

Constructed Fear of Poverty: The Power of Identity and the Identity of Power Among Youths

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Abstract

While discussing youth, less attention is paid to their fear towards the issue of poverty and how this fear could affect their identity formation. This paper aims to outline how urban youth construct their fear of poverty and how this issue is affecting their identity formation. The research was conducted using both the quantitative and qualitative designs. 720 respondents were involved in the survey. 30 of these respondents were chosen to be involved in three Focus Group Discussion sessions. This study demonstrated that youth's idea of fear is based on real situations and the 'possible fear' is to avoid this threat in the first place. The results identified that economic situation is the main contributing factor for one to be in poverty followed by the lack of education, lack of governmental support and lack of societal support. Finally, this study shows that by identifying this fear, it is hoped that the youths will have stronger confidence in their identity and self in relation to the current world context.

Keywords: Youth; Identity; Poverty; Fear; Inequality.

Introduction

Youth represents a critical time in the identity formation process. It revolves the transition to youth to have the rights and carry the responsibilities of an adult person, a transition that has been made harder for many young people in the face of a changing and unequal society. Generally, youth is envisioned as someone who is involved in the process of establishing a sense of identity in the essentially insecure world which serves tension in their experiences on a daily basis. Most discussions involving youth are described and often associated with issues revolving a transitional period of being dependent and becoming independent. By contrast, much less attention is paid to how youth defined

fear in dealing with issues of inequality and how these fears can affect their identity formation.

In modern societies, one's identity is no longer perceived as something that is given, but rather something one must choose and develop by oneself. The youth phase is commonly seen as a period in one's life which is particularly concerned with identity construction. Research on youth by sociologists is still quite recent. Sociologists are now interested in exploring into many aspects that influence youth identity formation and their level of confidence with their identity. Stanley Hall's earliest work (1904) is seen as one of the earliest scientific studies that incorporate sociological elements in the study of youth. Clearly there is a multitude of anxieties and worries which may have had an impact on these young people's ability to identify with their local surroundings.

This paper calls the attention to some of the factors that contribute to youth's fear of poverty and to point out ways in which efforts can be made to overcome their fear in relation to their identity formation. It will further discuss the importance of youth sense of belonging in the construction of their personal identity. This paper also hopes to uncover how youth overcome their fear and to build confidence in constructing their identity. In this way, although issues of fear are integral to youth identity construction, it could be dealt with in a more confident and realistic manner.

The objectives of this paper therefore are:

1. To outline urban youth constructive idea of fear in relation to poverty.
2. To identify whether issues of poverty affect urban youth identity formation.

Literature Review and Theoretical View

Youth is a concept that could be found in varied types of literature. Though fundamentally it is a concept associated with biology as a stage in human growth and development, it is also the subject of interest in many disciplines such as education, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and demography, among others. According to Rosenmayr (1972), the term 'youth' could be viewed from two main aspects: on one hand it refers to a phase in the development of individuals, and on the other, it designates a group in society. These are two interrelated aspects that could be analysed separately.

While there is no single definition of what 'urban' contexts are, most cited definitions usually reflect national census classifications. Classifications may be based on density, livelihood and activity profiles, or number of residents. For the purposes of this paper, 'urban youth' refers to youth living in the 'urban' space which refers to 'areas of dense human habitation that also exhibit a higher density of built space (and reflect higher concentrations of services, infrastructure and socioeconomic activity) than outlying rural settlements and areas' (Gupte, 2013).

The youth phase is commonly seen as a period in one's life which is particularly concerned with identity construction. Erikson in his work entitled "Identity: Youth and Crisis" (1968) identifies the period of adolescence as a stage of psychological development characterized by role confusion or identity diffusion. It denotes a condition in which a young person is uncertain about his status and role in the society. According to Weeks (1990), identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others; at its most basic, it gives you a sense of personal location and the stable core to one's individuality.

Fear is not reducible to generalisations, but needs to be viewed as situated, complex and often having multiple causes (Shirlow & Pain, 2003). While there is no single adequate definition of fear, for the purposes of this research, I will employ Pain's (2000) definition of 'fear' as the "wide range of emotional and practical responses to 'crime and disorder' individuals and communities may make" (Pain 2000). Several studies have shown that

people living in disadvantaged areas are much more fearful than the rest of the population (Borooah and Carcarch, 1997; Pantazis and Gordon, 1997). Indeed, Pantazis (2000) employs the notion of vulnerability to demonstrate that the poorest people in society suffer most, both from the insecurities that relate to crime, and from several noncriminal incidents including job loss, financial debts, and illnesses.

Identity on the other hand, is subsumed within the broader concept of self and is a newer entrance to social psychology. Regardless, it has been used variously in the English language since the fourteenth century. In contemporary social psychology, the concept of identity retains these earlier notions while also explicitly employing relatedness. Identity can thus be broadly defined as: categories people use to specify who they are and to locate themselves relative to other people (Michener & Delamater, 1999). In this sense, identity implies both a distinctiveness (I am not like them or a 'not-me') and a sameness as others (I am like them or a 'me-too') (Burke & Tully, 1977). Bauman (1988), however, provides a different conceptualisation of identity in late modernity:

"Everyone has to ask himself the question 'who am I, 'how should I live', 'who do I want to become' – and at the end of the day, be prepared to accept responsibility for the answer. In this sense freedom, is for the modern individual the fate he cannot escape, except by retreating into the fantasy world or through mental disorders. Freedom is therefore a mixed blessing. One needs it to be oneself; yet being oneself solely on the strength of one's free choice means a life full of doubts and fears of error ... Self construction of the self is, so to speak a necessity. Self-confirmation of the self is an impossibility" (Bauman 1988).

Poverty itself is a multidimensional phenomenon (Witt 1998, Hebel 2004). Poverty is not restricted to one dimension, e.g., income, but it manifests itself in all domains of life, such as housing, education, health (Deleek et al., 1992). Multidimensional poverty encompasses the various deprivations experienced by poor people in their daily lives – such as poor health, lack of education, inadequate living standards, disempowerment, poor quality of work, the threat of violence, and living in areas that are environmentally hazardous, among others (Oxford Poverty and Human

Development Initiative, 2020). A multidimensional measure of poverty can incorporate a range of indicators that capture the complexity of these phenomena in order to inform policies aimed at reducing poverty and deprivation in a country. Depending on the context of a country and the purpose of the measure, different indicators can be chosen to reflect the needs and priorities of a nation, as well as its constituent regions, districts, provinces, etc. (Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2020).

Poverty is related to a lack of something, for example of resources, money or social aspects. This lack can be differentiated in absolute, relative, subjective and objective approaches (Eichler 2001). Ultimately, conceptions of poverty are based upon social values and norms (Sindzingre, 2000; Blackwood & Lynch, 1994). Human poverty is defined by 'impoverishment in multiple dimensions – deprivation in a long and healthy life, in knowledge, in a decent standard of living, in participation' (UNDP, 2000). Therefore, income as the sole indicator of well-being is inappropriate and should be supplemented by other attributes or variables, e.g., housing, literacy, life expectancy, provision of public goods and so on (Kolm, 1977; Atkinson and Bourguignon, 1982; Maasoumi, 1986; Tsui, 2002). Poor people describe poverty and ill-being to include poor health, nutrition, lack of adequate sanitation and clean water, social exclusion, low education, bad housing conditions, violence, shame, disempowerment and much more (Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2017). Therefore, in understanding poverty, the task is to understand how different visions and perceptions overlap, how they interrelate and what the implications of different approaches and definition are (Alcock, 1997).

Theoretical View

The relationship between poverty and identity has received little attention from studies of identity development. Stress, social stigma or marginalization, and the nature of the opportunity structures faced by many poor adolescents conspire to create a context that is not conducive to the exploration into identity issues. Grotevant (1987) offered an elegant process model of identity formation that comprises four main components: individual characteristics that have bearings on the

identity process, contexts of development, the identity process in specific domains (e.g., occupation, ideology), and interdependencies among the different identity domains. The model is described as developmental, contextual, and life span in scope. The identity process, according to Grotevant (1987), begins with an orientation to engage in the identity exploration.

Tying this in with Grotevant's (1987) thinking on identity processes, it should be expected that for many poor adolescents the orientation to engage in exploration will be suppressed. At the same time, in terms of the evaluation component of Grotevant's model, it seems reasonable to expect many poor adolescents to settle quickly and prematurely into roles that fail to take advantage of all the adolescents' potential, roles perhaps based on realistic appraisals of the local opportunity structure or roles perhaps ascribed by the non-poor element of society. Additionally, this premature settling into roles should be expected to preclude future identity exploration.

Given that 'identity' is about belonging, this paper is an attempt to see how students from the selected urban public university deal with their daily fears of poverty in an attempt to form their identity. The temporality of identity is commonly overlooked; however, it should be noted that identity is ever in-process and changes over the life course. Identity is never complete and can incorporate aspirational and fantasy elements.

Methodological Approach

This study is an empirical based study. The study was conducted using the triangulation method in which both qualitative and quantitative approaches are used in collecting data and discussion of the results of the study. The Triangulation Method was chosen because it can strengthen the validity and reliability of data and enrich the data. According to Chua Yan Piaw (2006), the triangulation method can be seen as 'seeing a statue of different angles' to get a clear overview of the shape of the statue. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), there are four types of triangulations namely data triangulation, methods triangulation, investigator triangulation and theoretical triangulation. In this study, researchers will use only two types of triangulations, namely data triangulation and methods triangulation.

Data collection methods that were employed in this research include survey and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Random sampling was used to get respondents in which each sample has an equal probability of being chosen and is meant to be an unbiased representation of the university population. A total of 720 respondents were employed in this research from three public universities in Malaysia namely University Science Malaysia (Northern region), University of Malaya (Centre state region) and University Technology Malaysia (Southern region). Respondents consist of local students, male (181) and female (531) and from various ethnic backgrounds. This research attempts to obtain an equal proportion for both genders; however, it is shown that the number of female respondents is predominant than male in all universities involved.

Three Focus Group Discussions were held at each location with 8-10 respondents per session.

Respondents in each session are picked among the 720 respondents involved in the survey. Their participation is of a voluntary basis based on the criteria set. This includes that in each session there will be male, female and they are of different ethnic backgrounds. The views expressed in this FGD discussion are important in providing the respondents with the opportunity to make comparisons and share experiences about what they are going through in a more relaxed and comfortable environment.

Respondent’s Background

As this study is aimed at youth, the largest number of respondents involved are between the age ranging from 21-23 years old, consisting of 428 (59.4%) out of the total 720 respondents. This is followed by 246 (34.2% of respondents with the age ranging from 18-20 years old. This is shown in Table 2.

Table 1: Respondent’s Sex

| Gender | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------|------------|----------------|
| Male | 181 | 25.14 |
| Female | 531 | 73.75 |
| Not stated | 8 | 1.11 |
| TOTAL | 720 | 100% |

Note: Source from survey.

Table 2: Respondent’s Age

| Age (Years) | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------|------------|----------------|
| 18-20 | 246 | 34.16 |
| 21-23 | 428 | 59.44 |
| 24-26 | 41 | 5.69 |
| 27-32 | 5 | 0.69 |
| TOTAL | 720 | 100% |

Note: Source from survey.

Respondents involved came from various ethnic backgrounds as shown in Table 3 below. The largest number of respondents are Malays (61.1%), followed by Chinese (24.4%) and Others (7.7%). It was shown that respondents that categorize

themselves as Others mainly are from Sabah and Sarawak with various ethnic groups stated namely Bumiputera, Dusun, Kadazan, Iban, Murut or Malay-Chinese.

Table 3: Respondent’s Ethnic Group

| Ethnic Group | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------|------------|----------------|
| Malay | 440 | 61.11 |
| Chinese | 176 | 24.44 |
| Indian | 43 | 5.97 |
| Others | 55 | 7.63 |
| Not stated | 6 | 0.83 |
| TOTAL | 720 | 100% |

Note: Source from survey.

Table 4: Respondent's Household Income

| Monthly Household Income (RM) | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------------------|------------|----------------|
| Less than 2000 | 199 | 27.63 |
| 2001-3000 | 148 | 20.55 |
| 3001-4000 | 112 | 15.55 |
| 4001-5000 | 67 | 9.30 |
| 5001-6000 | 63 | 8.75 |
| More than 6000 | 129 | 17.91 |
| Not stated | 2 | 0.27 |
| TOTAL | 720 | 100% |

Note: Source from survey.

In Table 4, the findings show the indirect categorization of the family's economic position either they are from B40, M40 or the working class. From Table 4 above, 459 (63.7%) of the respondents can be categorized under B40 and the rest are M40 and high-income families. These refer to the income groups categorization in Malaysia, where generally B40 group represents the bottom 40% of income earners (<RM 4,850), M40 group represents the middle 40% (RM 4,850 – RM10,959) and T20 group represents the top 20% (>RM 10,959 of monthly income) (The Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019).

Results and Discussion

This paper provides more empirical evidence that revolves around the idea of youth going through the transitional period of being dependent and becoming independent. Focusing on the key content areas of the extent of their fear in dealing with issues of poverty and how this fear affects their identity formation, ideas and views, the researcher has worked with youth in urban public universities to better understand the issues from their perspectives. Data highlighted shows how the issues relating to poverty are seen as fear in their daily lives and how strong their identity is in dealing with these fears. Like most social facts, the idea of fear is constructed by various discourses. This study looks into the communicative aspects as the main contributor to the reality of the idea of fear.

i. Youth Constructed Fear of Poverty

Poverty

This part will discuss findings in relation to youth's understanding of poverty, factors identified in contributing to poverty and their constructive fears

in relation to issues of poverty and inequality. Figures are provided to show the summary of the findings and by listing down the most important factors to the least important factors that are identified from the findings in relation to issues of poverty and inequality. In relation to the cultural and societal impact of this research, the data have shown that more than 90% of the respondents involved are aware of the meaning of poverty and inequality although the rest seems unsure of what the terms really refer to. The narrative construction of their identity is constructed and reconstructed repeatedly through their constructive idea of what they fear for.

The first question asked was whether respondents have heard of the term 'poverty' and it shows that 647 (89.8%) said yes and the rest said no. However, how respondents construct their idea of poverty might differ from one another and that could also contribute to the "No" answer. On the other hand, this could also show that since nearly 40% of respondents came from M40 and above, they might feel that the question is about associating themselves in the state of poverty and this led them to state "No" to the question asked. Among the answers provided by the respondents in the FGD session on what is poverty, according to their understanding: (Names of respondents have been changed due to confidentiality consideration).

"...What I believe poverty is that poverty is a state when you are unable to meet your most basic needs at a rate that is at a constant rate like there will be fluctuations where you're unable to provide, unable to access certain basic services or like necessities like you may not be able to have an adequate amount of food for a week or a month, or you may not have access or may not be able to access, access things that would allow you to find stability. So, I defined poverty as a form of constant instability for a person,

specifically in terms of like their financial situation, but it also extends to other elements of their lives so they can do their job or their living conditions. And that's what I define as poverty." (Daniel)

"... Poverty is when a person is in a phase of life in which he or she can't or unable to sustain his own living in terms of like to support his own life or his families' or friends' life. So that to me is poverty." (Nabila)

Next findings will investigate the respondents' opinions on what are the factors that could contribute to poverty. 10 reasons were listed, and the respondents are required to choose the most probable reason to the least probable reason on what factors contribute to poverty. The factors that were listed down are personality trait (B3A), health reason (B3B), economic situation (B3C), spiritual/religious reason (B3D), lack of education (B3E), Infrastructure (B3F), lack of governmental support (B3G), lack of societal support (B3H), own weaknesses (B3I) and one's luck (B3J).

Figure 1: Factors Contributing to Poverty.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| B3C | 287 | | | | | | | | | |
| B3E | | 178 | | | | | | | | |
| B3G | | | 102 | | | | | | | |
| B3H | | | | 100 | | | | | | |
| B3H | | | | | 103 | | | | | |
| B3H | | | | | | 113 | | | | |
| B3F | | | | | | | 114 | | | |
| B3F | | | | | | | | 114 | | |
| B3D | | | | | | | | | 139 | |
| B3J | | | | | | | | | | 332 |

Note: Source from survey.

What are shown in Figure 1 are the factors that contribute to poverty according to the most probable reason to the least probable reason. The findings reveal that the most probable reason for one to be in poverty is their economic situation, followed by the lack of education, lack of governmental support, lack of societal support, infrastructure, spiritual/religious reason, one's luck, personality trait, health reason and lastly one's own weakness. The fact that economic situation is seen as the most probable reason is that it creates poverty in terms of unemployment, crime, and poor health. In addition, the poor have little disposable income, and they cannot spend and generate income for firms and jobs for other individuals. Next, the lack of education shows that not every person without an education is living in poverty, but most of the poor people living in poverty do not have an education.

Research dealing with potential effects of poverty (or socioeconomic status, in general) on identity is hardly surprising given how many, if not most, identity theorists and researchers have made little attempt to describe the effect of external sociocultural influences on identity formation, a point adroitly addressed by Yoder (2000) in an

article discussing barriers to ego identity status formation (Phillips & Pittman, 2003). Socioeconomic status influences development and life decisions by opening and closing opportunities (Rojewski & Yang, 1997). Economic stress is also associated with marital conflict, discord, separation, and divorce according to Elder and Caspi (1988). When adolescents live in families with greater than average rates of conflict, dissatisfaction, or divorce, the affective climate of the family may have negative effects on adolescents' psychological well-being and provide a stressful context for identity development.

"For me... I feel one of the main factors is mindset. So, if you're born poor, I believe that if you're unable to change it, sometimes it's because of the opportunities that you don't get or that you're restricted from. But I also feel it's the mindset because if you want to do it, you will find avenues where you'll be able to achieve." (Khaish)

The next part of the findings will look into what respondents fear the most in relation to poverty. 10 reasons were listed, and the respondents are required to choose the most probable reason to the least probable reason on what factors contribute to

poverty. The factors that were listed down are building a relationship (B4A), insufficient food and basic needs (B4B), poor quality work (low-paid and insecure) (B4C), not being able to travel (B4D), not getting good education (B4E), lack of

self-confidence and being left-out (B4F), unable to enjoy life like others do (B4G), being involved in unplanned crime for survival purpose (B4H), living with stigma and labeled as poor (B4I) and gaining respects from others (B4J).

Figure 2: Issues that are fear most in relation to poverty.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---------|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|
| B4B | 325 | | | | | | | | | |
| B4E | | 146 | | | | | | | | |
| B4E | | | 145 | | | | | | | |
| B4C | | | | 108 | | | | | | |
| B4C | | | | | 89 | | | | | |
| B4F | | | | | | 93 | | | | |
| B4G/I/J | | | | | | | 96 | | | |
| B4J | | | | | | | | 126 | | |
| B4D | | | | | | | | | 122 | |
| B4D | | | | | | | | | | 222 |

Note: Source from survey.

What are shown in Figure 2 are the factors that look into what are the issue youth fear the most in relation to poverty. The most fearsome issues that were identified here are insufficient food and basic needs. This is then followed by not getting good education, poor quality work (low paid and insecure), lack self-confidence and being left out, unable to enjoy life like others, living with stigma and labeled as poor, gaining respect from others, not being able to travel, building a relationship and the least fear is being involved in unplanned crime for the purpose of survival.

While basic needs are most likely to be advocated as a measure of absolute poverty, there is no priori reason that one's basic needs might not be relative to what other members of the society have. Needs are likely to become increasingly relative as average incomes rise and as needs take on increasingly social dimensions (Watson, 2014). For

some youth, the transition to adulthood presents a number of challenges in meeting their basic needs. They may not be able to find employment that offers them sufficient wages and to let them fulfil basic needs. In other words, youth are no longer dependable on their parents in matters related to their basic needs, food or health benefits.

Poverty and hunger are negatively affecting youth development. At this point youth are in their most critical stages of cognitive, social and emotional development. Any sustained interruption to their nutrition or to their care, if not treated early, can result in irreversible damage to their development. As impoverished youth grow, they will be less likely to succeed in school and this will perpetuate the cycle of poverty and poor human development (Chilton, Chyatte & Breaux, 2007).

ii Feeling Whether Their Identity is More Powerful Than Their Fear of Poverty and Inequality in Their Identity Formation.

Figure 3: Issues of poverty does not influence my identity formation

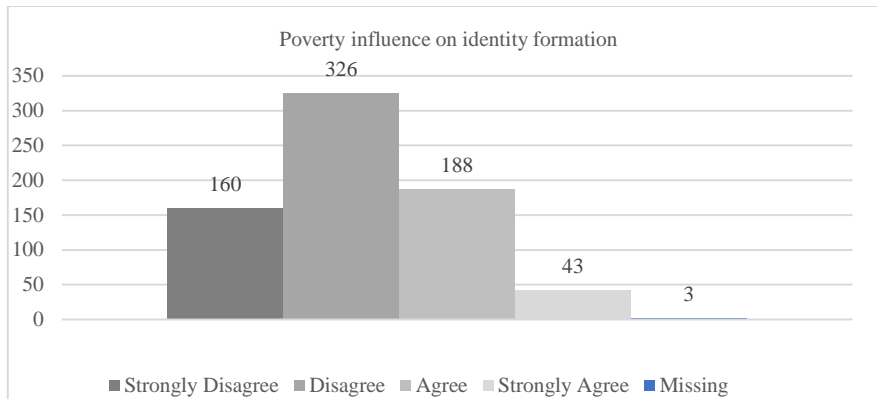
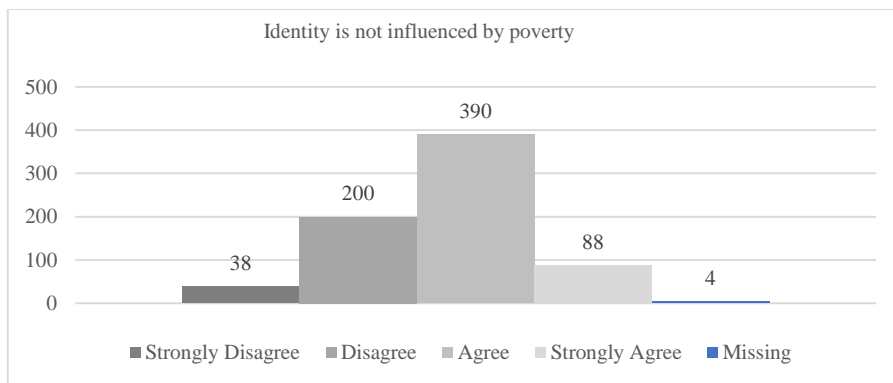


Figure 4: I believe I have a strong identity and not easily influenced by poverty



In Figure 3, when respondents were asked whether issues of poverty influenced their identity formation, majority (326 or 45%) disagreed with the statement. This is followed by strongly disagree (160 or 22%). This shows that most respondents involved in this study feel that issues of poverty and inequality do have influence on their identity formation. Meanwhile in Figure 4, when the respondents were asked whether they believe they have strong identity and not easily influenced by poverty and inequality, majority (390 or 54%) agreed with the statement. This is followed by disagree (200 or 28%). Although the results show that slightly more than half of the respondents felt that they have strong identity, the next highest responses show that they somehow do not have a strong identity and they might waver in their identity formation when dealing with issues of poverty.

Therefore, it can be said that issues or poverty imping youth identity formation in varieties of ways. DeHaan and MacDemid (1996) found that economic hardship and psychological behavioural

outcomes are indirect. Poverty was related to lower levels of identity development that in turn were associated with negative outcomes in the areas of self-esteem, loneliness, delinquency, and academic achievement (Phillips and Pittman, 2017). Clearly it can be said that the manner in which poverty affects youth identity has been under researched. However, it is undeniable that poverty impinges youth identity development in a variety of ways and a variety of domains.

In tying the findings of this research with Grotevant’s (1987) model of identity formation process, it is anticipated that for many urban youths, the orientation to engage in exploration will be suppressed. The B40 and M40 youths seem to expect to settle quickly and prematurely into their roles that might fail to take advantage of all the youth potential based on the realistic appraisals of the non-poor element of the society. The unsettling situation would preclude their future identity formation.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that youth's idea of fear is based on real situations. One 'possible fear' that youth see as threat to their identity formation is poverty. By identifying these fears in relation to poverty and inequality, youth will have stronger confidence in their identity and self in relation to the current world context. It is noted that the findings that have emerged from this research have much to do with the influence of poverty factors and how the life experiences of the youth are making them more powerful in which it is referring to the power of their identity and how their fear of poverty signifies the identity of power in influencing their identity formation.

Finally, this research has the potential to be explored further by looking into aspects like the identity formation of rural youth, marginal youth and disabled youth. All of these groups should be explored in their own context and comparative studies will make this research stronger and much anticipated by all parties in developing a better future for the next generation to come. All parties should stand hand in hand for youths who are the hope of the nation. When these youths successfully acquire their ego identity, it will indirectly indicate that they will be able to function well under stressful environments in future and build good relationships with the environment and be open to new ideas that can enable them to have a better future.

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