

Exploring Existential Crises among Poor Academic Performance University Students in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study explored the existential crises encountered by university students in Bangladesh through in-depth interviews with 7 students. Existential crises are mental illnesses, but certain characteristics make them distinguishable from psychological issues. The findings were organized into three themes namely anxiety-based existential crises, emotional existential crises, and loss of meaning and purpose. Findings from this research demonstrated that the participants experienced separation anxiety, death anxiety, career anxiety, and fate anxiety. Their encountered existential crises and diverse challenges in university life made them emotionally vulnerable and helpless, and they experienced emotional pain, guilt, and identity crisis. In addition, they viewed their lives as meaningless and realized their end when some of them committed suicidal behaviour. This research contributes to specific topics where the mental health practitioners can address existential crises through interventions, workshops, and psychoeducational programs in higher education.

Keywords: Existential Crises, Academic Performance, University Students, Bangladesh, Higher Education

Introduction

University students experience diverse psychological problems. A report indicated that psychological problems work as barriers to achieving a good academic result (American College Health Association, 2015). In addition, several studies provide evidence that students are not able to perform well in their examinations due to encountering several psychological problems. For example, anxiety, depression, relationship difficulties, stress, death of close ones, and suicide attempt (American College Health Association, 2015; Sörberg Wallin et al.,

2018). However, there are specific psychological problems that are categorized into existential crisis-related problems (e.g., suicidal ideation, death of close ones). Not all psychological problems are existential crises as existential crises have certain characteristics that make them distinguished from psychological problems (Roy et al., 2023). Existential crisis was stated as “a confrontation and an experienced relationship of the existential realities, therefore, a crisis becomes an existential crisis” (Buténaité et al., 2016, p. 24).

University students encounter diverse existential crises like existential anxiety, death anxiety, and perceived stress. It does not only reduce their academic performance but also helps to make them burnout. Song (2020) conducted a study with medical students to explore the cause of burnout among medical students and found that existential isolation, freedom (groundlessness), and meaninglessness rather than witnessing patients' death and suffering, were the main themes for their burnout. Furthermore, Besharat et al. (2020) found that perceived stress considerably weakened the responsibility and meaningfulness of university students' lives. Perceived stress also produced signs of anxiety to cope with ultimate concerns (e.g., death, freedom, loneliness, and meaningfulness) where existential anxiety forecasted death anxiety (Evram & Çakici Eş, 2020).

The prevalence of suicidal behaviour in Bangladesh included a 13.4% rate of suicidal ideation, a 6% prevalence of lifetime suicide planning, and a 4.4% incidence of suicide attempts (Rasheduzzaman et al., 2022). In another study, it was found that the prevalence of suicidal ideation for male students was 12.4% and for female students was 17.3% (Bala et al., 2020). Moreover, the Aachol Foundation surveyed to explore suicidal death among students in Bangladesh and found that 101 university students committed suicide where the percentage of committing suicide among male students was 64.36% and females was 35.64% (The Financial Express, 2022). Recently, researchers found a very high prevalence of suicide ideation among university students that was 61.1% (Mamun et al., 2020). Hence, it is evident that both male and female university students in Bangladesh are experiencing existential crises (i.e., suicidal behaviour) remarkably.

Research Gap, Significance, and Question Guiding this Study

Existential crises such as meaningfulness and crisis of meaning are inducing interest in academic settings (Vötter, 2020). Here, crisis of meaning is unbearable, and it is distinct from depression. Hence, existential crisis is the prime focus for the present study because students enter their university life at an age where existential crisis emerges with the transition from adolescence to adulthood. After entering the university campuses, they encounter different challenges such as adaptation to a new environment, relationship problems with peers and intimate partners, and other academic-related challenges (Dogan, 2018). Additionally, they experience diverse psychological problems. They become more susceptible to existential crises due to confronting these adverse life events along with their encountered psychological problems. Many quantitative studies (American College Health Association, 2015; He & Yang, 2015; Sörberg Wallin et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2017) suggest that existential crises affect the academic performance of students, but it does not reveal what sorts of existential crises they encounter. Therefore, the researcher uses a qualitative approach to unpack the specific existential crises faced by university students.

Researchers and practitioner psychologists like student counsellors can benefit from the research findings. For instance, psychologists can address the existential crises in their interventions for university students to improve their academic performance as well as mental health. They can incorporate the findings such as themes of existential crisis into workshops, seminars, or psychoeducational programs for university students especially for newly arrived students to enhance their adjustment to new environment. The present study has contributed to the literature by introducing complex existential approaches and psychosocial development theory in the field of educational psychology research. For example, psychological problems are very generic terms to describe the mental health status of university students. This study has differentiated existential crises from psychological problems. University students undergo a life transition that starts from their entrance to university where existential crisis plays an important role. Hence, the exploration of existential crises encountered by university students provides a significant contribution to the literature. The theoretical framework of this study regarding existential crisis and academic performance has also provided insight to the researchers, and it has added extra value to the body of knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

The present study has used Tillich's (1952) theory of existential anxiety and Yalom's (1980) concept of ultimate concerns to develop a theoretical framework to address the objective of this inquiry. For example, when university students start their university life, some of them may live without their parents. Students want to be independent and self-reliant individuals, and that process of growth makes them separate from their previously established boundaries with close ones. This separation and growth process offer students to experience existential isolation (Yalom, 1980). Therefore, existential isolation, an ultimate concern of Yalom, addresses the separation and growth process of university students. In addition, existential anxiety is associated with identity development and considered as a common existential crisis that is experienced by adolescents (Berman et al., 2006). Individuals develop identity crisis if they fail to acquire a coherent and integrated sense of identity. Hence, Tillich's (1952) theory of existential anxiety covers identity crisis. Furthermore, students are confronting more psychological problems than earlier generations (Eisenberg et al., 2013) which affect their academic performance whereas some psychological problems are existential in nature. The components of Tillich's theory (e.g., death, emptiness, meaninglessness, guilt, and self-condemnation) and Yalom's ultimate concerns (e.g., death anxiety, isolation, meaninglessness) can affect academic performance.

Methodology

Research Design

A case study method was employed to reveal existential crises experienced by university students in Bangladesh. The case study method offers a complete understanding of a topic (e.g., existential crises) because it "is an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (Yin, 1994).

Study Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in Bangladesh where university students were the population. University students having poor academic results were the sample, though the determination of poor academic performance was very challenging. According to most of the university

websites, it was stated that students needed at least a grade point average/cumulative grade point average (GPA/CGPA) of C (2.00 out of 4) to continue or complete the study (American University, 2022; Universiti Putra Malaysia, 2003, p. 28; University of Dhaka, 2024). Based on these references, GPA/CGPA C (2.00 out of 4) was the lowest CGPA/GPA for a student to continue education in a certain institute. A higher GPA/CGPA from a GPA/CGPA of B was generally regarded as an average or good academic performance. Therefore, a GPA/CGPA of B (3.00 out of 4) was considered as the cutoff point to determine poor academic performance for this study. Students who obtained a lower or equal GPA/CGPA of B (3.00 out of 4) were recruited for this study.

The purposive sampling technique was used to recruit respondents because this technique is very effective and provides rich data in qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002). Additionally, purposively recruited respondents are especially knowledgeable and experienced in investigating phenomena of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2011). A public university was selected to recruit participants for this study. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with university students who obtained poor GPA/CGPA. Data saturation was the criterion to determine the final sample size for qualitative inquiry (Mason, 2010; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data saturation was achieved at the sixth interview, after that the seventh participant was recruited and interviewed to examine whether any new information emerged. We did not find any new information; hence, seven participants were recruited for this study. Diverse demographic for respondents based on their department, academic year, and ethnicity were identified and selected for the study. Characteristics of participants of in-depth interviews are presented in Table 1 (appendix).

Every department of the selected university was independent and distinguished in executing its academic tasks; hence, permission from the chairperson of every department was needed to recruit research participants from departments. Because of the time-consuming process of getting permission to recruit research participants, one residential hall and one department at the university were considered suitable places where the researcher could access students from different departments together. The selected university had several residential halls where students from different departments dwelled in a hall. Participants were recruited from a residential hall and a department. At first, an approval from the ethics committee of the Institutional Review Board of the University Putra Malaysia was obtained before conducting the research. Secondly, approval from the provost, administrative head of a residential hall, of the selected residential hall, and chairperson of the selected department of the university was also taken to collect the data for this research. Then, a circular for recruiting participants was posted on the notice boards of those places. The research purpose, inclusion criteria, role of participants, and benefits of participation were clearly explained in that circular.

A teacher who was associated with the selected residential hall and department assisted in making a list of students with poor academic results. A short pre-screening interview was performed to select the research participants from the list of potential candidates. Here, after explaining the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the study, students were asked about their psychiatric history. For example, whether they were taking antipsychotic medication or not, and whether their psychological status was functional or not. If someone was not able to make meaningful communication with people, they were excluded from the study.

In-depth interviews were the primary method of data collection which were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, which was developed based on the literature review and theoretical framework of this study. The interview protocol is presented in Table 2 (appendix). Before conducting the actual study, a preliminary study was conducted to revise the interview protocol. Based on this interview, the semi-structured interview questions were improved, especially the probing questions.

Data Analysis

We employed a thematic analysis technique to analyse the transcribed data (Boyatzis, 1998) where we employed an inductive analysis approach to analyse the data using ATLAS.ti 22, a qualitative data analysis application. Inductive analysis grants a bottom-up approach to acquiring a thorough understanding of the experiences of respondents (Saldaña, 2013). In addition, we aimed to explore an innate understanding of the experiences of participants that was served by inductive analysis. Interview transcripts were read several times to get an insight from the data. After that, line by line coding approach was followed to generate initial codes. These codes were categorized, and these categories were organized into themes.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

The researchers needed to employ and embed techniques in the research process to establish rigor and trustworthiness from the beginning (Cypress, 2017). We applied member checking, practice reflexivity and bracketing, and audit trail to achieve rigor and trustworthiness of the study since at least two techniques were recommended by Creswell & Poth (2018) to use in establishing rigor and trustworthiness that were adopted from Creswell & Miller (2000).

Member checking refers to the validation strategy where participants of the study provide feedback to clarify whether the depiction of data analysis of the study is accurate or not (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This validation strategy was conducted through a follow-up interview. All respondents acknowledged that the research results reflected their experiences.

Reflexivity is strictly maintained in qualitative research during the entire research process (Sundler et al., 2019). The researcher's subjectivity, values, and practices were examined through maintaining a reflective journal. Finally, biases, preconceptions, and experiences were bracketed before conducting the interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). As a former student of this university, when participants shared their life stories, the researcher recalled some related memories (e.g., food quality, accommodation problems, and student politics) during his student tenure. However, he bracketed his biases and preconceptions about the data and findings during data collection and analysis. He also provided a detailed description of the themes by illustrating the original data that was grounded from participants rather than interpretation by the researchers (Sundler et al., 2019).

Finally, the auditor reviews the research process and findings to assess the accuracy of the entire research project (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher of the present study kept a record of the entire research project. The independent auditor reviewed the entire research procedures such as methodology, interview guidelines, data collection, and analysis procedures immensely. The audit report indicated that this study had been conducted precisely and transparently.

Findings and Discussion

Seven participants from different ethnic groups and religions such as Bengali, Chakma, Garo, Hindu, Buddhism, Christian, and Muslim were interviewed. Their age ranged from 21 to 25 years old with an average age of 23. A pseudonym was given to each respondent, and it will be used throughout this article. There is a dearth of research about the existential crisis in education settings, hence, the findings of the present study will be compared with accessible previous studies otherwise the findings will be reflected through the theoretical framework of this study.

The existential crises experienced by respondents were organized into three themes: anxiety-based existential crises, emotional existential crises, and loss of meaning and purpose. The summary of the findings is presented in the table 3:

Theme 1: Anxiety-Based Existential Crises

Anxiety was the premier concern for this theme. Participants of this inquiry experienced anxiety before entering the university campus, later it emerged with career and future goals of their lives.

Separation Anxiety

Participants experienced a fear of isolation from family members and their surroundings before leaving their homes. When they heard the news of getting an offer letter from their university, they became excited. After the excitement, they realized they must leave their parents, siblings, neighbours, friends, and relatives. For example, participants were asked about their experience of leaving family members in order to live on the university campus. Bipul shared that he was happy when he heard that he was offered admission into a reputed public university. At the same time, he started to feel that he needed to leave his home. Here is a quotation given as follows:

“But it took time to cope with this homesickness. The truth is that I am a little bit homesick. I love to stay at home. The day I left home, I felt tremendously awful.” (Bipul)

Dhaka city and university campus were very new places for them. Most of them had no experience of living outside without their parents for a long time. Sukanto never spent a night without his parents, leaving home was horrible for him. An excerpt from the interview manuscript is furnished below:

I felt a craving to meet them. I felt awful. I missed them intensively. As I grew up in a village, the village environment attracted me very much. It was like my mind was there, where my body was here in university. (Sukanto)

In this context, another participant Joydeb expressed how he struggled to cope with this separation anxiety. Here is a quotation provided below:

Yes, I felt sorrow. I called my parents over the phone, and I used to cry over phone calls. My mother was worried about me. This situation continued throughout the year. My first year was gone with this tension and crying. (Joydeb)

When individuals want to be independent person, they start keeping themselves separated from their elders. This separation becomes an existential angst (Maxwell & Gayle, 2013). Moreover, they explore and understand different spheres of their life as a process of growth. Existential angst is very common phenomenon in this continual growth process (van Deurzen & Adams, 2016). In addition, Yalom viewed growth as a process of separation that became a person with autonomy, self-reliance, and independent (Yalom, 1980).

Death Anxiety

Most of the participants acknowledged that they encountered death anxiety. For example, Sukanto stated that he had death anxiety from his childhood. Shamim stopped to think about his death. A quotation is given below:

“If I think about death, fear automatically appears. I do not know what will happen next. For this reason, I do not think about it. No need to welcome fear by thinking about it.” (Shamim)

Furthermore, Samir was not afraid of his own death rather he was frightened of the death of his close ones. Not only respondents are afraid of their own death but also, they are afraid of death of their close ones. Whenever they think about death of a close person, they feel treble awful. They recall the associated memories with them that make them sad. Yalom (1980) viewed death as one of the first traces of anxiety while Tillich (1952) considered death anxiety as one of the most fundamental existential crises. Participants of this inquiry also reflected view of Yalom and Tillich where someone was afraid of his death and other person was afraid of death of close ones.

Career Anxiety

Career anxiety refers to anxiety about a career whether participants will get a job or not as well as having career indecisiveness. Career anxiety is associated with concerns about the future, causing individuals to feel a sense of uncertainty about their lives. As a result, it constitutes an existential crisis, because existential crises are very familiar in career anxiety (Pisarik et al., 2017). Poor results make respondents worry about their careers because there is a result-based criterion to apply for a job at a well-reputed organization including government institutions in Bangladesh. Hence, CGPA is considered one of the entry requirements for getting a job. Some quotations are furnished here to explain the career anxiety of the participants:

“When I apply for bank jobs, tension about poor CGPA appears. It must appear when I apply for a government job.” (Sukanto)

I think a lot about my career. It changes noticeably. Slowly but surely, anxiety about my career is mounting. At the same time, I am realizing that it is affecting my life. It is a real tension. I feel terrific. My life became different from other people's. (Ullash)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, university of the participants was completely shut down, obliging students to remain in the same academic classes for prolonged periods. In Bangladesh, age limit is one of the criteria for job applications. Students who are close to completing their graduation face various existential crises, as their age may surpass the

eligibility limit for jobs before they graduate. Consequently, career anxiety emerges gradually but significantly.

Fate Anxiety

Anxiety about fate can be defined as the failure or success of life that will be compensated in the name of fate. Participants of this study experience fate anxiety whereas they compensated for their failure for the sake of fate. Most of them believed in fate. They claimed that their CGPA was poor because of fate. They struggle hard to obtain a good CGPA, but they have not achieved a good result. They leave this failure to fate. Two quotations are excerpted below:

“Is there any way not to comply with fate? I have tried my best to improve my results but failed. I will not change the study environment of the hall. Some issues need to leave on fate.” (Bipul)

“I am not neglecting the impact of fate.” (Pibir)

Theme 2: Emotional Existential Crises

Emotion was the foremost concern for this theme, consisting of four emotion-based existential crises namely emotional vulnerability, emotional pain, guilt, and helplessness.

Emotional Vulnerability

Emotional vulnerability can be defined as a state or process of emotional weakness in which people cannot control their emotions, they become susceptible to emotional breakdown. People can experience emotional vulnerability during an existential crisis where they encounter various types of emotions and cannot control their feelings (Fonseca, 2011). The findings of this study imply that participants experience a diverse range of emotions and cannot regulate them. They experience emotional vulnerability after experiencing other existential crises such as identity crisis, racism, guilt, meaninglessness, and isolation. As an example, a quotation is given below:

“The ethnicity of these students is creating problems in terms of their academic performance or participation in different organizations or activities. I believe it.” (Pibir)

In addition, Sukanto shared that he experienced racism from his class friends and some of his teachers. Hence, identity crisis and racism created a process that made respondents emotionally break down.

Emotional Pain

Emotional pain refers to the perception of psychological pain during or aftermath of an existential crisis. Participants perceive emotional pain in the aftermath or during an existential crisis. Participants of this study felt emotional pain when they encountered the realization of their end, anxiety about fate, career anxiety, isolation, meaninglessness, suicidal behaviour, racism, guilt, and death anxiety. Moreover, breakups with intimate partners also elicited emotional pain. For example, Sukanto encountered emotional pain after experiencing racism. He also encountered emotional pain when his girlfriend neglected him and did not share her feelings with him. He said,

"I did not know why she neglected me. Suddenly I revealed that she started to neglect me profoundly."

Furthermore, some participants keep themselves isolated, for example, after a relationship loss or political instability, they suffer from emotional pain. During isolation, they are in a vale of loneliness (Yalom, 1980). Hence, loneliness is somehow related to emotional pain.

Data analysis reveals that guilt, meaninglessness, and isolation are common among the participants who experience emotional pain. In another study, it was found that guilt and meaninglessness were associated with suicidal behaviour (Li et al., 2022); hence, emotional pain is an important aspect of suicidal behaviour.

Guilt

Guilt is an emotional component of existential crisis (Buténaité et al., 2016). All participants experienced guilt because of their poor academic performance. They enjoyed their first year of university life thinking that they would cover this gap in the next three years. In the meantime, they encountered diverse challenges that were responsible for poor results. However, they blamed themselves for their poor CGPA because they had not utilized their time properly. Two quotations are furnished below:

Now I think that if I had utilized that time, my results would have been better. My father is sending money through his hard work, and I could not achieve anything worthwhile. (Bipul)

Yes, I feel guilty. I have not done anything for myself. I have not worked as persistently as others have. (Pibir)

Furthermore, respondents compare their results and activities with other students who have higher CGPA. This finding supports Tillich's (1952) theory of existential anxiety. Guilt is the relative aspect of the third domain of his theory of existential anxiety where people explore their behaviour as not as good as expectation of other people.

Helplessness

Helplessness is one of the emotional components of existential crises where participants confront the existential reality with emotional pain. Here, they cannot control the situation or outcome apart from enduring the pain, the situation becomes unbearable. Most of the participants of this study were mandated to reside at their university hall and to be involved with a political party to resolve accommodation problems. For example, Ullash was bound to stay in the hall because of his financial crisis. He needed to be involved with a political group. As a member of political groups, students must execute different activities apart from studying. He skipped classes to execute tasks assigned by his student-political party. He said that it was extremely intolerable for him. He was helpless in this situation.

Joydeb stayed in a room with other members of his political group. They executed numerous political activities till midnight. He could not sleep well, and it impacted on her well-being.

"I developed insomnia because of sleep disruption." (Joydeb)

In addition, they could not get enough time to study and attend classes regularly. They needed to participate in political programs instead of taking preparation for assignments and examinations. They took several initiatives to live outside their university hall, but it was not possible due to their economic problems. The political activities left them feeling helpless.

Furthermore, after experiencing racism, especially from lecturers and class friends, some participants became helpless and experienced emotional pain. For instance, Sukanto who came from an indigenous community suffered from racism. He felt helpless to observe negligence from peers and teachers, he did not expect this behaviour from them. A quote is provided below:

“There were some teachers who neglected us because of our ethnic identity.” (Sukanto)

Theme 3: Loss of Meaning and Purpose

Loss of meaning and purpose were the main concerns for the sub-themes of meaninglessness and realization of own end, suicidal behaviour, and identity crises. Explanation of four sub-themes of this theme is given below:

Meaninglessness and Realization of Own End

Meaninglessness and realization of own end sub-themes are closely interconnected. Meaninglessness means people feel emptiness and they will not have a purpose to lead a life where the realization of own end means that people perceive that they are going to die, or they will lose everything. They will become nothing. For example, Sukanto shared how he perceived his life as meaningless. A quotation is given below:

I lagged in the battle of life. I mean, my friends can apply for jobs. In that situation, I feel that half of my lifetime has been wasted. I feel it. My entire life was not normal, I mean life is full of sorrow. It seemed like a cursed life. (Sukanto)

The life of Sukanto became meaningless, he thought several times to commit suicide and attempted twice to commit suicide. Moreover, Shamim realized his end after a breakup with his girlfriend. He became emotionally numb and perceived that he had lost everything from his life.

Some participants view their life as meaningless while others realize their own end of life. For example, a poor CGPA reduces the acceptance rate of a job application at a reputed organization. When some participants cannot apply for the first category of government job due to poor results, they consider their life as meaningless. For instance, Bipul realized that his life would be meaningless if he could not sit for the BCS examination. BCS examination or any sort of public service was his dream job. It was not his realization of his end because he had a plan to do business if he did not get a job from his desired job list. According to Yalom (1980), people created their meaning to live. Here, respondents of this study have formulated meanings in their lives through getting a government job.

On the contrary, Pibir perceives his life as meaningless. Most of the time he realized that there was no purpose in his life as he said that life seemed meaningless. According to Tillich (1952), the life of a human being has no purpose and value. Some participants have explored that

they have no purpose in their lives. They suffer from emotional pain without having a purpose in life (Yalom, 1980). One participant has attempted twice to commit suicide while another respondent assumes suicide as a right to kill himself when he does not want to live. Earlier research findings support this finding of this study; for example, existential meaninglessness anticipated suicidal ideation (Li et al., 2022).

Suicidal Behaviour

Sukanto developed depression and became separated from friends after a breakup with his girlfriend. He used to maintain close contact with his parents. During his isolation period, he rarely shared his feelings with his parents. He was detached from the major functions of his life such as attending university lectures, food intake, sleep, and mingling with friends. At one point in his depressed life, he attempted to commit suicide.

“I attempted twice to commit suicide when I was depressed.” (Sukanto)

Pibir expressed that he thought to end their life at a certain stage. A quotation is given below:

It was true that I thought to commit suicidal behaviour. I mean, because I assumed that there was such a thing as a right to death. Right to death means if you are ever disgusted with your life, if you do not like it, you can leave it. I believe that. (Pibir)

Zhu et al. (2022) conducted a study with students and found that existential isolation helped to develop suicidal ideation directly and meaninglessness indirectly among the participants. The respondents of this study also experience meaninglessness and suicidal behaviour. This study cannot predict the direct or indirect relationship between existential isolation and suicidal ideation or meaninglessness.

Furthermore, meaninglessness in life can develop suicidal ideation in individuals (Li et al., 2022). The findings of this study also support this research finding. Two participants have suicidal ideation in common while they experience meaninglessness, though other existential crises play an important role in developing suicidal ideation. Data analysis indicates that conflict in relationships with close ones, career anxiety, and guilt along with meaninglessness make respondents vulnerable to suicidal ideation; nevertheless, these existential crises are not enough to provoke participants to commit suicide. When, helplessness, emotional pain, isolation, fear of isolation of family members, and other challenges add to these existential crises participants can attempt to commit suicide. This analysis does not make causation for suicidal ideation to suicidal attempt; rather, it provides insight into triggering factors that provoke suicidal ideation to suicidal attempt.

Identity Crisis

Six participants who came from minor and Indigenous communities were confronted with an identity crisis when they questioned themselves about their purpose in life, their ideal career for themselves, and roles and responsibilities against their families. In addition, they experienced an identity crisis when they encountered the end of a relationship, after being isolated from people and surroundings, and the aftermath or during a stressful situation. Some quotations are excerpted from the transcripts:

Pibir shared that he was confronted with an identity crisis because of his ethnic identity. When he came to campus, identity crisis became a pinnacle issue for him. Here is a quotation provided below:

My identity becomes a prime concern for the future. I explored that we were only two to three Indigenous students among 180 students in our class. The ethnicity of these students is creating problems in terms of their academic performance or participation in different organizations or activities. I believe it. (Pibir)

After a breakup with an intimate partner, Sukanto was shocked and confused about his role and responsibilities toward his family. He lost the meaning of leading a life. He did not have a career choice either. In that context, they confronted an identity crisis because they did not find their real self. Furthermore, he confirmed that when he experienced racism whether it was from his university teachers and friends, or an unfamiliar person, an identity crisis appeared. He narrated that he experiences identity crisis till now whenever he is confronted with racism.

Six participants, who come from minor and Indigenous communities, have experienced identity crisis. Several challenges or existential crises are responsible for developing identity crisis such as questioning about purpose in life, end of relationship, isolation, career anxiety, roles and liabilities toward family, and racism. Here, individuals encounter with different challenges, but all participants experience racism. Hence, identity crisis and racism are closely associated with each other.

Data analysis of this study cannot establish causation between identity crisis and racism, though some respondents precisely state that they question their identity every time after encounter racism. Another participant shares that racism is a common phenomenon in the country. They confront racism because of their religion and ethnicity. Therefore, it can be concluded that racism can be one of the responsible factors for developing identity crisis among individuals from minor communities where minor communities can be defined by religion and belonging to an Indigenous community.

Strengths and Limitations

The present study has strengths and limitations. The recruited participants are from different ethnic (e.g., Bengali, Garo, Chakma) and religions (e.g., Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and Buddhism) as well as different academic years that represent the different academic years, religions, and ethnicities of the selected university. The recruited participants are from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds as well as various academic years, representing the array of academic years, religions, and ethnicities of students at the university. Furthermore, the rigor and trustworthiness of this study have been established through recruiting an independent external auditor, and member checking.

Recruitment of participants with similar levels of experience, cultural beliefs and practices, and experienced life adversity were limitations of this study. Moreover, female participants were not accessible for data collection for this study. In addition, participants were recruited from a university only; hence, generalization of the findings for other universities and cultural contexts will be another limitation of the inquiry.

Conclusion

Though this study has several limitations, the findings will provide concrete insight for mental health professionals, and academic administrators in addressing specific existential crises in educational settings in Bangladesh. Mental health professionals, such as student counsellors, can assess existential crises and differentiate them from psychological problems (e.g., determining whether career anxiety is a psychological problem or existential in nature) to tailor therapeutic interventions that improve students' mental well-being, thereby enhancing their academic success. Moreover, researchers can conduct research on a large scale with minor and Indigenous communities to explore the association between racism and identity crises. Finally, administrators in academic settings can organize workshops or seminars for newly arrived students to increase awareness about the forthcoming challenges and its impact on their mental well-being.

Moreover, the findings of this study have theoretical and contextual significance. This study has combined existential approaches and psychosocial development theory in academic settings. For instance, the fifth and sixth stages of Erikson's (1950) theory of psychosocial development explains the psychosocial development status of a university student. The research findings of this study have supported the fifth stage of this theory that students have entered their university life with an identity crisis; when they encounter racism identity crisis becomes prominent.

Contextually, the findings offer a concrete insight into the existential crises experienced by university students in Bangladesh which were assessed as general psychological problems. As an example, the determination of future goals (i.e., career choice) is one of the prime concerns for university students, if they are in a loop of existential crisis (e.g., purpose of life or future), they cannot choose their career as a future goal. Other findings such as separation anxiety, identity crisis, and purpose and meaning in life can be assessed and intervened through different psychoeducational programs, workshops, and therapeutic services.

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