Factors That Influence Mental Illness Among Students in Public Universities

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ABSTRACT

This study is about the interrelations between three factors which are financial distress, health condition and social relation with mental illness among students in Universiti Utara Malaysia. Mental illness affects individuals feeling, mood as well as thinking processes. This condition eventually disturbs the ability and functions that relates towards others. People with same diagnosis face different experience. A mental illness is not based on one specific event, therefore may include a stressful job or home life, victim of a crime, entering the college life or workforce, marriage, children, divorce, job changes or a job loss. Statistical Package software for Social Science (SPSS) Version 25.0 was used to analyse the data. Results showed that financial distress, health condition and social relation have a positive relationship towards mental illness.

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1. Introduction

Mental illness is an ailment which creates disorders in thinking processes as well as behaviours which results in an inability to handle life's ordinary demands and routines. Some of the examples of common disorders are depression, bipolar disorder, dementia, schizophrenia and anxiety disorders. The outcomes may include changes in mood, personality, personal habits and/or social withdrawal. Based on World Health Organisation (2003), mental illness is a worldwide problem, which one in four families has at least one member with a mental disorder.

According to Malaysia Health Minister Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad, there are about 4.2 million people anguishing from various mental health issues (Carvalho, Sivananda & Shagar, 2018). On the other hand, a study by Ministry of Health Malaysia in 2015 indicated that about 29.2 percent of the adults above 16 years old are facing mental health issues. This figure shows the increase of mental illnesses among adolescents. This situation is worrying and if this number keeps hiking up, we may face some serious problems where we will be led by an unstable future leader.

The assistance from professionals recognized the five factors of mental issues namely, the identification of mental health issues, support from parents and environment, positive parodies and expectations of healthcare professionals and finally, the impression towards the problems. The most important factor that needed help is the intial stage which is the identification of mental health issues. People believe that this identification is a turning point where they become conscious of the frequent occurrence of mental illness and the acceptance on getting help for the arising problems.

1.1. Research problem

Mental illness affects individuals' feelings, mood as well as thinking processes. This condition eventually disturbs the ability and functions that relates towards others. Mental illness usually exists during young adulthood (The Kim Foundation, 2018). Young adults will go through series of changes which affects their lifestyle. Some of the examples may include a stressful job or home life, victim of a crime, entering college life or workforce, marriage, children, divorce, job changes or a job loss. These examples can bring added stressors and hesitation. In order to deal with such uncertainty, mental illness repeatedly affects those who are in late teen years or in their early twenties. According to American Psychological Association (2011), mental illness distresses both women and men equally. Their finding also reveals that women experience more depression compared to men, whereas men are more likely to experience an impulse-control or substance use disorder than women.

There are many factors that may lead to the mental illnesses among students. Financial problems, chronic disease, and social relations are the main factors of mental illness.

Mental illnesses are brain-based disorders which usually end in various symptoms that can affect our daily lives. Schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depressive disorder are three commonly diagnosed mental illnesses.

Therefore, the research objectives of this study are to assess whether or not financial distress, health condition and social relation relate to mental illness among Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) students.

2. Literature Review

Mental illness can cause disruption to thinking processes, emotional state, and routines. Lessard (1998) found that mental illness was experienced by adults as well as university students. This is due to a unique environment (e.g. university) that often requires students to balance the various roles and tasks they need to take. Hence, the mental illness phenomenon among university students is a topic that often becomes the study material of most researchers.

2.1. Mental illness

Mental illness discusses the mental health conditions or disorders that impact our thinking processes and behaviour. Mental illness contributes to 15 percent of all recognized diseases worldwide. Moreover, according to the World Health Organization (2003), over 450 million people live with a mental disorder. The organization also added that poor mental health is linked with certain factors namely rapid social prohibition, unwanted lifestyle, threatening issues of violence, and physical ill-health.

Mental health is as equally important as physical health in human life. Mental health is seen from both good and bad perspectives. In an individual's life, the person might experience both perspectives unequally. Those who are facing mental health problems should need someone's help to overcome it. Proper treatment and protection towards mental health among children and youth are essential for individual development in future.

According to Hunt and Einsenberg (2010), epidemiology on health problems among university students is very common however the actual cause which leads towards mental problems among students is still uncertain. Ignorance towards mental health is a major cause for improvement in mental health problems among learners. Researchers (Khan, Sulaiman & Hassali, 2010) also revealed that the students who have experienced depression have appropriate knowledge about symptoms and treatment for depression. Hence, it can be seen that most students who have essential knowledge on mental health have experienced it, which is considered as unhealthy for future generations.

2.2. Conceptualizations of mental illness

Mental health is related to mental disorders. World Health Organization (2003) defined mental health as "a state of well-being whereby individuals recognize their abilities, are able to cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and make a contribution to their communities." In a general point of view, mental health denotes to an individual's ability to develop it, to manage life surroundings and participate in societal activities as well (World Health Organization, 2013). However, the definition of mental health has been revised (World Health Organization, 2013) as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".

Mental illness denotes to various types of mental sicknesses and feature abnormalities in cognition, emotion or mood, and the highest integrative aspects of human behaviour, such as social interactions (Malaysia Mental Health Act, 2001). Mental health and mental sickness are two different notions that establish two sides of a spectrum. Entire conditions that fall between these two sides are reflected as mental health problems.

Normal people do not necessarily have good mental health. It is essential for students to handle good stress that can balance mental health and the environment. In addition, mental health can equip someone to overcome the challenges in their lives. People with good mental health will know to face the stress well. To deal with stress, one can do daily activities or exercise, leading to his or her ability to contribute to the public and society. Thus, good mental health allows a person to generally live a balanced life.

Poor mental illness is a serious unrecognized public health concern. For example, depression, anxiety, panic disorders, agoraphobia, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, continues to lower the work productivity. According to Ministry of Health Malaysia (2011), depression was one of the causes of death in Malaysia. In the National Mobility Health study conducted by the Ministry of Health Malaysia in 2011, 1.8 percent of adults in Malaysia suffer from depression and 1.7 percent of them are suffering from anxiety.

2.3. Antecedents of mental illness

An individual with mental illness faces difficulties, struggling on their own. Mental illness can be coped with, but it depends on the person's ability to identify and manage the problem. First, the symptoms show up in various ways such as hallucination (Sani, 2018), delusions, anxiety, or mood swings. Second, the society lacks awareness about the mental illness and causes the affected person to face difficulties and become worse. Thus, mental illness is not only focusing on symptoms but also the reactions of society which will bring the awareness towards the illness in a person (Rusch, Angermeyer, & Corrigan, 2005).

2.3.1. Financial distress

As this research concentrates on students in higher level education, three variables have been identified that influence mental illness among students. Firstly, financial distress causes mental illness in students. The question may arise, "why are students facing financial distress?" as it may seem that they do not any commitments to undertake. According to Joo (1998), financial distress is caused by financial situation which includes personal, family, and various other financial conditions. In this, financial behaviour is related to education, financial independence, and risk tolerance (Joo & Grable, 2004). This can be said because the students pursuing higher level education are unable to cope up with the loan itself. This has urged the students to find alternative ways to get sufficient financial assistance to support their expenses throughout the semesters. These actions create stress and worriedness and can lead to mental illness, moreover if the families are also facing financial difficulties.

2.3.2. Health condition

Health condition is also another variable that causes the students to experience mental illness. A number of teenagers and youngsters are affected by prolonged health conditions which leads to mental health issues (Delamater, Guzman & Aparicio, 2017). Chronic diseases such as cancer and diabetes lead to mental illnesses and this happens because they are unable to accept the reality of the sickness that they are experiencing, resulting in mental instability. This may also lead to very suicide cases among people if they cannot recover from such mental illnesses.

2.3.3. Social relations

Social relations is a factor which almost all the students, especially those in the first semester at university, will face as they go through a transition process. The transition process will be different across students – some may go through a smoother transition, while others may take a longer time to adjust (Pedrelli, Nyer, Yeung, Zulauf & Wilens, 2015). This scenario can be related to when the students achieve academic excellences at school level but are unable to give the perform as well when they are at university. Higher competition in pursuing academic excellence puts stress on students in realizing their vision. Other than that, age becomes a barrier for certain students in university who are not willing to accept others' opinions if their friends are younger than them. Usually, mental illness can be experienced in many situations such as isolation, lack of sleep, high worriedness, and biological symptoms (Mushtaq, Shoib, Shah & Mushtaq, 2014).

The next section discusses the hypotheses development and research framework in detail.

2.4 The relationship between financial distress and mental illness

Financial distress is understood to be the most common factor that may lead to mental illness in an individual. However, the researchers concluded that the individuals who have suffered financial problems for long periods are more likely to have negative effects on their cognitive and emotional well-being (Klontz, Britt, Archuleta & Klontz, 2012). The relationship between financial difficulties and poor mental health faced by the students has been discussed in previous research. In order to investigate the relationship, a number of undergraduate students have been taken as a sample to measure the relationship between financial distress and mental illness among students. In relation with the findings, it has been found that greater financial difficulties create an atmosphere for greater depression for the students (Richardson, Elliot, Roberts & Jansen, 2017).

The period of adulthood is ordinarily related with a mental health problem because it is a momentous life change which happens to these youngsters and introduces the element of financial responsibility (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Andrews and Wilding's (2004) research concluded that financial stressors were certainly connected with high anxiety and depression among college students. Debt has become a serious factor that students are always concerned about during their higher education studies, because the student loans are usually not sufficient to be fund their expenses. After deducting the college fees, the remaining loan amount that they receive to cover expenses is much lower. The amount they need to use throughout the semester will be a greater stress as the prices of certain things that need to be purchased increases. In addition, O'Brien and Shedd (2001) also stated that low-income students usually receive a common source of aid. Hence, this financial help is insufficient to fulfil their financial needs.

Financial difficulties are usually faced by the students who come from poorer families. They find it difficult to smooth their expenses, causing them to find other sources of income. In this case, certain students fall into worse depression, which results in abandoning their studies (Richardson, et. al. 2017).

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Financial distress is positively related to mental illness.

2.5 The relationship between health condition and mental illness

Health problems are understood to be one of the factors that may lead to mental illnesses. Past research shows that there are number of teenagers and youngsters affected by serious health conditions which led to mental health issues (Delamater et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to address this problem and promote a healthcare policy that integrates psychological and behavioural interventions along with medical

interventions. This study also suggested that more controlled studies need to be done which emphasizes on the effectiveness and cost offset regarding mental illness.

In various research, it has been stated that less assignation in medical and mental health care can cause death specifically for those who experiencing serious mental health problems (Lambert & Newcomer, 2009; Piatt, Munetz, & Ritter, 2010; Viron & Stern, 2010). Other research pointed out that only 40 percent of people in the United States who are experiencing serious mental illness, receive general medical treatment (Wang, Demler, & Kessler, 2002). Furthermore, in the United States, the lifespan of people with severe mental illness, according to public mental health agencies in eight states from 1997 to 2000, was reported to be at least 30 percent shorter than that for the general population, whereas in the United Kingdom, it is only 65 percent.

Therefore, based on the findings above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Health condition is positively related to mental illness.

2.6 The relationship between social relations and mental illness

Mental illness is often inclined by social determinants such as gender, social class, race, ethnicity, and household patterns, social institutions such as disability and social security systems and healthcare organizations. The growing number of people who are affected with mental illness can be managed through family support, occupation, income support and medical care (Mushtaq et al., 2014).

Researchers agree that social relationships influence an individual's mental and psychological well-being. According to Levy, Ricketts and Le Blanc (2010), if the mental health problems cannot be identified by family members, it can be recognized by relatives and close friends who can influence the affected people in the decision to get expert assistance.

Postnatal depression, an example of mental well-being problem, is seen to affect the effectiveness and parental role development, social outcomes such as marital dissatisfaction (Whisman, 2006) and marital breakdown (Stein et al., 2000; World Health Organization, 2001).

There are various factors in social relationships that affect students' mental health such as family pressure, education and peer factors. According to Mastura, Fadilah, and Nor (2007), top five determinants that cause stress among students are changes in sleep routines and diet, semester breaks, increased workload and receiving new tasks. This is due to various responsibilities and tasks that need to be accomplished by students in university.

Moreover, families are also major contributors either being the causing factor or also becoming the support system in enduring the mental illness. The understanding of individuals with mental illnesses differs from television interpretations of mental illness, to experiencing a friend or co-worker suffering with mental illness, to having a family member with mental illness, and having the individual himself/herself having mental illness (Corrigan, Edwards, Green, Diwan, & Penn, 2001).

In other cases, it can be influenced by their intense environment or a traumatic life episode. Contemporary studies have demonstrated many issues pertaining to social conditions such as child abuse or neglect, poor neighbourhood conditions, and low social support. All these triggers the forms of mental illness in a person (Fisher & Baum, 2010).

The study by Ooi (2002) seeks to identify the causes of stress among Universiti Teknologi Malaysia students. The findings show that environmental factor is the core contributor of students' stress level compared to academic, financial, family, social and intrapersonal factors. The overall pressure level of the students is also low and at moderate level of anxiety. Meanwhile, there is significant relationship between stress and academic achievement and no significant difference in the level of stress among students according to the year of study, the degree followed and the gender.

Based on the discussions above, the following hypothesis is developed:

H3: Social relations is positively related to mental illness

2.7 Proposed conceptual framework

Figure 1 below shows the conceptual model of the relationship between financial distress, health condition, social relations, and mental illness.

Financial Distress

Health Condition

Mental Illness

Social Relations

Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

The population of this study was UUM students and the appropriate sample size was determined via Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size calculation. This calculation was applied to validate the implications of a sample size in order to test the relationship between variables. Based on the sample size calculation, 379 samples were used in further analysis.

The mental illness questionnaires measured students' awareness and perceptions about mental illness by using stigma items adopted from Eisenberg, Downs, Golberstein & Zivin (2009). Secondly, financial distress was measured using 10 items developed by Archuleta, Dale and Spann (2013). As for the health condition, 9 items adopted from Andrews and Wilding (2004) were included. Next, for social relations, 9 items were included (Aldiabat, Matani & Le Navenec, 2014).

4. Results and Discussions

In line with the hypothesis, the findings from analysis show that the financial distress positively leads to mental illness (Table 1). It shows that the students agreed or either they are struggling in financial insufficiency themselves in university. Furthermore, Richardson et. al. (2017) has found that greater financial difficulties cause the students to atmosphere a greater depression. In addition, Andrews and Wilding (2004) specified that financial stressors were certainly connected with increased anxiety and depression attitudes among students.

Table 1. Pearson correlations for main variables

	Financial	Health	Social	Mental
	Distress	Condition	Relations	Illness
Financial Distress	1			
Health Condition	0.75**	1		
Social Relations	0.62**	0.64**	1	
Mental Illness	0.89**	0.83**	0.84**	1

Note: ** *Correlation coefficient is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)*

Besides that, health condition also has positive relationship towards mental illness among UUM students (r = 0.83, p<0.01). It is consistent with previous study (Delamater et al., 2017) which indicated that a number of teenagers and adolescent have serious health conditions and many of them suffer from mental health problems related to their situations.

Finally, social relations are also positively related to mental illness (r = 0.84, p<0.01). This indicates that social relations are one of the factors that contribute towards mental illness among UUM students. The finding is consistent with Andrews and Wilding (2004) which found that social relations was certainly connected with increased anxiety and depression attitudes among college students.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the study focuses on three factors which are financial, health and social relations. All the three factors have positive relationships with mental illness among students. Thus, all hypotheses (i.e. H1, H2 and H3) were accepted. By understanding the mental illness factors, it will help us to reduce some causes that may affect the students' well-being. Nevertheless, this study would have given the students a picture

of how and why students are suffering mental illness. This study also encourages the students to identify and manage their problems to avoid situation from exacerbating in the future.

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