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Final Year Undergraduate Psychology Students' Development of Self-Concept, Personal Perceptions of Degree, Career Preference, Readiness and Perceived Job Prospects

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ABSTRACT

There is an influx of job seekers in the current economic climate thus competition for a job tightens. This paper aims to identify psychology students' development of self-concept, perceptions of their degree, their career preferences and perceived job prospects. This study employed instrumental case study design and open-ended interview questions to explore participants' perceptions and opinions. Eight final year psychology students from International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) were recruited through convenience sampling. The interview sessions were conducted through online virtual meeting. The transcribed interview was analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis resulted in three main themes and each theme has subthemes. The themes identified explained that students' perceptions of their degree is characterized by the establishment of self-concept, personal growth, acquired academic and employability skills. Additionally, students' career preferences and job prospects were influenced by their degree experiences. There are some suggestions made related to the policy and practices to improve psychology students' job prospects.

Keywords: perception, career preference, self-concept, growth, exploration

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, the selection of job is not a decision that can be made instantly as every career field requires a person to be equipped with specific type of education that comes with its own experiences, skills, and personality traits that are good fit for the career (Dubrin, 2004). Therefore, the process of career selection may have started way before the enrolment into a university. Students who are gradually uncovering their passions tend to choose a desired stream in high school that would be leading them to their future career. Also, parents, schoolteachers, and career officers assist in giving career guidance throughout the process (Ferreira et al., 2007). Choosing a career is known as one of the most complex yet important decisions in life, hence, the needs in being thoughtful and careful along the selection process (Serbes & Albay, 2017). The chosen career will bring either positive or negative impacts and determine the kind of life that one will be living in. Ahmed et al. (2017) stated that making the wrong career choice will cause a waste of time, money, energy, and motivation. The efforts that are not directed to the right direction will result in unmet expectations as well as wastage of resources and eventually cause frustration and disappointment.

When it comes to career selection and job prospect, it is important to acknowledge the factors that influence career development including personal growth, skills development and preferred career after graduation (Super & Jordaan, 1973; Super & Knasel, 1981). Nyamwange (2016) believes that the

choices are subjected to several influences but can be categorised into two factors namely, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic factors are personal in nature and related to biological forces. Intrinsic factors that are responsible in influencing the career decision making include one's level of intelligence, personality, self-concept, occupational knowledge, interests, and values (Barrow, 2009). Extrinsic factors on the other hand are external in nature and can be evident by environmental factors. The examples are social contacts, role models, state of economy, ethnic background, choice of subjects, and educational background (Nyamwange, 2016). Zunker (2002) mentioned that the establishment of personality and development of interest of an individual are greatly influenced by the extrinsic factors. This factor could be the experiences they face while completing their degree.

In pursuing a specific career that requires an undergraduate level of education, the shortage of skilled vacancies in the job market will be a hindrance to one's career planning. According to Ministry of Human Resource's job portal MYFutureJobs, there are 47,639 available degree-level job but the number of degree graduates who are actively seeking for job is 121,429 (Pfordten, 2020). The total job seekers that outnumbered the total vacancies for skilled jobs has resulted in the over-supply of fresh graduates in the labour market and eventually leads to the phenomenon of underemployment where the degree graduates have to opt for semi-skilled or low-skilled jobs. Moreover, the fresh graduates seem stuck in-between situation of being underqualified and inexperienced for most high-skilled jobs, and overqualified for the remaining available jobs (Mottain, 2019). In addition, some graduates eventually secured a position in a field unrelated to their degree major (Kim, 2019).

The influx of job seekers calls for a competitive job market thus graduates need to prepare to be marketable upon graduation. However, the reality in Malaysia fails to achieve this. According to Ang (2015), TalentCorp Malaysia released a report in 2014 and mentioned that Malaysian graduates lack knowledge of employers' expectations, and it resulted in losing to their competitors. This indicates the need of having the awareness of required competencies. Regardless of the current condition of job market in Malaysia, the responsibility lies among future graduates to identify and be aware of the qualifications gained from the tertiary education in order to plan for their employment.

Currently, there is a lack of research that have attempted to explore this phenomenon among undergraduate psychology students. Majority of past studies predominantly looked at non-psychology students who are outside Malaysia. While countries like the U.S. continuously seek to improve the employability of their psychology graduates (Donaldson & Berger, 2006; Strapp et al., 2017), Malaysia might still be lagging behind as per indicated in the latest statistics and remarks by employers (Mottain, 2019; Pfordten, 2020). Plus, past research heavily focused on what makes graduates employable while the degree experience that could either foster or suppress self-growth important for career development were overlooked. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the development of self-concept, personal perceptions of degree, career preference, readiness and perceived job prospects from the lens of psychology students. To fulfil the objectives, semi-structured interview using eight open-ended questions were employed. The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify themes that reflect the textual data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perceptions of Education

A few past studies have been reviewed in order to have a general idea of students' perception towards their education. Furberg (2010) believes that students' perception of their education changes over time as they keep on progressing throughout their learning years. He explored the changes of students' perception towards their education by comparing the variables of learning, responsibility, engagement, and satisfaction. A survey with questions that are categorized according to the variables was developed

and distributed to students of Umea university School of Business. The results showed that students' overall perception towards their education is positive as they are fairly satisfied with the education. In terms of learning, students realised the importance of the knowledge and intend to put the knowledge into practice in their lives. The goal of learning is no longer about passing the tests and exams. In terms of responsibility, students are becoming more individualistic in the sense that they are starting to realise that it is their responsibility to strive for success in education.

Next, a quantitative research by Misran and Sahuri (2013) intended to identify the perceptions of UKM Engineering undergraduate students towards engineering courses offered at the university. Engineering students of all cohorts were given a survey and their perception towards engineering program were compared according to their cohort. The pattern shown in their perceptions was correlated with the learning experience that they go through. The researchers found that each cohort group has a similar trend in the perceptions towards engineering program. The findings showed that students agree that UKM offers the best engineering program compared to other local universities and they show high motivation in pursuing master's degree in engineering field. However, the students claimed that they are not well-prepared to work as an engineer after graduate and most of them are still in the process of mastering the required knowledge. They are still lacking skills and knowledge to become a real engineer.

The findings from the past studies showed that students' perceptions of their education are shaped according to what they are getting from the education itself. If the education benefits them in any way, students tend to have a positive perception on the education. The experiences that put them at disadvantages were more likely to result in negative perception of the degree. However, the perceptions are not permanent as students will keep progressing. There is a need for the current study to examine how the progress of students throughout their education's years can form a firm perception towards their education and their career selection as well.

Factors Influences Career Choice and Job Prospect

Many past researches have been conducted to study the factors that influence students' choice of career. A research conducted by Firmin et al. (2014) aimed to investigate students' perceptions about their rationale for pursuing pharmacy as a future career. Thirty-six pharmacy students were interviewed in order to gain data that represents students' own point of views. The findings of this study showed that students' decision to pursue pharmacy were influenced by their cognition, experiences, and certain people. The students are reported to have a strong liking for science and healthcare. The benefits such as salary, job security, and prestige offered in pharmacy-related career come to be of secondary importance to them. Encouragements from parents and respected figures also play a role in influencing their decision. Therefore, these factors contributed in making the students believe that they would fit in the pharmacy field, hence, their career choice.

Children may not choose the same career paths as their parents, but parental support may affect their career decision making. Yean and Chin (2019) studied the effects of parental influence on undergraduate students' career choice. A structured questionnaire was given to 242 final year undergraduate students within the discipline of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The findings showed that continuous encouragement from parents give a long-lasting positive effect on students' interest in STEM-related careers. According to the researchers, parents are capable of inspiring their children due to the fact that they are the people their children close to and parents become the source of support for their children. The result of this study is consistent with the findings

from past researches. Therefore, it supports the belief of parental influences as the key to a significant impact on the career choice intention of their children.

Next, a study conducted by Jackson (2015) aimed to examine the influence of work-integrated learning (WIL) on undergraduates' career choice status. The result showed that the status of career choice is relatively strong among those who have taken WIL as part of their academic studies or during a practical of their degree specialisation. The experience from the practical course would influence career choice status through the assistance provided in the career decision-making process. The WIL can be seen in the form of short-term work practical, internship or community-based project. Many employers have started to employ WIL as a medium of recognizing desired quality and talent. The experiences gained from WIL can help students to perceive the expectations and requirements from their targeted career. Also, WIL can aid students with knowledge about relevant roles of their dream position (Hall, 2010).

The findings from the past studies also showed that students' career preferences could be influenced by intrinsic factors or extrinsic factors or both. The intrinsic factors mentioned in the past researches were students' personal interest and occupational knowledge. The extrinsic factors identified in the past studies were social contacts, state of economy, role models, and educational background. Although there is a great emphasis on the roles played by the factors in influencing the career choice, the present study will focus on how students' perceptions of their degree influence their career preferences while taking into consideration the factors that contributed to the perception.

The past research only focused on either the perceptions of education or the factors that influence career choice among non-psychology students. However, there has been limited research that looked at psychology students' personal perceptions towards both their education experience and perceived career readiness and job prospect. Therefore, the present study is conducted to explore this phenomenon further among psychology undergraduates.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was conducted based on the self-concept theory of career development by Donald Super where the theory explained the importance of acknowledging the influence of self-concept's development in career planning (Super et al., 1996; Super & Jordaan, 1973; Super & Kidd, 1979; Super & Knasel, 1981). It was suggested that the evolution of career is lifelong because Super believes that self-concept changes over time throughout one's life and grows through experiences. People go through various phases of life and have their self-concept progresses over the transition of one phase to another. The result of the changeable self-concept that is reflected in individuals' life situation eventually influence their career planning in terms of occupational preferences and competencies (Leung, 2008).

According to Patton and McMahon (2006) and Super et al. (1996), during the growth stage, individuals' self-concept is growing in a more advanced manner because they are being exposed to various jobs through various people such as family, school, and social media. The experiences would bring them to recognize their own sense of autonomy and competency. Soon enough, they will be able to expand their work-related skills and styles and discover appropriate role models to look up to. Along the way, individuals will gradually learn a better understanding of their interests and potentials. The exploratory stage will allow individuals to keep their vocational identity evolving through various experiences like career exploration, educational training, internship, and any job-related activities. (Kosine & Lewin, 2008). According to Gushue et al. (2006), a connection between identity formation, self-concept, and career development has been recognized. The study has connotation of Super's Career Development theory as the researchers mentioned how the formation of identity was highly influenced

by individuals' career exploration and career plans' development. Therefore, Super's Career Development Theory is suitable for this study as the theory embodies the key concepts that signify career planning.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual framework identifies concepts from the career development theory that are to be addressed in the research questions or objectives. In finding out students' perception of their degree and their career preferences, several relevant concepts were used to construct the interview questions. The selected concepts that were queried through the questions are self-concept, growth, and exploration.

The first question is about describing themselves as a person. Participants are expected to describe their current self by highlighting their unique characteristics and strengths. The answer to this question is specifically represent the self-concept. The concept of exploration is queried through both second and third question. The second question is about describing themselves as a person before they become a psychology student. Participants are expected to describe their old self by highlighting the differences in their characteristics. The third question is about the way studying psychology has changed the participants. The expected answer would be the positive changes in behavioural and cognitive aspect of them.

The concept of exploration is queried in fourth until the last question. The fourth question is about the summary of what have been acquired throughout their degree years. The expected answer would be the skills, or any useful experiences gained from the registered courses. The fifth question is about participants' job preference based on the acquired skills, knowledge, and experiences. Participants are expected to share the kind of job that would suit them and their target job position or company or area. The sixth question is about the opinion of their qualification. Participants are expected to speak about their competency and confidence in getting the preferred job. The seventh question is about participants' opinion on how their degree prepare them for a place in the job market. The expected answer would be about applicable academic knowledge in the work setting. The last question is about suggestion for the Department of Psychology or the university in preparing students for world of employment.

METHOD

Participants

The targeted samples for the present study were final year undergraduate psychology students with active education status at the International Islamic University of Malaysia. It was expected that the final year students would be in the process of planning for their future career. Moreover, they have completed a minimum of three years of study, equivalent to six long semesters. Hence their experience and knowledge of the psychology courses and how it may influence their career plans would be beneficial to meet the objective of the present study.

The recruitment of participants utilised convenience sampling method as the participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to be interviewed. The participants were recruited at two stages, the first stage was during a long semester in late 2020. The second stage was during the long semester in early 2021. Four subjects agreed to be interviewed during the first stage and another four subjects agreed to be interviewed during the second stage ($n = 8$). Participants consisted of one male and seven female final year psychology students from IIUM. Seven of the subjects were 23 years old including the male participant and one female participant was 26 years old during the time of interview. All participants were Malay Muslims.

For the present study, all participants were asked the same questions for the purpose of data saturation (as recommended by Guest et al., 2006). Probing questions were only asked if participants misunderstood the question (likely due to mishearing) or when they faced difficulties in recollecting their experiences. Data collected reached saturation point as no new codes emerged from the transcribed interview during the second stage of recruitment. This step is recommended by Fusch & Ness (2015) to ensure content validity of data is acquired.

Research Design

This study employed instrumental case study design by using semi-structured interview questions to explore participants' perceptions and opinions and obtain open-ended data. Instrumental case study is known as the study of a specific subject in order to give a better understanding into a specific issue, make generalizations, or construct a theory. The subject in instrumental case study will help in understanding other things (Mills et al., 2010). The obtained open-ended data from participants helped researcher to explore more perspective as it opens for many interpretations.

Materials

The materials that will be used in this study include sufficient Internet connection, a laptop, an earphone set and a consent form. For the interview session, a set of semi-structured questions consisting eight questions was used to obtain the data. The questions were designed based on the selected concepts from the Career Development Theory by Donald Super (Super et al., 1996; Super & Kidd, 1979; Super & Jordaan, 1973; Super & Knasel, 1981). The questions include changes of perceived self-concept, which include view of on personal traits, growth, skills and related characteristics to career plans, from before and after taking degree in psychology. In addition, participants' perceived experience as a psychology student and its influence towards their career preference and readiness were also included in the interview questions. Probing questions were included whenever necessary to ensure in-depth answers were acquired.

Procedures

The study started with recruiting participants through viral social messages and contact with the student society group to reach out to final year psychology students from the International Islamic University of Malaysia. In the viral message, a brief introduction to the study's objective and methods were written. Attached with the message is a link to Google Form survey which required the subject to fill in basic demographic information. The survey was disseminated to around 60-80 final year students of the Department of Psychology. Only 57 students responded to the survey and eight students agreed to be part of the interview.

Online interviews were conducted through the medium of Zoom Meeting or Google Meet at a time of their convenience. At the beginning of the interview session, participants were given a softcopy of consent form to be filled where they were requested to give their demographic information and a signature indicating their consent of participation and having the audio recorded. After that, they were briefed on the purpose of the study, their rights to withdraw themselves, and the confidentiality of their personal information as well as the recordings of the interview session. The approximate duration of each interview was around 15 to 30 minutes. The recorded audio of each interview was saved and in the possession of the researchers only. The transcribed text were used for analysis.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis in order to identify themes that reflect the textual data. In achieving the best possible analysis, six steps were taken throughout the process of analysing. The first step is familiarisation with the data where researcher was actively immersed in the data. The textual data was read, and the recorded audios were listened to several times for the purpose of transcribing the interview. After gotten intimately familiarised with the content, initial codes were generated.

In this second step, quotes that are potentially relevant to the research questions were highlighted and labelled with an initial code. The initial codes provide a brief summary or an interpretation to describe the content of the data. Data that was relevant to other code has been combined throughout the entire dataset. After the data was coded and merged, the codes were shifted to themes. In this step, the coded data was reviewed to recognize any codes that are similar or overlapped.

Themes were constructed based on any relevant topics or issues that reflect a pattern in the data. In some instances, the themes and subthemes uncovered emerged from a combined analysis of participants' response and its relation to well-known psychology concepts, for example empathy and theory of mind. Additionally, the search and labelling of themes were heavily influenced by Super's Career Development Theory. According to the theory, the participants are currently in the Exploration Stage of their Career Development (Super & Knasel, 1981). The stage is characterised by "trying out" things allowing them to gain skills and experiences that may benefit their future career. Thus, in the analysis, there is a great focus on the experiences, skills, and knowledge gained from psychology degree as explained by the participants themselves. Therefore, the definition for these themes or subthemes are likely taken from past literature and further explained through the words of the participants to illustrate the presence of the concept in career planning.

The themes and subthemes were reviewed for the purpose of quality-checking. This is to ensure the themes constructed represent the entire dataset. Codes that seemed irrelevant or overlapped are removed. The themes and subthemes were given its final names and explanation and are presented in the result section together with selected quotes.

RESULTS

The present study sought to identify students' perceptions of their degree and their career preferences as both are parts of the career planning. In achieving the objectives of qualitatively exploring students' concept of self, personal perception of their degree and how it prepares them for future career, preparedness for a job, and career plan after completing degree, three relevant concepts from Super's Career Development Theory were used and queried through the interview questions. There are a total of three themes identified: (1) Growth of Self-concept; (2) Factors influencing growth of self-concept during degree; and (3) Psychology students' view of their job prospects. Each theme has its own subthemes.

Growth of Self-Concept

Under this theme, the concept of self focuses on individuals' personal development as psychology undergraduate students. The self-concept is malleable as it changes with time and experience of the individuals (Super & Kidd, 1979). To explore the presence and factors attributed to these changes, each participant were asked on their current view of themselves and their past self-prior to starting degree. All participants unanimously indicated changes in their self-concept which indicates growth. The answers given by participant indicated personal perception of changes from adolescence

towards entering early adulthood and as a result of studying various psychology taught courses. Under this category, there are a total of two subthemes that highlight personal growth associated with personal traits and one subtheme that highlight life and academic skills. The subthemes on personal traits include (1) growth of empathy and theory of mind, and (2) improved emotional regulation. The third subtheme under growth of self-concept the (3) developed academic and practical employability skills.

i. Growth of empathy and theory of mind

This subtheme focuses on the growth or enhance individual personal traits which empathy and theory of mind. Empathy involves the process of understanding, feeling, sharing and being aware of the other person's feelings (Eklund & Meranius, 2021). Empathy allows an individual to feel and think about what others are feeling through setting aside egocentric concerns and attempt take the perspectives of others, i.e. imagining the emotions that they feel and their underlying intentions (Davis, 2006). Theory of mind, on the other hand, refers to "the ability to understand and appreciate that other beings have thoughts, feelings, and intentions" (p. 286, Krawczyk, 2018). Several participants have indicated growth in their ability to put aside personal egoistic thoughts and attempt to understand that there are underlying causes and intentions behind the behaviours of others.

How psychology changed me, it changed my way of thinking, my thoughts. The importance of understanding people's behaviour so that people can understand our way of thinking meaning not being judgmental. (Participant B)

For example, we can understand why people are like that and sometimes I feel like getting mad but I kind of understand why too so yeah...And now I understand why and how to handle and interact with them... Also, we understand why people procrastinate because they want to avoid the burden, the stress and that is not simply because they are lazy. So, how psychology has changed me, I now have insights about them so maybe I can easily encounter them. (Participant C)

Umm also, being a psychology student has changed me in the sense of I am more empathic. I try to be much more understanding of the human behaviour. I understand that every behaviour stem from something and they have learned the behaviour. (Participant D)

The above quotes showcase how participants perceived their growth as a result of taking a psychology degree. Almost unanimously all participants of present study indicated that they began to develop empathy and theory of mind throughout their degree years. One participant further asserted that it is a must for a psychology graduate to at least leave with a greater ability to empathise with others around them.

Uh definitely helpful especially about um being empathic you know. I cannot imagine psychology students not come up as emphatic after they learn all the psychology things. (Participant F)

ii. Improved emotional regulation

Emotional regulation is an adaptive process of regulation one's emotions to retain the useful features of emotional reactions to environmental stimuli and reducing the potential destructive features (Denollet, Nyklíček, & Vingerhoets, 2008). The ability to regulate ones' personal emotions are important because positive emotional regulation improves adaptability to various challenging situations. Studies have found that individuals with greater emotional regulation ability are likely able

to deal with stressors at work (Kim et al., 2009). Under this subtheme, one participant mentioned enhanced emotional regulation is a result of learning psychology.

Learning psychology has changed me in the sense that I would observe people more, I would analyse things. Being a psychology student makes me exposed to the psychology knowledge especially on how to regulate your emotions. I tried to practice the theories in psychology to my personal well-being. (Participant D)

It is uncertain whether a psychology degree is a key component for assisting students in dealing with work related stress among the participants. It is likely a result of the university coursework solely and the ongoing pandemic, for example Participant F mentioned two incidences where she felt challenging but she triumphed through. The first situation is related to the difficulties of online classes and another is completing a difficult course.

I just said that it is what it is and I can, I cannot do anything about it. So, where the first time we go online classes, I actually, my result dropped, so from there I analyse what happened and what did I do. And from then, I, I make us, I change my study plan and my study method. So, I can see improvement in my result. (Participant F)

...statistic is like one of the killer subject for psychology students? so my friends and I form a study group and uh, study week ... And, we learn statistic from morning till like late evening, in like, in you know in study week there's some of the classes are, do not, did not have air conditioning on, so we learn in the hot environment and we still persevere and learn all day about statistics. (Participant F)

Additionally, Participant H mentioned about a course project that she deemed challenging but she managed to overcome it.

... And then, secondly, oh, how to communicate especially to the elderly, which was like around 70 and some of the questions uh she cannot understand then so I guess, uh figuring the alternative and face to face with individuals at that age it requires me to like um adapt with the language she's familiar with. (Participant H)

If growth in emotional regulation is a by-product of psychology degree, it indicates usefulness of psychology degree and may eventually be a key element in ensuring positive job prospect among psychology graduates. It might be beneficial to further explore these development among psychology graduates and compare it with other non-psychology graduates. Moreover, future research may examine as well whether emotional regulation ability acquired from psychology degree could be useful in real work setting.

iii. Developed academic and practical employability skills

Under this subtheme, majority of the codes identified found consistent expression of growth during degree as they acquired academic skills such as running statistical analysis, conducting research and write reports.

In terms of skill, statistics, data, and conducting research. Counselling skills as well, like what we can say and what we cannot say. (Participant B)

...like statistic, it gives me the, data analysis skill and then, research methodology things like that, even all courses in fact because we have assignments right. Before it's um, they improved my research writing a lot because even before I entered UIA, I was doing A level we didn't have like reports, basic research writing, so I really started to learn by

myself um research writing when I started to do the psychology assignments lah basically. So it improves a lot... (Participant E)

Aside from the basic academic skills, other applied skills such as counselling or therapy techniques were mentioned.

For example, in positive psychology, I have acquired a lot of techniques on how to be positive. I am exposed to how to do the mindful breathing, and how to change the way you think by using the positive psychology theories. In clinical psychology, I am also exposed to techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation, the types of therapy used in Malaysia. (Participant D)

some of the subjects I think can help my my social skills, my soft skills and my future career for example like um for example uh counselling psychology or abnormal psychology. I can use this this certain topic uh to uh to which is I can apply throughout my internship, throughout my future career, yeah. (Participant G)

Apart from academic skills, the other type of mentioned skills would be the more practical applied skills, such as the ability to interact and work with the community outside the university. Three participants expressed that the infield experience allowed them to use the learned knowledge thus developed practical skills. These experiences could be part of a project assigned by a lecturer for course credit. For example, Participant E mentioned about an assignment for her Developmental Psychology taught course while Participant F mentioned about assignment from Child Psychology taught course.

Um, it was for my developmental psychology, we had to do assignment where we had to meet um kids from like, I don't know what center was that but we had to talk with the kids and stuff...It wasn't the developmental psychology course that gave me the skills to do that, it was intro I think because I was so amazed with the intro uh so the next semester I had to do the assignment um I used things that I learned from my intro to psych to talk with the kids. (Participant E)

... this semester I'm taking child psychology, so what we're doing is a project with primary school students and uh adolescents, so one of the project is to read, sort of reading, reading coaching session with a student, with a mentee, it's like a mentor mentee program, so I think, that really helps me like what I learn in psychology really helps me um to connect with my mentee. (Participant F)

Factors Influencing Growth of Self-Concept During Degree

The growth of self-concept is a crucial aspect of career development task and it is theorised the change could be attributed to chronological age, civil status, experience, social and economic conditions (Super & Kidd, 1979). For this theme, the focus is placed on the answers the participants provided on the specific experiences they acquired during their degree which resulted in changes mentioned in the previous theme. Therefore, the key condition that allows them to grow is the degree experience which are divided into two main subthemes: the skills and growth were acquired through (1) taught psychology courses and (2) infield experiences and coursework or extracurricular projects.

i. Taught psychology courses

Under this subtheme, the participants mentioned several skills which they believe they have gained during their time as a degree student through taught courses, including both the theoretical and

applied psychology courses. The skills mentioned were indicative of their competency and confidence in securing a career after graduation. Under this subtheme, only those skills they perceived would match with the requirements for a position that they intend to pursue were explored. Selected participants mentioned that the skills are expected to be useful in various settings that require the knowledge learned from taught courses in psychology degree. For example, Participant B mentioned that developmental psychology would be useful in career as teacher.

Firstly, I am interested to be a teacher ... So, if I want to be a teacher, the things I have learned like from learning subject makes me want to focus more on children, their development, study and all... I can use the psychological techniques in teaching to gain their interest in learning and like how we learn development psychology, learning. We can understand more since we have the knowledge, we can understand the behaviours of the students and how to cater to their problems. (Participant B)

Based on the excerpt above, Participant B is well aware of the need of her aspired career and those needs are met through taking a psychology degree. Her explanation indicates that taught courses provide useful techniques and knowledge. In her case, developmental psychology which teaches knowledge related to children's behaviours and factors influencing their growth would be applicable among teachers.

Aside from teaching, another career of interest frequently mentioned is Human Relations. One prominent answer is by Participant C whom mentioned she perceived that the skills acquired vary from knowledge on organisation, how to use psychometric tests and how to deal with others for a career in Human Relations.

Okay like IO, to me it helps a lot in terms of my future career...So, taking IO made me more exposed to the world of organization which I think I am comfortable with. Meaning to say that I understand HR works so during any interviews later, I can easily answer them. From studying psychology also, I understand that a tool must be valid and reliable in order to predict good result. Basically, applicable things to my career. Anything that we have to do when dealing with people. (Participant C)

Similar to Participant B, Participant C is well aware of the needs of her career preference and how a taught psychology course, which is Industrial and Organisational Psychology would be the fitting course to prepare them for a career in Human Relations. Moreover, the usefulness of the course for Human Relations career is further echoed by another participant:

I think maybe HR position miss. Because, I also, I also take IO psychology this semester, I think the course, the subject that uh, the subject that, the subject, I mean, IO psychology also uh enhance me to prepare for my future career yeah in HR position. (Participant G)

Additionally, there are other taught courses that were mentioned and the knowledge again are of equal value to various careers that the participants intend to pursue. For example, Participant D mentioned two courses which are Clinical Psychology and Media Psychology would respectively benefit her career plans to be a clinical psychologist.

In clinical psychology, I am also exposed to techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation, the types of therapy used in Malaysia. And then subjects like media psychology, I am exposed to how people are affected by the usage of media and how they are psychologically affected and why psychology is important in fields such as media. (Participant D)

Meanwhile, Participant G expressed that in general, the taught courses has given various social and soft skills that would generally benefit both her future career and internship practice.

I think yes, from the subject course that I take, that I take through my degree, through my degree, I think some of the some of the course eh sorry, some of the subjects I think can help my my social skills, my soft skills and my future career for example like um for example uh counselling psychology or abnormal psychology. I can use this this certain topic uh to uh to which is I can apply throughout my internship, throughout my future career, yeah. (Participant G)

This subtheme collects participants' personal thoughts on how the courses they have learned influenced their preparedness for a career they aspire. This section carefully selected quotes which the participants had provide extensive explanation on how the knowledge gained class lessons were deemed valuable for future career practices.

ii. *Infield experiences and coursework or extracurricular projects*

The present subtheme focuses on the influence of field experience and projects assigned to them either as part of coursework or extracurricular activities influencing their personal growth and skills development.

Uh, there's this particular assignment in my second year, um the developmental psychology, so I need to find a family of three generation that living in the same house, uh that actually put me in the field. Like I have to go to people's house and interviews and everything for all the assignments specifically, especially experimental psychology. Most of the time I engage with my peers, person that, student, but that experience when I'm doing my assignment in second year, it really opens up my eyes... (Participant H)

Em, project, I think um the memorable experience about project is when we connect with the community for example uh this semester I'm taking child psychology, so what we're doing is a project with primary school students and uh adolescents, so one of the project is to read, sort of reading reading coaching session with a student, with a mentee, it's like a mentor mentee program, so I think, that really helps me like what I learn in psychology really helps me um to connect with my mentee. (Participant F)

Participant H and F expressed that coursework projects opened up an avenue for them to gain beneficial experience to practice their skills and knowledge during their degree. The important value of their coursework projects is the requirement. The project required them to meet and communicate with the members of the community.

One participant expressed that her time as an intern at a psychiatric department provided exposure to the field and prepared her for a journey towards becoming a clinical psychologist.

For example, what I have done for my internship, I have interned at a hospital under the psychiatrist department. So, through that, I am being exposed to the procedures, the hospital settings, the psychology knowledge, the practical aspects, and the patients itself. (Participant D)

Aside from internship and coursework projects, other beneficial experience include extracurricular activities, such as project management for the department.

I learn a lot um how to handle the program which is quite big and how to do well with the co-member which is um some of them I had some of them are freeride and we need to back up...yeah that's my unique experience during Psych Day (Participant G)

Psychology Students' View of their Job Prospects

This theme focuses on the confidence the participants insinuated in relation to their ability to secure a job with a psychology degree qualification. The transcripts were searched to identify how the students view their degree and the confidence in securing a career they want. During the analysis, three different subthemes emerged and labelled accordingly. The first two subthemes were two opposing opinions on sufficiency of a degree to secure a job. It is important to clarify that none of the participants perceived their psychology degree as futile. Instead, it is the opposite. Unanimously, all participants stated that they perceived their degree to be useful for their future career. However, the extent which the degree could assist with job prospects may vary due to the participants' personal thoughts, knowledge, experiences gained, and career preferences.

i. Psychology degree is sufficient to secure a job

Some participants have expressed that their psychology degree is sufficient as they acquired skills that are desired by future employers.

I think the Suruhanjaya, I try to Google what course that they want, um then I think um my course which is psychology my degree course, can um, can help me to get this job because um, because from what I read this ps, this SPA9 uh have qualified, have what uh we call, they take psychology student to work as psychology officer uh anti-drug officers, something like that. (Participant G)

Some other participants have mentioned that a psychology degree is general. Although, it will not assist to secure a definite position in a specific psychology related career, it opens their options to various different careers outside the field.

Um, this degree has not only give me a qualification to get a job but I would say all the knowledge and all the skills would able me to be applied in a working world later. So I guess yes, yes, this degree is actually very helpful. And then it's, it would actually able for me to embark into different kinds of careers that requires general degrees so I guess it it makes it versatile degree program. (Participant H)

Moreover, due to its wide range of coverage in human behaviours, participants have indicated that it is possible for them to opt for career that are indirectly related to psychology. The skills and knowledge they acquire from elective courses allow them to have basic introduction to the career itself. As per mentioned:

Um, like I said maybe it's not as specific as people who did degree in HR but um...So um, but i still feel like there are things that I can apply, things that I learned in psychology especially about human behaviour and stuff. Especially in IO. There are things that I can apply so, I think it's fine. (Participant E)

Human Relations is the most commonly cited career option by the participants of present study. Although the exact reasons of its popularity among the participants were unexplored, the participants have remarked that they were either inspired or learned a lot from an elective course titled Industrial and Occupational Psychology. The taught course has in some way introduced them to knowledge they

deemed would assist them in securing and performing at a potential company as a Human Resource Officer.

I think maybe HR position miss. Because, I also, I also take IO psychology this semester, I think the course, the subject that uh, the subject that, the subject, I mean, IO psychology also uh enhance me to prepare for my future career yeah in HR position. (Participant G)

However, this sentiment may not be shared with all participants. Thus, the next subtheme is introduced.

ii. Psychology degree solely is not sufficient to secure a job

This subtheme focuses on the view of participants that expressed their chances of securing a job position once they graduate is low. The provided explanation include a psychology degree is insufficient since psychology degree lack providence of employability skills.

As a psychology graduate, going into psychology field, maybe it does prepare me, but it is not in high level because degree in IIUM just taught you on the theories but not on the practicality. It's more on the knowledge stuff. If you actually want to delve in other job prospects than psychology field. It does not really prepare ourselves rather than we prepare our own selves like applying the knowledge and stuff. (Participant A)

Participant A has expressed that theories are heavily focused in the degree but there is a lack of practice or training given to ensure the knowledge learned could be put into practice especially for those who intend to find a job aside from psychology-related career. Moreover, there were also expressed concern over competition with those who took specific degree, for example a degree in Human Relations.

Because if you are taking psychology field and then you decided to become a human resource worker, so for me, I think if you want to further pursue your career in HR department, it's better if you take HR at the first place and not psychology. My personal opinion. Not saying that taking psychology is wrong but there might be a better chances or skills that might applied in HR management courses rather than psychology. (Participant A)

Um, huh, okay, um I've heard a lot about how uh people psychology students go to HR but if I compared myself with people who actually took degree in HR, I feel like, I don't, it depends on the company, if they are open. Like they are open-minded, they understand that people in psychology might do HR as well. Um, it's okaylah but then, I'm still, I still feel um low self-confidence lah when I compared with people who actually did degree in HR. (Participant E)

Meanwhile, another participant expressed that to secure a career within the psychology field, a master's degree is required because a degree is not enough to become a full-fledged psychologist.

As a psychology student, most of our aims is to be a psychologist right. You need a master's to do that so with the psychology degree, I don't think it will be enough to prepare them for a job in the future. This is because being a psychology student, you need to do master's to be qualified to be a psychologist. So, the degree is not enough as proven as how we need master's to be specialised in certain field of psychology. (Participant D)

iii. Areas of improvement to increase psychology graduates' job prospect

Some participants are well aware of the lack of preparation they may have to apply for a career. Therefore, the last question of the interview queried them on their thoughts on what could be suggested to the universities and relevant stakeholders on needed improvements to increase graduates' job prospects. Participant G mentioned that the department could assist students for future career through informing them of job positions that would be suitable for psychology graduates.

I think uh I think they need, I think the department can can uh en can provide uh the pro can provide more program which related to the psychology course...psychology department not really uh not really um not really provided what is actually, what is actually that we as a student can be... they are not really uh like tell us what we should be in the future (Participant G)

Similar thoughts were shared with other participants, for example Participant E suggested talk programs:

Um, the department also, do like a talk like something right, maybe more talks on like not just psychologists but also other jobs like HR. Because you know like, people whose taking degree in psychology they can't be a psychologist straight away right, yeah, so most of the students actually would be a trainee, psychologist trainee or going to HR more on what you can do right after degree lah basically. (Participant E)

Moreover, Participant G further recommended the department to provide students with practical skills useful for their future careers.

I think um department also can do like the like um...program that have a therapy for example ... cognitive behavioural therapy or whatsoever therapy that like can um able to help uh our help students like to be more knowledgeable about that therapy and maybe ... this thing uh help them for uh their future career for example if they really want to secure a position as clinical psychologist (Participant G)

First of all, we psychology students, we are not exposed to the hands-on work. For example, I like to teach, maybe learning course can bring us to schools, sit in one class and let us actually observe because when we are leaning theories, it is very different to the hands-on. We cannot practice the theories... Also, in abnormal psychology, we could have field work that requires us going to hospitals to have first-hand experiences. (Participant B)

The participants' answers indicate that they are aware of both the benefits and the limitations of the psychology degree in preparing for their future career. The concerns they expressed are mainly related to the areas which the university or more specifically the department could improve upon. However, the feasibility of executing the changes suggested is up for debate. There is a need to pose similar questions to the department themselves whether the changes are plausible and possibly future employers on the need of aforementioned changes. For the present research, the focus ends with the answers provided by the recruited psychology undergraduates. The other perspectives, including from the department, university and relevant stakeholders, need to be explored in future research.

DISCUSSION

This study qualitatively explored students' concept of self, personal perception of their degree, preparedness for a job, and plan of action after degree. Following Super's theory, the participants of

present study are currently in the Exploration Stage of Career Development which are characterised through personal self-examination and role try-outs to explore career options (Super & Jordaan, 1973). During this period, career readiness gradually develop as they acquire new information relevant to their career decisions (Super & Knasel, 1981). Essentially, the development of their self-concept was characterized by the positive changes including growth of empathy, theory of mind, improved emotional regulation and the addition of academic and employability skills. Psychology that is known as a scientific study of humans' mental processes and behaviours allowed the students to also develop a better self cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally. The education was not only perceived as a means of personal growth, but it also offered useful knowledge and skills that can be applied in the work setting.

Overall, the students have expressed that their psychology degree have greatly benefitted them and prepared them for the next journey that is searching and securing a job position. The perceived benefits had also built positive perception towards degree experience. This finding is aligned with a prior research by Furberg (2010) where students' are satisfied with their degree if the perceived knowledge and skills are deemed useful. The findings also support the career development theory which stated that growth occurs from adolescence towards adulthood involve exploration through formal education (Super and Knasel, 1981).

The degree experience influenced students' career aspiration in the field of psychology. This is expected as graduate students are likely searching for careers within their major due to their strong interest in the subject matters and field of science (Firmin et al., 2014). However, some did mention that psychology degree is versatile thus job opportunities is available across various sectors including non-psychology field. This is concerning because it could increase competitions with other non-psychology graduates (Mottain, 2019). Moreover, if psychology graduates apply for a job in a non-psychology field, it raises the question whether a psychology degree is useful in Malaysia.

Students' preparedness for a job were manifested in the way they reviewed their employability skills. According to the students, the skills were mostly obtained from psychology lessons in class and practical coursework during their internship period. Nevertheless, there were recommendations on increasing applied and practical courses. Similar findings were found in other studies indicating students' career readiness could be enhanced if they learn how to apply what they have learned (Weldon & Ngo, 2019). Plus, problem based learning has been a popular teaching mode due to its positive impact in long term professional practice (Fenwick, 2002; Shuptrine, 2013). The results indicated that is currently practiced in the department and has assisted career development but there could be increase in both quantity and quality. For quality enhancement, the coursework could be integrated with actual real work related task.

Majority of the participants decided to pursue a career either in the psychology field after they finished their degree due to the skills, knowledge, and experiences acquired during degree. Majority also indicated satisfaction with the degree course. In spite of that, some of the participants believe there are still avenues the university could improve due to concerns that their degree may be insufficient to apply for the job they desire. The reasons delineated include the qualification being too general, requirement of master's degree and the lack of training provided for their future careers. It is possible that these concerns could be addressed through providing assistance for career plans specifically for psychology graduates. The assistance could range from informing them their options and best course of action after they graduate. The assistance may also include providing a clear picture on the jobs which psychology graduates could pursue and the skills they need to secure and perform in their selected career. Additionally, the degree courses could include job-related knowledge to prepare themselves entering the working world. However, the feasibility and necessity of such changes must be reviewed

by other respective stakeholders. It is recommended that future studies further explore the value of psychology degree through interviewing both the providers of the degree, i.e. the university and education ministry, and the potential employers. Alternatively, even the alumni could be interviewed as well as they could be a source of authentic information on psychology careers after graduation (Lawson, 2017).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The influx of job seekers leads to a competitive job market calls and the need to stand out in a room full of applicants. Regardless of the current condition of job market in Malaysia, future graduates must identify and be aware of the qualifications gained from the tertiary education in order to plan for their employment. Since there is limited representation of studies on the perceptions from the lens of psychology students, the present research seek to explore this phenomenon through interviewing final year undergraduate psychology students.

The present qualitative study found that students' self-concept, personal perception of their degree, preparedness for a job, and plan of action after degree indicated the same pattern of growth and exploration as delineated in the Career Development theory (Super & Knasel, 1981). Students' perceptions of their degree also influenced their career preferences and job prospect. During degree, students explored their qualities and capabilities and decide on what career to be pursued and envisioned their future as a job seeker and employee.

This study was an opening move in exploring psychology students' career development that could potentially impact rate of unemployment among psychology fresh graduates in Malaysia. There are various practical implications, including changes in teaching structure and provide career planning programs mainly catering to psychology majors, that could be further researched and introduced into policies at both the university and national level. Moreover, some of the participants mentioned that it is difficult to secure a job in the field of psychology despite having a psychology degree. This is a common concern since in Malaysia, 51% of graduates work in field unrelated to their degrees (Kim, 2019). Plus, the current job market is extremely competitive due to influx of graduates (Donald et al., 2018). Thus, it is important to further explore the need and uniqueness of psychology degree in the current Malaysian job market. Psychology is useful in various settings (even its need during the global pandemic is undeniable, see Kazak, 2020). However, a psychology degree may need more evidence to present its utility in Malaysian work setting.

This study had several limitations. Firstly, the study heavily focused on the perspective of final year psychology undergraduate students. During the time of the interview, selected few of the participants had indicated either lack of knowledge or awareness on career plans. It is possible that it is earlier than expected for them to begin thinking about their future career. Thus, the responses provided may not be a clear picture on their actual ability on career planning and their thoughts about their degree. It is highly recommended that future studies explore the same topic among graduated psychology students and currently in search for a job. The second limitation is the potential bias of the researchers which include a psychology lecturer actively teaching in the department and an active final year psychology students. Although the influence of knowledge and experience of the researchers were minimised as much as possible through objective review of the responses. During analysis, the researchers limit any personal interpretation and relied mainly on participants' answers and literature review. Yet, it remains probable that the data analysed may be interpreted differently by outsiders. It is recommended that the phenomenon is further explored in other public and private universities with similar teaching and course structure to see whether the results remain consistent and researchers' influence could be ruled out.

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