

A survey of some aspects of birthday celebration

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Background. The tradition of celebrating the day of birth of an individual is thought to have existed since the ancient times. Depending on the culture, religious beliefs, and the geographic location, occasions for ritual performance differ greatly. The aim of this pilot study was to investigate how students in Lithuania evaluate the importance of their birthday.

Materials and methods. An “Invitation to Remember Your Birthday” questionnaire was created by the authors to collect the responses for evaluation. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions divided into four parts. It assessed how and what the respondents felt on their annual birthday, about the organization of the celebration, gift-receiving, and the value of the ritual.

Results. A total of 309 medical students of Vilnius University completed the survey ($n = 146$ year 4, $n = 163$ year 5). The results suggested that the birthday is an important individual occasion, which students tend to celebrate annually. The respondents tend to feel better and more loved on the day of their birthday.

Conclusions. Birthday is seen as an opportunity to spend time with friends and family, have a break from daily responsibilities, and receive attention from people around them. Birthday celebration of medical students is affected by their social and cultural context. The findings of this study may be relevant for future studies when searching for age- and culture-appropriate ways to use birthday celebration as possible means of improving mental health. The current data can be used for longitudinal and cross-cultural comparisons.

Keywords: birthday, celebration, birthday functions

BACKGROUND

The tradition of celebrating an individual's day of birth is thought to have existed from the ancient times (1). It is believed that the Romans were

the first to develop the habit of annually honouring their family members, friends, and clients with banquets, prayers, and gifts on the day of their birth (1). Throughout the centuries, anniversaries were perceived as a special day mostly among the adult population. It was not until the 19th century that children's birthdays are thought to have started gaining recognition and being celebrated in modesty (2). In the 20th century,

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children's birthday celebrations were acknowledged as a factor helping children to adapt to biological and social age-related changes (2). The historical evidence leaves no doubt that rituals play an important role in human life. It is believed that such life-course celebrations as birthdays not only help to understand the cyclicity of natural processes but also are essential celebrations of passage in society (2).

Depending on the culture, religious beliefs, and the geographic location, occasions for a ritual performance differ greatly. From seasonal natural phenomena, position of the stars and planets, and sometimes even the behaviour of certain animals to celebrations of historical and religious festivals and, eventually, birthdays, the event remains socially significant. Although the importance of birthdays for children was investigated from different perspectives, little research has been done on its value for adults. The aim of this study was to investigate how students in Lithuania perceive the importance of their birthday.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To collect responses, the authors created a questionnaire "Invitation to Remember Your Birthday" that consisted of 15 questions divided into four parts. The first part of the survey was focused on how students felt on the day of their birthday and consisted of Likert scales. The second part covered questions on the organization of the celebration. The third part provided questions about gift-receiving. Finally, students were asked to share their opinions on what their birthday meant to them and what rituals they performed on the given day. The last three parts were composed of multi-choice questions. Respondents were also provided with free writing space to leave comments in case they wished to include a different answer or more detailed information on the subject.

The survey was made to look as a birthday party invitation card and a sweet treat was attached to it in order to trigger memories about birthdays. Vilnius University medical students in their 4th and 5th year of studies were chosen to complete the anonymous survey on birthday celebration. The surveys were handed out before lectures and collected after them the same day. The statistical analysis of the results was performed using SPSS Statistics 22.0 and Windows Excel.

RESULTS

A total of 309 medical students completed the survey ($n = 146$ year 4, $n = 163$ year 5), among them 217 female (70.2%) and 92 (29.8%) male students. The average age of the participants was 22.94 years (22.83 female and 23.21 male). Most of the student were pleasantly surprised with the format of the questionnaire and no unconsumed treats were returned with it.

Analysis of the responses revealed that medical students felt better and more loved on the day of the birthday. The respondents specified their level of agreement on symmetric Likert-type scales, which were composed of 11 Likert items. The items were marked on a horizontal line, on which the items were marked in numbers from 0 to 10. The 0 mark meant feeling worse or less loved compared to an average day, 10 meant feeling better or more loved compared to an average day and 5 was the neutral point, meaning feeling no different to an average day. The arithmetic mean for feeling better or worse compared to an average day was 7.57 and 7.02 for feeling more or less loved. Females tended to feel better and more loved than male respondents ($p < 0.05$). The study also showed that 10.4% of respondents could not fully enjoy their birthday celebration because it coincided with winter or spring examinations.

When asked who the respondent would prefer to celebrate their birthday with, the answers distributed in the following way: with friends (90.9%), with a significant other (80.6%), with their family members (66.3%), and alone (12%). Students preferred their birthdays to be organized by others than to organize them themselves (49.2% and 21.4%, respectively). Around one-fifth of all respondents preferred not to celebrate their day of birth at all (18.1%).

For both female and male students, being with people important to them was the best gift to receive on their birthday (79.6%). The second best gift was a fun party (45.3%), and the third place was given to money (35.6%). The fourth and the fifth places were taken by gifts of an experience (27.8%) and a physical gift (15.9%).

Most of the respondents believed that birthdays were an occasion to receive personal attention from people around them (62.5%). More

than half of the students saw their birthdays as an opportunity to have fun (57.3%). A birthday was also a motive to receive gifts (49.8%) and treat oneself to a tasty meal (43.7%). About a third of the respondents took on fewer everyday responsibilities on the given day (35%) or spent the day thinking about their life (32.7%). Some students admitted they did not consider their birthday as a day of special significance (30.7%) and most of the respondents (73.5%) agreed that as the years passed, birthdays became a less meaningful occasion for them to celebrate.

DISCUSSION

It is important to notice that in Lithuania birthday celebration gained popularity as late as after the Second World War. Before that the majority of the people would annually celebrate the day of their name. Although today some older members of the society still prefer celebrating their name days and jubilees, most of their children and grandchildren have been raised with an emphasis on the day of their birth and celebrate birthdays every year. The study shows that medical students in Lithuania tend to celebrate their birthdays and feel special on the celebration day.

Depending on the society, milestone birthdays may differ, but most of them mark similar life-changing events, such as entering school, gaining the right to work, and entering adulthood (2). As an example, special attention is paid to the 16th and 21st birthdays in the United States of America. Birthdays are important in American culture as this life-course ritual compensates for the absence of profound rituals of the transition from childhood to adulthood and may contribute to the reduction of overall stress levels during critical periods of individual's life (3). In most European countries, including Lithuania, the 18th birthday is an important day of becoming an adult and gaining the rights to drive, vote, and get married.

Birthdays serve four main functions to the celebrating individual: the ritual of passage in the community, individuation, provides a sense of group membership, and gift-receiving (2). It is important to mention that the results obtained in this pilot study provided important information on various aspects of the subject.

Most of the students responded that birthday celebration was an occasion to get attention from the people around them. A birthday party was the second most desirable gift to receive. Also, most of the students would have preferred it to be organized for them. Finally, the results suggest, that the respondents felt better and more loved on the day of their birth. Although females responded they felt better and more loved than males, no other gender-linked data was found to be statistically significant, therefore further studies are needed. The results support the idea of birthday having a purpose of individuation to the birthday person. The celebrations can help with a better understanding of oneself, make the person feel unique and valuable, provide support in tough times (2, 4). It is believed, that rituals performed during holidays can be used in occupational therapy by addressing individual's beliefs and needs (4).

Only a small part of the respondents preferred spending their birthday alone. Some respondents admitted they could not fully enjoy their birthday celebration because of winter or spring examinations. As long as medical students dedicate much time to their studies, it would be interesting to broaden the study to search for differences with adults of similar age but different occupation and to compare the results. Those who celebrated preferred being accompanied by people they considered important in their lives: friends, significant others, and/or family. A day spent with them was chosen to be the most-wanted birthday gift. Performing the birthday ritual among people allows the celebrating person to feel connected to others and supported by them. Rituals are known to contribute to social cohesion and positively affect physical and mental health (5). Performance of them within family improves children's self-organizational skills, support their emotional development, and lead to better coherence between single parents and their offspring (6).

Gifts can be material as well as non-material and are meant to mark the celebration (2). Among medical students, the most desired gift appeared to be non-material and time spent with people important to them. The second best gift is a birthday party. These results show that non-material gifts of communication and attention are highly valued by medical students. It might also indicate

a lack of opportunities to spend enough time with their friends and family, as well as a deficit of leisure time and/or positive emotions triggered by birthday parties. The reason for such results is not completely clear. It would be beneficial to collect and compare responses from students of different faculties and age groups.

It is known that a gift serves as a tool to evaluate relations between the giving and the receiving sides (7). A study suggests that gift recipients prefer receiving gifts that were requested to those that were not (8). Such gifts are recognized by the receiver as thoughtful, while the giver appears to them as attentive and responsive. On the other hand, if the gift givers are not attentive to the receivers requests, they tend to purchase unrequested gifts thinking they signal a sincere concern for the gift recipient. Gift recipients prefer money even more than the item they have requested (8). The results of this study support this theory as the most requested material gift by medical students is money and physical things take the second place. Further studies exploring various traditions of name day celebrations and birthdays that are changing with time in societies are needed.

CONCLUSIONS

The forms of birthday celebration are changing and evolving. Analysis of the responses revealed that the importance of birthday celebrations is broadly recognized among students. The results suggest that birthday is an important individual occasion, which students tend to celebrate annually. It is important not only to the celebrating person, but also to his or her family, friends, and significant others. Birthday celebration of medical students is affected by their social and cultural environment. The subject is interesting to investigate dynamically and cross-culturally. It could be relevant for the future studies when searching for age- and culture-appropriate ways to use birthday celebration as a possible means of improving public mental health.

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KAI KURIŲ GIMTADIENIO ŠVENTIMO YPATUMŲ APŽVALGA

Santrauka

Įvadas. Manoma, kad tradicija švėsti gimtadienius susiformavo dar senovėje. Šią šventę lydintis ritualas įvairiose kultūrose stipriai skiriasi, priklauso nuo religinių įsitikinimų ir gyvenamosios vietos. Bandomojo tyrimo tikslas buvo iširti, kaip Lietuvos studentai vertina gimtadienio šventės svarbą.

Tyrimo medžiaga ir metodai. Anketą „Kvietimas prisiminti gimtadienį“ sudarė 15 klausimų, suskirstytų į 4 kategorijas. Apklausoje respondentų buvo klausama apie tai, kaip jie jaučiasi per savo gimtadienį, kaip jie švenčia šią šventę. Taip pat respondentams buvo pasiūlyta atsakyti į klausimus apie dovanų gavimą ir įvairius gimtadienio šventimo ritualus.

Rezultatai. Anketą užpildė 309 Vilniaus universiteto medicinos studentai ($n = 146$ IV kurso studentų, $n = 163$ V kurso studentų). Apklausos rezultatai parodė, kad gimtadienis yra svarbi asmeninė šventė, kurią studentai švenčia kiekvienais metais. Respondentai yra linkę jaustis geriau ir labiau mylimi, lyginant su paprasta diena.

Išvados. Gimtadienis respondentams yra galimybė praleisti laiką su šeima ir draugais, atitrūkti nuo kasdienių atsakomybių ir gauti dėmesio iš aplinkinių. Medicinos studentų gimtadienio šventimo ypatumai priklauso nuo kultūrinio konteksto. Šio bandomojo tyrimo rezultatai gali būti naudingi ateities tyrimams ieškant būdų panaudoti gimtadienio šventės organizavimą kaip prevencijos ir ankstyvos intervencijos priemonę gerinant psichikos sveikatą. Tyrimo duomenys gali būti panaudojami longitudinaliniams ir tarpkultūriniais tyrimams.

Raktažodžiai: gimtadienis, šventimas, gimtadienio funkcijos