A qualitative study to explore understanding and perception of sexual abuse among undergraduate students of different ethnicities

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore university students' understanding on sexual abuse and their perceptions on sexual abuse victims.
Methods: A total of 14 focus group discussions were conducted and stratified into three different ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese and Indian). Participants were female undergraduate students (*n* = 75) from a public university in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
Results: Findings revealed ethnic variations in the understanding of sexual abuse. Although many considered sexual abuse to necessarily involve sexual intercourse, Chinese and Indians had a better understanding and were more broad minded towards what constituted sexual abuse. Malay participants were more conservative and emphasized on relifious ways to define sexual abuse. Majority of participants considered that females and children are more likely to be victim of sexual abuse. A person's improper dress code, being too attractive in appearance, mixing with the opposite sex, lack of awareness, disabilities, environmental and family factors predisposes a person to sexual abuse.
Conclusion: There were ethnic disparities in understanding the meaning of sexual abuse and perception of sexual abuse victim. Malays held more conservative opinions compared to Chinese and Indians.

Introduction

Sexual abuse is an increasing social problem in Malaysia. It is a form of social and human rights violation that has gained international recognition over the past three decades (Abeid, Muganyizi, Olsson, Darj, & Axemo, 2014). Sexual abuse can have a negative impact on an individuals' physical, emotional and mental development and health (Mathoma, Maripe-Perera, Khumalo, Mbayi, & Seloilwe, 2006). These negative consequences of sexual abuse have been well documented in previous literature (Chen, Murad, Paras, Colbenson, & Goranson, 2010). Sexual abuse can be classified into contact and non-contact abuse. Contact sexual abuse includes sexualised kissing, fondling, masturbation and digital or object penetration of the vagina or anus and oral-genital, genital-genital and anal-genital contact (Giardino, 2008). Non-contact sexual abuse includes exhibition, inappropriate observation of an individual while he or she is dressing, undressing or bathing, and producing or viewing pornography or forced prostitution (Giardino, 2008). Malaysia has been experiencing an escalating number of sexual abuse cases over the past seven years (Malaymail online, 2017). A total of 22,234 sexual abuse have been reported between 2010 and 2017 (Malaymail online, 2017). In addition to this, several studies

have highlighted the lack of knowledge among Malaysian adolescents with regard to sexual and reproductive issues (Rahman et al., 2011; Anwar, Sulaiman, Ahmadi, & Khan, 2010). This poor knowledge and misperceptions towards sexual abuse may contribute to sexual victimisation not being looked at seriously. Furthermore, there are many government agencies and NGOs in Malaysia that attempt to create public awareness on sexual abuse but the efforts remain inadequate (Othman & Jaafar, 2012). Sometimes confusions arise because of the different traditions, culture and customs practised by different societies in Malaysia, making the definition of sexual abuse more complex and controversial in the multicultural environments.

Understanding the concept of sexual abuse relies on the ability of an individual to define what is sexual abuse (Mathoma et al., 2006). Several studies have reported that victims of sexual abuse may not consider themselves as victims because they believe that sexual abuse must include sexual penetration (Anderson, Ho-Foster, Matthis, Marokoane, & Mashiane, 2004; Choo & Dunne, 2011). In other words, many people are unaware of the non-penetrative forms of sexual abuse such as exhibition and pornography. For instance, a study conducted by Mathoma et al. in Bostwana and Swaziland reported that sexual exhibition and viewing of pornography were alien to the African culture

and not considered as sexual abuse (Mathoma et al., 2006).

Many studies have reported that women are more likely to experience sexual abuse compared to men (Jones, Runyan, Lewis, Litronik, & MM, 2010; Pasura et al., 2014; Steel & Herlitz, 2005). The feminine appearance and small physical built of women makes them more vulnerable. A woman's vulnerability is explained by the nature of the patriarchy tradition practised in most societies. There are some cultures in certain societies that perceive males to be socially and culturally superior compared to females (Kalra & Bhugra, 2013). Likewise, in the patriarchal structure, women are culturally considered to have a subordinate status and lack decision making in comparison to men (Abeid et al., 2014). This further illustrates the gender distribution of sexual abuse in the context of gender-based violence where women and girls face a power imbalance in some societies (Abeid et al., 2014). Gender-based violence is a breach of the fundamental human right to life and liberty. This term describes how men are often the sole decision-makers and women have to submit to their wishes and, in particular, satisfy their sexual needs (Bower, 2014).

With regard to, sexual abuse victims, few studies have found victims to be younger than the perpetrators (Lambert & Andipatin, 2014; Sweet & Welles, 2012). Younger individuals are vulnerable to sexual abuse because they are innocent and can be described as powerless members of human society (Mathoma et al., 2006). Children, for instance, can easily be forced with threats into performing sexual acts (Pasura et al., 2014). There is overwhelming evidence that report children delay or never disclose their sexual abuse experiences (London, Bruck, Sesi, & Shuman, 2008; London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005; Foster & Hagedorn, 2014). In many situations children are not believed (Cossar et al., 2013). In addition to the fear of not being believed, these children are reluctant to face shame and self-blame after reporting their experience of sexual abuse (Schaeffer, Leventhal, & Asnes, 2011).

A study in Africa noted that certain ways of dressing and watching television programmes with sexual content increased an individual's risk of being sexually abused (Mathoma et al., 2006). Females who dressed in revealing and sexy ways have been found to be associated with wanting to seduce the opposite sex for sexual satisfaction (Pasura et al., 2014). This usually stands as an opportunity to a perpetrator to engage in sexual abuse or rape.

So far no study has been carried out in Malaysia on the ethnic variations in perceptions of sexual abuse. Malaysia is a multi-racial country whose population consists of three main ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese and Indians, as well as a number of indigenous people. Because of this ethnic diversity there are also cultural differences in attitudes to sexuality and sexual activities which can hamper public understanding of the issues surrounding sexual abuse. Culture plays an important role in how certain populations and societies view and perceive sexual abuse (Kalra & Bhugra, 2013). Across culture, attitudes towards gender have resulted in females being more likely to be sexually abused in societies that perceive males to be culturally more superior to females (Kalra, 2013). For instance, in rural India women have no independent control of their sexuality. If a woman resist against sexual intercourse, it may be perceived as a direct threat to a man's power, masculinity and identity (Kalra, 2013). Furthermore, in many East Asian cultures, sexual abuse is perceived to be shameful (Futa, 2001). Families are more also more resistant to disclose an incident of sexual abuse and receive help from outside due to the emphasis of family cohesion (Fuhua & Qin, 2009).Therefore, it is important to understand sexual abuse and its victims so that victims be identified early and are being brought through the right channel for help. The aim of this study was to explore understanding of sexual abuse victims among a sample of female university students at a public university in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia using the qualitative enquiry method. The study focuses on female participants because, in general, females are at greater risk of sexual abuse than men.

Materials and methods

Ethical consideration

This study was approved by the University Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC) Medical ethics committee. The approval number is 913.8. Participants were given a sheet which gave a brief description of the study and its objective before providing written consent. A questionnaire on socio-demographic background was also administered. Participants were assured that all information provided would be treated as confidential.

Study design and setting

An inductive qualitative design employing focus groups (FGs) was chosen to gain in-depth understanding of the perceptions of students from different ethnic groups. The sample consisted of undergraduate students in a public university located in Kuala Lumpur, West Malaysia. Focus groups took place between October 2013 and March 2014.

Study sample

The FGD participants were recruited through a combination of snowball and purposive sampling techniques and the following inclusion criteria were applied: (1) undergraduate student, (2) female, (3) willing to provide informed consent and (4) Malaysian citizen. Having had a sexual abuse experience was not an inclusion criterion. To allow for comparisons between ethnicities, participants were assigned to FGs on the basis of ethnicity. The reason for segregating participants into groups according to ethnicity was because of the cultural differences between ethnicity. This method also allowed the discussions to flow well without much interruption as different ethnicities spoke different languages.

Data collection

The FGDs were conducted until data saturation was achieved. In this study, data saturation was reached after conducting a total of 14 FGDs. The number of participants in each FGD in this study ranged from five to seven participants. Discussions were held in a private room in the Faculty of Medicine and were free from interruptions. Prior to the FGDs, written informed consent was obtained from each participant and demographic information from all participants was recorded. Participants were guaranteed that their participation and opinions would be anonymous and confidential. To ensure anonymity, all participants were asked to provide a pseudonym before the interview commenced. The pseudonym was used in the data analysis and while reporting results. A semi-structured guide supplied questions and prompts were used to direct the discussions. Discussions were intended to focus on participants' understanding of sexual abuse and their perceptions about the victims of sexual abuse. An FGD guide and guiding questions that was developed and used during discussion is shown in Table 1. FGDs lasted between 45 and 60 min and were recorded using a digital audio recorder and transcribed verbatim. A moderator facilitated the discussion and an observer made notes to supplement the audio transcripts. During the discussion the moderator addressed the participants by their pseudonym. At the end of the discussion participants were given a small cash reward.

Data analysis

All FGD discussions were analysed and compared with the analysis of previous discussions which in turn further shaped the subsequent sampling, data collection and analysis FGDs continued until data saturation was reached or new information was uncovered. Coding and categorizing was carried out using the QRS Nvivo qualitative computer