveness) and (d) permissive (low demandingness and high responsiveness) (Pasquali et al., 2012; Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994). However, this study focuses on the two basic dimensions (responsiveness and demandingness), instead of the four types, as the main purpose is to examine whether parenting style is a significant factor associated with adolescents' anxiety symptoms.

Parenting style can be further divided into the maternal parenting style (mother) and paternal parenting style (father). In Malaysia, the paternal parenting style was found to be associated with a lower level of adolescents' anxiety; this relationship was moderated by family socioeconomic status (SES) (Jafari, Baharudin, & Archer, 2013). Instead of family SES, this examines other demographic variables (age group and race) in relation to parenting style and adolescents' social

anxiety. Additionally, Ang et al. (2017) suggested that fathers play a different parenting role than mothers, as shown by the less harmful effects of paternal parenting styles on depression. They proposed that adolescents' psychological well-being is not greatly affected by maladaptive paternal parenting styles as compared to maternal parenting styles. Therefore, more research is needed on the parenting styles of Asian fathers, especially in the Malaysian context (Yahya, Zulkefly, & Baharudin, 2018). This is why both paternal and maternal parenting styles are examined here.

The effect of parent style on adolescents' level of anxiety varies by culture (Mousavi et al., 2016; Varela, Niditch, Hensley-Maloney, Moore, & Creveling, 2013). For instance, studies done in several collectivist countries (countries that prioritize the group over the self) failed to find a significant relationship between the authoritarian parenting style and psychological well-being among adolescents (Mustapha, Shahadan, Khan, Stephan, & Archer, 2017; Rudy & Grusec, 2006). The authoritarian parenting style is considered a norm in Malaysia, which is a collectivist country (Mousavi et al., 2016). Moreover, Jafari et al. (2013) described Malaysia's family culture as encouraging a strong sense of family obligation and discouraging displays of hostility during disagreements. However, there is a lack of studies that investigate the relationship between parenting styles and adolescents' psychological outcomes in a collectivist context, including Malaysia (Jafari et al., 2013). Moreover, the effects of parenting styles on an adolescent's psychological outcome is based solely on the findings from the individualistic countries (countries that prioritize the individual over the entire group), which might not be suitable in the collectivist context of Malaysia (Jafari et al., 2013). It is important to investigate the relationship between parenting style and social anxiety in Malaysia to better understand the role of parenting style in predicting adolescents' social anxiety in Malaysia since the results are not significant in other collectivist countries. The cultural differences in adolescents' perceived parenting style and social anxiety were also examined in terms of race and age group to identify any significant differences within the context of Malaysia. The findings will then contribute to the planning of intervention by targeting the high-risk group of adolescents.

Based on the literature review, this research aims to investigate the relationships between adolescents' perceptions of their mother's responsiveness, mother's demandingness, father's responsiveness, and father's demandingness, and their own measured level of social anxiety. In addition, the study explored the perceived parenting style and adolescents' social anxiety by the adolescents' race and age group to identify any possible differences. Lastly, the predicting effect of different parenting styles on adolescents' social anxiety is examined.

2. Methods

In this study, it was hypothesized that there will be no significant correlation between the perceived parenting styles and social anxiety among Malaysian adolescents. To verify the research hypotheses, a cross-sectional study was conducted using a survey method. Prior to data collection, an estimated sample size of 272 was calculated using the formula proposed by Bartlett, Kotrlik, and Higgins (2001). total of 327 school-going high school students (151 male and 176 female) were recruited via convenient sampling method from an international secondary school and a national secondary school located in Selangor. They were 57.8% international secondary school students and 42.2% national secondary school students with an age range of 13 to 18 years old. Out of the sample, 41.9% were 15–16 years old, 31.8% were 17–18 years old, and 26.3% were 13–14 years old. About half of them were Chinese (50.5%), followed by Malay (42.8%), other races (3.7%) and Indian (3.1%).

The Ministry of Education Malaysia, Selangor State Education Department, and school principals granted the ethical approval and permission to carry out this study. Written parental consent and student assent were obtained prior to the data collection. The participants were briefed by the researcher on the nature of the research, their rights as participants, and confidentiality issues. A pilot study was held prior to the actual data collection to test the reliability of the scales in English; the pilot study involved 30 adolescents (7 male, 23 female) from a national secondary school in Selangor. In pilot study, the scales showed high internal reliability with the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.861 (Kutcher Generalized Social Anxiety Disorder Scale for Adolescents), 0.878 (Parental Perception Questionnaire: Mother Version), and 0.887 (Parental Perception Questionnaire: Father Version).

The Kutcher Generalized Social Anxiety Disorder Scale for Adolescents (K-GSADS-A; Brooks & Kutcher, 2004) was used to measure the participants' level of social anxiety. The K-GSADS-A has two subscales assessing the (a) anxiety level and (b) avoidance level the adolescents link with a situation respectively, with a similar set of 18 items each (e.g., "Initiating conversation with strangers"). In addition, the K-GSADS-A has 11 items evaluating affective distress (e.g., "Feeling judged or critically evaluated by others") and somatic distress (e.g., "Experiencing a panic attack"). The participants rated their answers to each item on a four-point scale from 0 "none" to 3 "severe/total avoidance." The total score of the K-GSADS-A is the sum of the scores of its four subscales: (a) anxiety level, (b) avoidance level, (c) affective distress, and (d) somatic distress. In this study, the K-GSADS-A demonstrated high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.906.

The Parental Perception Questionnaire (PPQ-20; Pasquali et al., 2012) was used to assess parenting styles as perceived by the adolescents. The participants filled out two versions of the PPQ-20: the father version (PPQ-20-F) and the mother version (PPQ-20-M). Both versions measure responsiveness and demandingness, and the participants give their answers on a five-point scale from 0 "not applicable" to 4 "totally applicable." An example item from PPQ-20-F is "I feel better after I talk to him about my problems," while an example item from PPQ-20-M is "It is easy to talk to her." In this study, both versions of the PPQ-20 showed high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.883 (PPQ-20-M) and 0.884 (PPQ-20-F).

The IBM Statistical Package for Social Science version 25 (SPSS; IBM Corp., 2013) was used to perform the statistical analyses. First, the descriptive statistics were computed to generate a demographic profile of the participants. Next, the study hypotheses were verified through inferential statistics with a significance level of $p < 0.05$. Pearson's correlation analysis was run to determine the relationships between mother responsiveness, mother demandingness, father responsiveness, father demandingness, and adolescents' social anxiety. One-way ANOVA was performed twice to examine differences by (a) race and (b) age group among the studied variables, respectively. Finally, a multiple regression analysis was used to investigate the predicting effect of different parenting styles on adolescents' social anxiety.

3. Results

The correlations among mother responsiveness, mother demandingness, father responsiveness, father demandingness, and adolescents' social anxiety are shown in Table 1. According to Table 1, there was no significant correlation between any parenting style and adolescents' social anxiety. The results also indicated that all variables of parenting styles were significantly and positively correlated with each other. The correlation between mother demandingness and father demandingness ($r = 0.644, p < 0.001$) was stronger than the correlation between mother responsiveness and father responsiveness ($r = 0.621, p < 0.001$). This means that fathers and mothers are more consistent in their control over their adolescent children than in showing their affection.

One-way ANOVA revealed that there were significant racial differences in mother responsiveness, mother demandingness, father responsiveness, father demandingness, and adolescents' social anxiety, as shown in Table 2. For mother responsiveness, Malay adolescents had a significantly higher score ($M = 33.9, SD = 7.0$) than Indian adolescents ($M = 29.5, SD = 8.7$) and, in order, other races of adolescents ($M = 26.2, SD = 7.0$).

and Chinese adolescents ($M = 25.7, SD = 8.6$). For mother demandingness, Malay adolescents had a significantly higher score ($M = 21.4, SD = 5.5$) than Indian adolescents ($M = 17.7, SD = 7.3$), Chinese adolescents ($M = 17.5, SD = 6.5$), and other races of adolescents ($M = 16.3, SD = 7.4$), in that order. For father responsiveness, Malay adolescents had a significantly higher score ($M = 26.9, SD = 8.1$) than Indian adolescents ($M = 22.6, SD = 9.2$), Chinese adolescents ($M = 21.0, SD = 8.4$), and other races of adolescents ($M = 18.2, SD = 8.5$). For father demandingness, Malay adolescents had a significantly higher score ($M = 25.2, SD = 7.0$) than Indian adolescents ($M = 20.7, SD = 7.3$), Chinese adolescents ($M = 20.3, SD = 7.7$), and other races of adolescents ($M = 17.4, SD = 7.8$). Furthermore, for social anxiety, Malay adolescents had a significantly higher score ($M = 62.6, SD = 17.3$) than Indian adolescents ($M = 62.0, SD = 11.3$), other races of adolescents ($M = 57.6, SD = 24.3$), and Chinese adolescents ($M = 54.6, SD = 21.4$), in that order. In short, Malay adolescents had significantly higher scores in both parenting style categories (responsiveness and demandingness) from both parents (mother and father) as well as greater levels of social anxiety than their peers in the other racial groups.

Another round of one-way ANOVA revealed significant age group differences in mother demandingness, father demandingness, and adolescents' social anxiety, as displayed in Table 3. For mother demandingness,

adolescents aged 13–14 years old had significantly higher scores ($M = 20.2, SD = 6.4$) than those aged 15–16 years old ($M = 19.3, SD = 6.2$) and 17–18 years old ($M = 18.0, SD = 6.7$), in that order. For father demandingness, adolescents aged 13–14 years old had significantly higher scores ($M = 23.3, SD = 7.7$) than those aged 15–16 years old ($M = 22.9, SD = 7.9$) and 17–18 years old ($M = 20.7, SD = 7.6$). Then, for social anxiety, adolescents aged 15–16 years old had significantly higher scores ($M = 61.3, SD = 20.2$) than those aged 13–14 years old ($M = 59.3, SD = 16.8$) and 17–18 years old ($M = 53.7, SD = 21.3$). In short, adolescents aged 13–14 years old had a significantly higher score in the parenting style of demandingness from both parents (mother and father) than their counterparts in the two older age groups. The parenting style of responsiveness showed no significant differences by adolescents' age group, for either parent.

4. Discussion

Limited empirical studies have investigated the relationship between parenting style and social anxiety in the Malaysian context. This study investigates the relationships between mother responsiveness, mother demandingness, father responsiveness, father demandingness, and adolescents' social anxiety in Malaysia. The results showed no significant relationships

Table 1. Intercorrelations, Means and Standard Deviation (SD) of Variables (N = 327)

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4
1. Mother responsiveness	29.4 (8.8)	1			
2. Mother demandingness	19.1 (6.5)	0.378***	1		
3. Father responsiveness	23.48 (8.8)	0.621***	0.320***	1	
4. Father demandingness	22.3 (7.8)	0.331***	0.644***	0.330***	1
5. Social anxiety	58.4 (20.0)	0.002	0.036	0.009	0.078

Note: *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2. Mean Score and Standard Deviation (SD) of the Variables by Race

Variable	F-value	M (SD)			
		Malay	Chinese	Indian	Other
1. Mother responsiveness	28.296***	33.9 (7.0)	25.7 (8.6)	29.5 (8.7)	26.2 (7.0)
2. Mother demandingness	11.310***	21.4 (5.5)	17.5 (6.5)	17.7 (7.3)	16.3 (7.4)
3. Father responsiveness	14.328***	26.9 (8.1)	21.0 (8.4)	22.6 (9.2)	18.2 (8.5)
4. Father demandingness	13.026***	25.2 (7.0)	20.3 (7.7)	20.7 (7.3)	17.4 (7.8)
5. Social anxiety	4.310**	62.6 (17.3)	54.6 (21.4)	62.0 (11.3)	57.6 (24.3)

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3. Mean Score and Standard Deviation (SD) of the Variables by Age Group

Variable	F-value	M (SD)		
		13–14 years	15–16 years	17–18 years
1. Mother responsiveness	0.658	29.3 (9.1)	30.0 (9.3)	28.6 (7.9)
2. Mother demandingness	3.065*	20.2 (6.4)	19.3 (6.2)	18.0 (6.7)
3. Father responsiveness	1.57	23.8 (8.7)	24.2 (8.8)	22.2 (8.8)
4. Father demandingness	3.214*	23.3 (7.7)	22.9 (7.9)	20.7 (7.6)
5. Social anxiety	4.480*	59.3 (16.8)	61.3 (20.2)	53.7 (21.3)

Note: * $p < 0.05$

between parenting style and adolescents' social anxiety. This finding is consistent with previous studies conducted in collectivist cultures like Malaysia's (Mustapha et al., 2017; Rudy & Grusec, 2006). This is corresponding to past studies which proposed that parenting styles are to be culturally different in predicting the level of anxiety (Mousavi et al., 2016; Varela et al., 2013). In particular, parenting styles were not predictors of adolescents' social anxiety in the context of Malaysia, a collectivist country with multicultural backgrounds. Meanwhile, a stronger correlation was found between mother demandingness and father demandingness than between mother responsiveness and father responsiveness. This indicates that Malaysian parents are more consistent in their control or supervision over their adolescent children than they are in affection-showing.

Moreover, the study showed significant racial differences in the adolescents' reports of mother responsiveness, mother demandingness, father responsiveness, and father demandingness, as well as in their measured level of social anxiety. Malay adolescents had significantly higher scores in the two parenting styles (responsiveness and demandingness) from both parents (mother and father) and more social anxiety than Indian and Chinese adolescents. This shows that the Chinese adolescents perceived their parents as having the least affection and parental control as compared to other races, which is consistent with the findings of Xu et al. (2005). On the other hand, Malay adolescents had the highest scores for parenting styles and social anxiety, demonstrating that they perceived their parents as having the most affection and parental control compared to the other adolescents in other racial groups.

Furthermore, there were significant age group differences in mother demandingness, father demandingness, and adolescents' social anxiety. In mother demandingness and father demandingness, 13–14 year old adolescents had significantly higher scores than their counterparts aged 15–16 years or 17–18 years. This means that the older the age of adolescents, the lower the parental control exerted on them. In terms of parental differences,

parents of both genders behaved similarly in their parental control over their adolescent children by reducing their demandingness as the children grew older. In terms of social anxiety, the adolescents aged 13–14 years showed a moderate level, whereas those aged 15–16 years had the highest level, and those aged 17–18 years had the lowest level.

There are several implications in this study. In terms of theoretical implication, it was suggested that there are differences between the individualistic culture and individualistic culture. This study shows that parenting styles are culturally different in predicting the level of social anxiety observed in Malaysian adolescents as compared to individualistic countries. Thus, mental health professionals should note that parenting styles do not have an adverse effect on the social anxiety of adolescents in Malaysia. Therefore, in terms of practical implication, mental health professionals should take measures to raise awareness of social anxiety and help adolescent Malaysians to overcome it. High risk groups such as those of Malay ethnicity or those aged 15–16 years old should be targeted and prioritized to be reached out to. Schools should be more open to educating their pupils from a young age about social anxiety and how to properly handle it. School counselors should counsel students who are struggling with social anxiety issues, without emphasizing the role of parenting styles since it is not significantly related to social anxiety. Besides, schools could plan for motivational speakers to have a short sharing session on empowering oneself and improving one's self esteem in order to overcome anxiety.

There are a few limitations to this study. First, convenient sampling was employed to collect data from adolescents at an international secondary school and national secondary school in Selangor, Malaysia. The data cannot be used to generalize the social anxiety levels of all Malaysian adolescents as they reflect only the social anxiety levels of adolescents from Selangor. Factors such as the lifestyle, way of upbringing, and social environment of adolescents in Selangor may differ from those of adolescents in different regions of Malaysia.

Therefore, further research is recommended to take the differences of such factors into account. In addition, studies can be conducted on a larger, more extensive scale to enable generalization of the results to the entire population of Malaysian adolescents.

Second, this study adopted a Western scale for measuring the adolescents' perceptions of parenting styles. Most measures of parenting styles are based on individualistic cultures (Yahya et al., 2018), as reflected in items that are more relevant to Westerners compared to Asians (e.g., "Acknowledges my opinions even when they differ from his own" and "Tries to be my 'friend' rather than a 'boss'"). In Asian culture (especially Malaysian culture), parenting styles differ greatly from those of Westerners. Differences are mostly seen in the areas of how parents show care to their children as well as how they raise them. Thus, there is a need for researchers to develop a measurement tool based on collectivist culture to better characterize parenting styles in Malaysia, especially given that cultural differences were found among parenting styles in the analysis by racial groups.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there were no significant relationships found between (a) parenting styles and adolescents' social anxiety and (b) the effect of parenting styles on adolescents' social anxiety in Malaysia. Therefore, the parenting style Malaysian adolescents encounter from their parents was not significantly related to their social anxiety in Malaysia. Moreover, there were significant racial differences in all the parenting styles and adolescents' level of social anxiety as well as significant age group differences in the adolescents' perceptions of parental demandingness and their level of social anxiety. The results showed that Malay adolescents and those aged 15–16 years old had the highest risk for social anxiety; therefore, interventions should focus on these groups.

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