



Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

**FAMILY STRUGGLES AND ITS IMPACT ON PSYCHOLOGICAL
WELLBEING OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS DURING COVID-19
PANDEMIC**

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Bachelor of Psychology (Honours)

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Final Year Project Report

Masters

PhD

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This declaration is made on the 05th day of July 2021.

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OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

NUR RAIHANI BINTI MOHD YUSRI AZHAR

This project is submitted
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a
Bachelor of Psychology with Honours

Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK
(2021)

The project entitled 'Family Struggles and Its Impact on Psychological Wellbeing of First-Year Students during COVID-19 Pandemic' was prepared by Nur Raihani Binti Mohd Yusri Azhar and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Psychology (Honours).

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the family struggles and challenges faced by eight UNIMAS first-year students during COVID-19 pandemic. The purposes are to understand how the pandemic affects the family which then affect student's psychological wellbeing and to explore the coping strategies used by them to maintain their psychological wellbeing when dealing with these challenges. Participants reported that they experienced family struggles such as financial hardship, relationship problems and having to juggle between their roles as students and children. Despite that, they reported positive aspects of staying at home during the pandemic with their family such as they can strengthen the bond, they get enough care, and they have good support system. Participants also revealed that they face other challenges as first-year students during the pandemic such as academic struggle and personal struggle. Positive Psychology PERMA Model approach was utilised as their coping strategies to maintain their psychological wellbeing during the COVID-19 outbreak which includes the element positive emotions, engagement, relationship, meaning and accomplishment. This study can lead to further implications on the psychological wellbeing of the first-year students in the new normal of public higher education institutions.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneroka cabaran keluarga yang dihadapi oleh lapan pelajar tahun pertama UNIMAS semasa pandemik COVID-19. Tujuannya adalah untuk memahami bagaimana pandemik mempengaruhi keluarga yang kemudiannya mempengaruhi kesejahteraan psikologi pelajar dan untuk meneroka strategi daya tindak yang digunakan oleh mereka untuk mengekalkan kesejahteraan psikologi mereka ketika menghadapi cabaran ini. Peserta melaporkan bahawa mereka mengalami cabaran keluarga seperti kesulitan kewangan, masalah hubungan dan harus berselisih antara peranan mereka sebagai pelajar dan anak-anak. Walaupun begitu, mereka melaporkan aspek positif tinggal di rumah semasa wabak dengan keluarga mereka seperti mereka dapat mengeratkan ikatan, mereka mendapat jagaan yang cukup, dan mereka mempunyai sistem sokongan yang baik. Peserta juga mendedahkan bahawa mereka menghadapi cabaran lain sebagai pelajar tahun pertama semasa wabak ini seperti cabaran akademik dan cabaran peribadi. Pendekatan Model PERMA Psikologi Positif digunakan sebagai strategi daya tindak untuk menjaga kesejahteraan psikologi mereka semasa wabak COVID-19 yang merangkumi elemen emosi positif, penglibatan, hubungan, makna dan pencapaian.. Kajian ini boleh membawa implikasi lebih lanjut terhadap kesejahteraan psikologi pelajar tahun pertama dalam norma baharu di institusi pengajian tinggi awam.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

The details of the research will be discussed in this chapter. This chapter includes background of study, problem statement, research objectives and questions, research framework, significance of study, and the definition of terms used in this study.

1.1 Background of Study

Guo et. al. (2019) stated that the spread of COVID-19 disease started in Wuhan, China since 12th December 2019 (as cited in Elengoe, 2020) and the first detected case in Malaysia was on 25th January 2020 involving 3 Chinese tourists (New Straits Times, 2020 as cited in Elengoe, 2020). The rise of COVID-19 cases started in March with beyond 553 cases which resulted in the announcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO) by the Prime Minister starting from 18th March 2020 (Sukumaran, 2020 as cited in Elengoe, 2020) until this very day. The announcement of MCO caused most university students to be sent home for safety purposes. The students started having online distance learning (ODL) for upcoming semesters during the MCO period.

Based on previous studies, quarantine have shown negative psychological impacts on students. For instance, a study done by Rogowska, Kuśnierz and Bokszczanin (2020) have shown that Polish university students experience very high stress and anxiety and needed support to go through the pandemic. Another study by Islam, Barna, Raihan, Khan and Hossain (2020) focused on Bangladeshi college and university students who were home-quarantined and concluded that students are at high risk of psychological effects during the outbreak due to stress, anxiety, and socio-economic status of family. A third study that the

current researcher would like to highlight was a study done by Sundarassen, Chinna, Kamaludin, Nurunnabi, Baloch, Khoshaim, Hossain and Sukayt (2020) on Malaysian students which came to a conclusion that the participants have almost severe stress and high anxiety during the MCO period due to online classes and juggling between house chores and assignments. This supported the numbers announced by the 2019 National Health & Morbidity Survey where close to half a million people in Malaysia experienced symptoms of depression due to changes in life caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Movement Control Order (MCO).

However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, most researchers focused on doing studies involving healthcare workers who are the front-liners and also older adults who are more vulnerable. A study involving healthcare workers in 2020 found that psychological wellbeing and resilience can be raised if they enhance their quality of sleep, life satisfaction and positive emotions during this outbreak (Bozdag & Ergun, 2020). Another study was done on older adults in Spain and showed that older adults who did Vigorous Physical Activity (VPA) and Moderate to Vigorous Physical Activity (MVPA) can increase their psychological wellbeing during the country's lockdown (Carriedo, Cecchini, Fernandez-Rio & Méndez-Giménez, 2020). These two research have given several ways to increase or maintain psychological wellbeing during the pandemic but on different groups in the society. Hence why the current researcher chose a different group in the society who are the first-year students.

According to a consultant clinical psychologist, Dr Urmilah Dass in New Straits Times (2020), MCO period would highly affect families with relationship, financial, and other problems. She also said that strong coping mechanisms and good support system are very much crucial at this time. Nonetheless, the scarcity of information on how family struggles impacted psychological wellbeing of students during this pandemic is unfortunate

because it is the proof that the society appears to be requiring if they are to support students at this critical time. Hence, this study will attempt to contribute to the society by exploring the family struggles faced by first-year students during COVID-19 pandemic and how they cope with it. This study aims to explore students' psychological wellbeing in a different perspective and using a different method than previous studies have done.

Therefore, the main goal of this research is to find out how the psychological wellbeing of students is influenced by family struggles during the outbreak. The researcher would also like to concentrate on students of the first year as they may face more difficulties. Other than that, the researcher wants to investigate the coping mechanisms used by the students more thoroughly. Finally, the researcher would like to find out how the pandemic can cause family struggles that then affect the psychological wellbeing of the student.

1.2 Problem Statement

Research on students' psychological wellbeing were mostly using surveys, conducted quantitatively to obtain data from the participants (eg, Davoren, Fitzgerald, Shiely & Perry, 2013; Liu, Ping & Gao, 2019; O'Brien, Tang & Hall, 2011; Olasupo, Idemudia & Dimatkakso, 2018; and Punia & Malaviya, 2015). This means that their studies used questionnaires and surveys to obtain data which might also mean the depth of data may not be high. However, in this study, the researcher will use a qualitative method by interviewing participants as there are less to none of the topic's studies are done in this method that the researcher knows of. With this method, the researcher may be able to obtain data in higher depth and have better understanding about students' psychological wellbeing.

Besides that, other studies were conducted in universities, which means that students were present physically. For instance, a study done by Davoren et. al. (2013) was conducted

in Ireland and their questionnaires were distributed to students who were attending face-to-face lectures. Another study was done by Olasupo et. al. (2018) in South African University and questionnaires were distributed during lectures and in their residence halls. This differs from the current research as the students are currently staying at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the researcher will have to do the study virtually to obtain the data needed.

Other than that, the researcher will also focus on students' psychological wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because there is lack of research done on students' psychological wellbeing during this outbreak. Most studies are usually done on front-liners, who are the medical staffs and healthcare professionals (eg, Bozdag & Ergun, 2020; Qasem Surrati, Asad Mansuri & Ayadh Alihabi, 2020; and Wong, Olusanya, Parulekar & Highfield, 2020). Recent studies also focused on older adults (Carriedo et. al., 2020, and Lopez, Perez-Rojo, Noriega, Carretero, Velasco, Martinez-Huertas, Lopez-Frutos & Galarraga, 2020). Rather than focusing on these groups of people, the current study will be focusing on university students as they may give out different results on how the pandemic affect their psychological wellbeing.

Besides, most studies on students' psychological wellbeing focused on university challenges (eg, Davoren et. al., 2013; Liu et. al., 2019; O'Brien et. al., 2011; Olasupo et. al., 2018; and Punia & Malaviya, 2015) which give out results that differ from the current study will investigate on. The current study will focus on how family challenges affect students' psychological wellbeing as there are no studies about this that the researcher knows of.

Finally, not many studies are done towards Malaysian students during the COVID-19 outbreak regarding their psychological wellbeing except (Kamaludin, Chinna, Sundarassen, Khoshaim, Nurunnabi, Baloch, Sukayt & Hossain, 2020; and Sundarassen et. al., 2020). Most studies are done in the overseas with Western perspectives (Capone, Caso, Donizzetti &

Procentese, 2020; Kecojevic, Basch, Sullivan & Davi, 2020; and Rogowska et. al., 2020). The current study will focus on Malaysian students' psychological wellbeing which may give out results and discussions from an Asian perspective. This perspective may be different which can benefit future researchers who decided to study on students' psychological wellbeing during a pandemic.

1.3 Objectives

1. To explore the family struggles and challenges faced by first-year students during COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To understand how the pandemic affects the family which then affect student's psychological wellbeing.
3. To explore the coping strategies used by first-year students to maintain psychological wellbeing when dealing with family challenges.

1.4 Research Framework

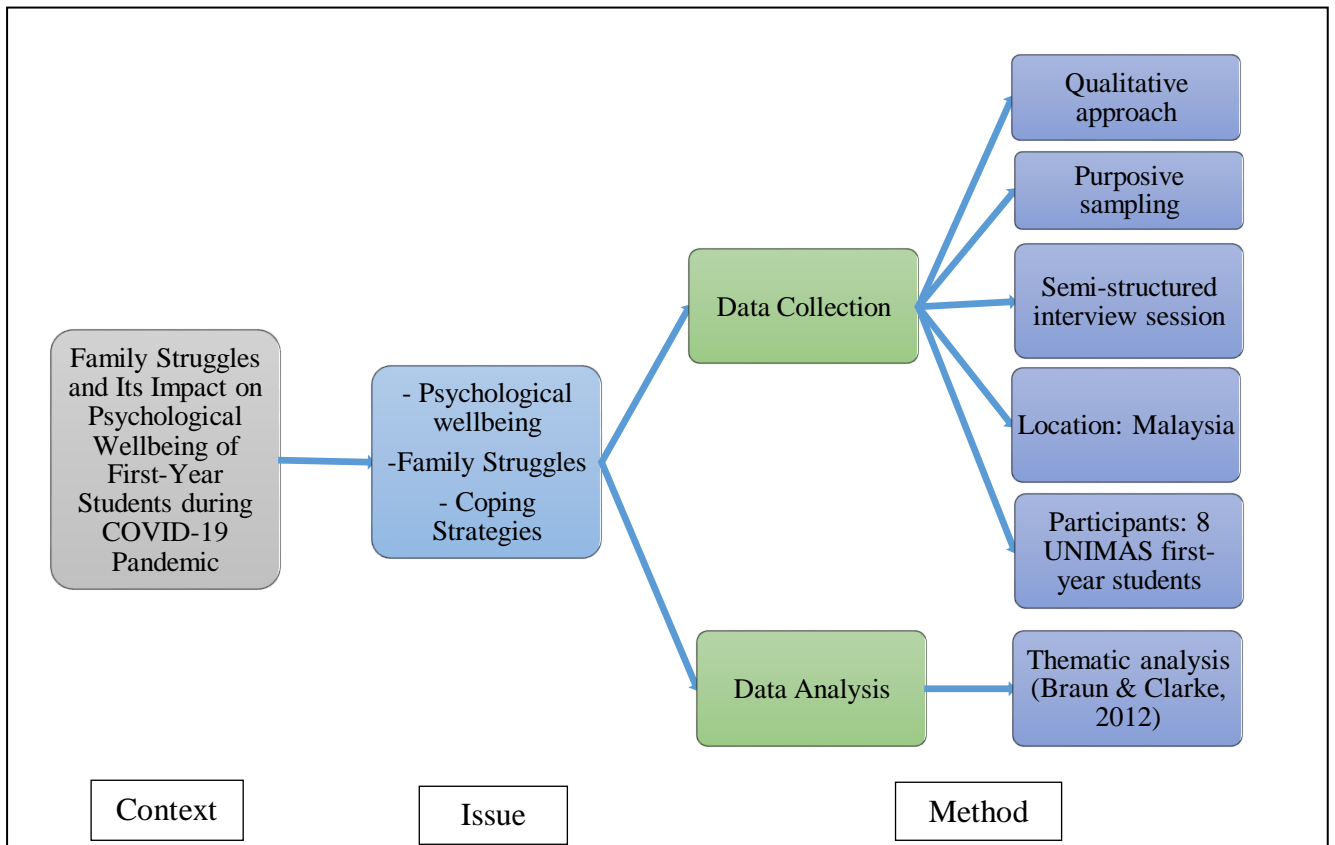


Figure 1: Research Framework

1.5 Research Questions

1.5.1 Main Question

1. How would the first-year students describe their psychological wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

1.5.2 Sub-questions

1. How do the first-year students describe the family struggles and challenges that they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How does the pandemic affect the family and the student's psychological wellbeing?
3. How do the first-year students who have family challenges maintain their psychological wellbeing during the pandemic?

1.6 Significance of Study

The findings of the study will give information regarding coping strategies that participants used to maintain their psychological wellbeing during the outbreak. This information will benefit other students who are facing similar challenges or struggles when trying to maintain their psychological wellbeing.

Besides, the results of this study also contributed to the society by giving higher awareness on how one's psychological wellbeing is during a pandemic. The study will benefit families or parents by providing information that student's psychological wellbeing can also be affected by factors other than university challenges. This will help them to improve their surrounding environment to improve their child's psychological wellbeing.

Lastly, the researcher of current study may uncover significant areas in understanding the psychological wellbeing of students that previous researchers may not be able to find out, which in this case is exploring student's psychological wellbeing due to family struggles during a recent pandemic. This will motivate future researchers to do research on factors or challenges other than family-related, that might affect one's psychological wellbeing during a pandemic. It may also motivate future researchers to do research regarding other types of wellbeing that may be affected during a pandemic, to students. Hence, this study is significant to the society, future researchers, and the researcher itself.

1.7 Definition of Terms

In this study, terms will be defined in two areas which are conceptual and operational.

1.7.1 Family Struggle

In terms of conceptual definition, family struggle or conflict relates to active disagreement among family members (Marta & Alfieri, 2014). Marta & Alfieri (2014) stated that this disagreement can take a wide range of forms, including verbal, physical, sexual, financial, or psychological, due to the nature of family relationships. They also added that it can involve different combinations of family members.

Operationally, the current researcher measures family struggle by asking a few questions to the participants regarding the home environment and their relationship with their family members.

1.7.2 Psychological Wellbeing

According to Burns (2017), psychological wellbeing can be conceptually defined as positive levels of inter- and intra-individual development that include one's relationship with others and attitudes of self-reference that include one's sense of accomplishment and self-growth. PERMA Model proposed by Seligman (2011) comprises of what a good psychological wellbeing has:

i) P – Positive Emotions

Positive emotions are the good things that we feel such as joy, hope and gratitude. Life satisfaction, longevity, mindfulness, social benefits, job outcomes, and physical wellbeing are positively linked to them (Coffey, Wray-Lake, Branand & Mashek, 2014).

ii) E – Engagement

Engagement refers to the state in which people may be completely engaged and absorbed in activities and use their curiosity and abilities to explore.

iii) R – Relationships

Relationships means feeling valued and loved and having positive relationships with others.

iv) M – Meaning

Meaning indicates that individuals feel the sense of belonging and perceive something that they believe is more meaningful than themselves.

v) A – Accomplishment

Accomplishment shows that individuals can achieve success, aim for positive results, and achieve them for their own sakes (Seligman, 2011).

In the current study, psychological wellbeing is operationally defined by participants description of how their relationship with families and home environment are during the pandemic and how they focus on self-care to maintain their mental health at that time.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher discusses on previous research that are related to first-year students' psychological wellbeing in other countries and Malaysian perspectives, the struggles faced by students during pandemic and the coping strategies of the first-year students. Besides that, the theory of positive psychology will also be discussed.

2.1 Psychological Wellbeing of Students in Other Countries

Psychological well-being (PWB) is "the accomplishment of the full psychological potential of someone" (Carr, 2004, p. 36 as cited in Stamp, Crust, Swann, Perry, Clough & Marchant, 2015). Ryff (1989) identified six separate components that reflect the PWB six-factor model consisting of (1) self-acceptance (positive evaluations of oneself and one's past life), (2) personal growth (sense of growth and continued growth as an individual), (3) life purpose (belief that one's life is important), (4) positive relationships with others (existence of meaningful relationships with others), (5) environmental mastery (the ability to control one's life and the environment effectively), and (6) autonomy (a sense of self-determination) (as cited in Stamp et. al., 2015).

In recent years, the adaptation of college students in the first year has been the subject of study (Walker, 2009 as cited in Sharma & Tankha, 2014). According to these studies, the degree of PWB has a profound influence on the adaptation of the first-year students' challenging lives. Bewick and colleagues (2010) found that as a measure of the degree of psychological well-being among students, the amount of psychological stress is greater at the beginning of the college year (as cited in Sharma & Tankha, 2014). For several students facing the difficulties of independent living, forming new friendships or support system, and

adapting to new learning systems, the first-year transition is usually reported as stressful (Scanlon, Rowling & Webber 2010 as cited in Stamp et. al., 2015).

Stamp et. al. (2015) who did a study theorizing that mental toughness and psychological wellbeing has significant positive relationship towards university students in United Kingdom. They concluded that mental toughness positively affected student's psychological wellbeing regardless of year of study. The strongest predictor for the student's psychological wellbeing was commitment in which students managing complex demands for their university life while the non-significant predictor was emotional control. Other than that, a study by Morales-Rodríguez, Espigares-López, Brown and Pérez-Mármol (2020) on students from a Spanish university found the relationship between psychosocial factors and psychological wellbeing to be significant. They found that students who do cooperative learning have higher self-acceptance leading to higher level of PWB.

Meanwhile, Kilgo, Mollet and Pascarella (2016) who did their study in Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNS) suggested that involvement in college activities positively affect first-year students' psychological wellbeing. They found that other than health-related predictors including physical activity and sleep patterns, student participation in extracurricular activities positively impact the psychological well-being of students. Hence, this study concluded that psychological wellbeing of first-year students were also affected by their involvement in college activities. In terms of major, Sharma and Tankha (2014) found that science students have better psychological wellbeing than commerce students in a private university in Jaipur, Rajasthan. They concluded that the difference in level of psychological wellbeing in the first-year students was caused by differences in their syllabus. They therefore suggested that business group students should be given more application-oriented environments and tasks to increase their PWB levels to put them comparable with the science group. They also suggested that activities involving groups

and goal-oriented achievements should be done more to improve the PWB of the business students.

Another study done by Punia and Malviya (2018) in India found that students from low-income families typically show similar general well-being trends to students from middle-income families. Specifically, autonomy is negatively linked to being from a low-income family, but it is also correlated with having greater meaning in life and slightly higher self-acceptance (Punia & Malviya, 2018). Punia and Malviya (2018) also added major PWB advantages are observable in students from high-income families. These students have greater environmental mastery, positive connections with others, purpose in life, self-acceptance, and overall PWB than students from middle-income families. Besides this, findings from a study by Ratanasiripong, China and Toyama (2018) showed that higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress are present in university students from lower economic status households in Okinawa, Japan. They discussed that this negative association may happen because university students from families with lower economic status frequently face additional obstacles, including minimal financial resources, higher hours of work than other peers, insufficient academic preparation, lack of family support for academic pursuit, and other family concerns that demand their time and attention. Therefore, these studies proved that socioeconomic adversity affected first-year students' psychological wellbeing.

From the findings of previous research, it can be seen that the level of PWB of first-year students are mostly affected by adapting to university challenges. In terms of family-related factor, socioeconomic status seemed to be studied mostly by previous researchers to assess first-year students' psychological wellbeing. Then, the current researcher will explain how students' PWB are interpreted in Malaysia in Chapter 2.2.