CHILDHOOD TRAUMA EXPERIENCES: AN UNPLEASANT EPISODE TO BE AVOIDED

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ABSTRACT

Childhood trauma experiences are the most common risk factors often been related to aggressive and criminal behaviors among incarcerated person. The traumas experienced during childhood, such as physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, are suggested to contribute to the development of aggressiveness among the population. The objective of this study is to acquire the prevalence of childhood trauma experiences and to identify the association of the childhood trauma experiences with aggressiveness among incarcerated person. A qualitative study was conducted involving adult prisoners and incarcerated juveniles in Peninsular Malaysia. The sampling method is based on the saturation theory with four groups of subjects; adult male prisoners (N=15), adult female prisoners (N=15), detained boys (N=6), and detained girls (N=6). A semi-structured interview was conducted based on an interview guide. Content analysis was employed to analyze the interview’s transcripts. Several subcategories were identified in childhood trauma experiences; physical punishment, verbal insult, emotional distress, and sexual abuse. In addition, four subcategories of aggressive behaviors were identified; anger, lack of self-control, and hostility. The findings showed high number of subjects in all groups had experienced traumatic events during childhood, especially physical punishments. Each group exhibited different pattern of childhood trauma experiences. Further analysis showed that childhood trauma experiences highly associated with aggressive behaviors in all groups. Similarly, each group exhibited different pattern of associations. It can be concluded that childhood trauma experiences significantly contribute to aggressiveness, and consequently lead to criminal behaviors among incarcerated person. The findings of this study are imperative towards future crime prevention, where the society should be alerted of the bitter consequences of childhood trauma experiences. The findings also provide an important application for rehabilitation programs in prison and detention centers.

Field of Research: Childhood trauma, aggressiveness, criminal behaviors.

1. Introduction

In the recent decades, involvement of people as an offender in the criminal justice system has been increasing. This phenomenon is witnessed by increasing number in the prison population. Being it male, female, adult or juvenile, the number of their involvement in the criminal justice system has steadily increasing throughout the recent decades (Elias, 2007; Quinn & Shera, 2009).

Continuous increase in the number of prison population has contributed to the increase in study and research related to the risk factors and the impacts that could lead to offending acts. Among risk factors that has often been related to offending is childhood trauma experiences (Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2008; Krischer & Sevecke, 2008; Palmer, Jinks, & Hatcher, 2010). Childhood trauma experiences, such as physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, have often been related to the aggressive
and criminal behaviors among prisoners. The traumas are suggested to contribute to the development of aggressiveness among the population.

Most previous studies related to childhood trauma experiences among prison population were conducted in the Western countries (e.g., Krischer & Sevecke, 2008; Reed et al., 2009; Messina et al., 2010; Swogger et al., 2011). So far, no previous published study on associations of childhood trauma experiences and aggression among prison population is available in Malaysia. The current study aims to provide an original data using qualitative method in order to pioneering such study in Malaysia.

Several previous studies were used as the references for the current study. In a study conducted among detained juvenile at New York, high number of juvenile indicated childhood trauma experiences, with girls showed higher incidence than boys (Veysey & Hamilton, 2007). At Cologne-Bonn, German, significantly higher incarcerated juveniles showed evidence of childhood trauma experiences compared to healthy control juvenile (Krischer & Sevecke, 2008). Among female prisoners at Recife, Brazil, more than 80 percent of them reported history of trauma experiences (Reed et al., 2009). Messina and colleagues (2010) in their study at California found that more than half of incarcerated female had past traumatic experiences. In addition, Sakelliadis and colleagues (2010) found high incidence of childhood traumatic experiences among male prisoners in their study in Greece. Childhood trauma experiences were found higher among female inmates than the male counterpart in a study in the United State (Swogger et al., 2011). In the study, more than 60 percent of female inmates reported physical abuse and nearly 50 percent reported sexual abuse (Swogger et al., 2011).

Based on the previous studies, the current study was designed. The objective of this study is to acquire the prevalence of childhood trauma experiences among adult prisoners and incarcerated juveniles. This is followed by the second objective, which is to identify the association of the childhood trauma experiences with aggressiveness among adult prisoners and incarcerated juveniles.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants and Sampling method

There were four groups of participants in the current study. They are; adult male prisoners, adult female prisoners, incarcerated boys, and incarcerated girls. The participants were recruited from four prisons and one detentions school in the Peninsular Malaysia. Since the current study is qualitative, the number of participants was decided based on theoretical concept of saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mason, 2010), which has often been used to determine the sample size in qualitative study. Saturation refers to a condition where data collection has provided enough evidence of the issue being studied and no new finding or code were found (Mason, 2010).

The sampling method used was purposive-selective sampling. The participants were selected based on the availability the participants, as well as the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria of all four groups are; participants are within the age range (adult: 22 to 49 years old; juvenile: 15 to 20 years old), able to communicate in Malay fluently, and had no history of any mental or physical health problems. The final number of participants involved in this study are as followed; adult male (N=15), adult female (N=15), boys (N=6), and girls (N=6).

2.2 Instrument and Data collection

The instrument used for data collection in this study was the interview guide. It consisted of standardized questions that were designed according to the predetermined themes or categories to
collect the related data. For this study, the interview guide consists of two main scales categorized under childhood trauma experiences and aggressive behaviors. For each scale, there are five to seven small questions.

In this study, semi-structured interview was conducted to collect the data. Semi-structured interview is a type of interview approaches that has most often been used in qualitative researches (Santiago, 2009). This method is more flexible and it allows for a more relaxed conversation during the interview session. Semi-structured interview allows for a deeper understanding of the responses given by the participants and may provide a larger dataset of the interview compared with the other methods (Santiago, 2009).

Prior to data collection, participants were informed regarding the procedures and related information of the current study. Participants were ensured of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection. A participant information sheet and a consent form were given to each participant to be signed upon their agreement to participate in the study. The interview was then conducted upon receiving their consent to participate.

At the beginning of data collection, the participants were asked briefly about their background for demographic data. Then, the standardized questions were asked. Questions concerning childhood trauma experiences were asked, followed by questions regarding aggressive behaviors. During the interview, the researcher had to write all the information given by the participants, since no recording device was allowed to be used by the prisons institutions. Approximately, every interview took about 50 minutes to complete.

2.3 Analysis

Content analysis was conducted in this study. Content analysis is based on preexisting theory, where logical deduction was first carried out to develop the categories of the analysis (Ezzy, 2002). It starts with the predefined categories, and it allows the preexisting theory to be tested against empirical data collected throughout the study. It is a very practical method to confirm or test a preexisting theory (Ezzy, 2002).

The most basic principle of content analysis is the predefined categories. Based on the principle of content analysis, the categories or concepts were first identified prior to the analysis. The sample to be categorized was selected and later followed by the identification of unit of analysis, from which the analysis took place. Finally, the units of analysis were reviewed and the related categories were counted or systematically logged based of the frequency of their occurrence in the units of analysis (Kellehear, 1993). Comparison between occurrences of categories can be done using statistical or quantitative method to facilitate more efficient interpretation of the result (Ezzy, 2002).

In this study, two predefined categories were identified; childhood trauma experiences and aggressive behaviors, and were applied to the interview guide. After the completion of data collection, the generated detailed transcripts were examined and several subcategories were identified. The subcategories were then counted and systematically logged for further analysis. The subcategories are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Predefined categories and the respective subcategories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predefined Categories</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Childhood trauma experiences</td>
<td>• Being physically punished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Being verbally insulted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Being emotionally distressed</td>
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</tbody>
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3. Findings & Discussion

3.1 Demographic information

a) Adult males:

The participants were between 22 and 46 years old. Among the 15 participants, the majority of them were Malays (60%). Most of the participants were divorcees (40%). Most of them had secondary education as the highest level of education and have always been switching jobs prior to incarceration. During childhood, majority of them lived with their biological parents (93.3%), and most of them had four to more than seven siblings (93.3%). Majority was convicted for more than one year.

b) Adult females:

The participants were between 22 and 49 years old. Among the 15 participants, the majority of them were Malays (60%). Most of the participants were divorcees (40%). Most of them had secondary education as the highest level of education and have always been switching jobs prior to incarceration. During childhood, majority of them lived with their biological parents (93.3%), and most of them had four to more than seven siblings (93.3%). Majority was convicted for more than one year.

c) Boys:

The participants were between 15 and 20 years old. Among the 6 participants, the majority of them were Malays (66.6%). All of the participants were single. The highest number of the participants had secondary education as the highest level of education (66.6%), and most of them always been switching jobs prior to detention (83.3%). Before being detained, all of them lived with their biological parents, with number of siblings are between four to more than seven. The participants were sentenced to detention either two to three years or till aged 21 years old.

d) Girls:

The participants were between 15 and 20 years old. Among the 6 participants, the majority of them were Malays (66.6%). All of the participants were single and had secondary education as the highest level of education. The participants had either a stable job, always been switching jobs or were unemployed prior to detention. Before being detained, most of the participants lived with their biological parents (83.3%), with number of sibling between two to six. Majority was sentenced to two or three years of detention (83.3%).

3.2 Descriptive analysis

a) Adult males:

Being physically punished was the most common childhood trauma experiences among adult male prisoners. Fourteen of the participants admitted being punished almost badly during childhood, mostly
by their own parents. Most of the participants had experienced being hit using rattan, hand, or belt. Some of them had obtained bruises or small injuries due to being hit.

Six participants indicated experiences of being verbally insulted by either parents or older sibling. The verbal insult included scold using harsh words and cursing. In addition, five participants admitted emotional distress due to being physically punished or verbally insulted, or due to family conflict. Emotional distress is indicated by feeling hurt, frustration, and felt that family hate or didn’t love them. None of the participants admitted sexual abuse during childhood.

The highest number of adult male prisoners exhibited hostility towards other people. Ten of the participants admitted often being hostile, where they easily become suspicious or constantly suspected a bad thing from others. Seven participants indicated easily being angry with five participants admitted lack of self-control where they had involved in constant argument and fighting with others. Only two participants had carried weapon with them or used weapon in fighting.

b) Adult females:

Physical punishment is the most common childhood trauma experiences among adult female prisoners. Ten of the participants admitted being hit regularly during childhood, mostly by parents. Most often, the participants were hit using hand, belt, or rattan; some to the extent of inflicting injuries and had to be carried to the hospital.

Compared to adult males, more adult females had experienced verbal insult which involved harsh repeated scolding or cursing. Nine of the participants admitted being verbally insulted, usually by their parents. Furthermore, six participants had experienced emotional distress as a consequence of physical punishment or verbal insult, as well as family conflict.

Most of adult female prisoners admitted that they can easily become angry (n=10). Compared to adult males, only five adult females exhibited hostility towards others. In addition, four of the participants admitted their lack of self-control, especially when they’re angry. Some participants confessed that they had involved in fighting due to uncontrolled anger. Lastly, two participants admitted had carried or used weapon for improper purpose.

c) Boys:

Out of six incarcerated boys, five admitted had been physically punished when they were younger, usually by their parents. Most of them were hit using rattan, belt, or hand, and some had obtained temporary bruise and small injuries. This finding is similar to adult prisoners where physical punishment was also found high among incarcerated boys.

High number of incarcerated boys had verbally insulted when they were younger (n=4). Mostly, the verbal insult involved harsh repeated scolding by parents. In addition, three participants had being emotionally distressed, either by other trauma experiences or family conflict. The emotional distress is often indicated by feeling sad and thought that their family didn’t love them.

Hostility is the most common aggressive behaviors being displayed among incarcerated boys. Five of six participants exhibited hostility towards others, especially towards their friends. This is followed by lack of self-control (n=4) and anger (n=3). Two participants had used weapon in fighting before.
d) Girls:

Among six incarcerated girls involved in this study, four had experienced physical punishment when they were younger. Most of them experienced being hit using belt, hand, or rattan by their parents. Some had obtained bruises, small injuries, and even serious injury that required proper treatment in the hospital.

Only one participant indicated verbal insult by her parents. None other had experienced harsh scolding or cursing when they were younger. Rather, three of six participants had experienced emotional distress, mostly due to family conflict. In addition, three participants had been sexually abused where all of them were raped by older people when they were younger.

Most participants displayed hostility, where five participants admitted often being suspicious towards others, especially their friends. This is followed by anger (n=4) and lack of self-control (n=3). Two participants had carried or used weapon with them.

![Figure 1: The Pattern of Childhood Trauma Experience among the Participants in the Four Groups](image-url)

Figure 1 showed the pattern of childhood trauma experiences among participants in all groups. As shown in the figure, all groups of participants exhibited different pattern of childhood trauma experiences. In all groups, physical punishment is the most common childhood trauma being experienced. Verbal insults are more common among adult females and boys, compared to the other two groups. In addition, adult females are more likely to experience emotional distress compared to the male. Boys and girls indicated no difference in emotional distress, showed that both groups are likely to experience feeling of sadness, frustration, and hate when they were younger. In the current study, only girls admitted experience of sexual abuse. None other groups had experience the similar trauma.
The pattern of aggressive behaviors among participants in all groups was displayed by Figure 2. As shown in the figure, all groups of participants exhibited different pattern of aggressive behaviors. Adult females are more likely to exhibit anger compared to the other groups. Adult males, boys, and girls are more likely to show hostility towards others. In addition, more girls showed anger compared to boys. Adult males are more likely to have lack of self-control than adult female. Similarly, boys showed higher tendency to lose self-control compared to girls. Finally, use of weapon was found similar among all groups. Nevertheless, since the number of boys and girls were less than adult prisoners, this finding showed that incarcerated juvenile might have higher tendency to use or carry weapon compared to adult prisoners.

3.3 Content analysis

The associations between childhood trauma experiences and aggressive behaviors were identified among the participants in the four groups. All the four groups exhibited different pattern of association.

a) Adult Males

Among adult male prisoners, physical punishment had the highest association with their aggressive behaviors. All participants who exhibited the four subcategories of aggressive behaviors (anger, lack of self-control, hostility, use of weapon) admitted experiences of physical punishment during childhood. Verbal insults also exhibited strong association with aggressive behaviors among the participants. All participants (n=6) who had being verbally insulted during childhood indicated anger. In addition, among the six participants, five participants showed hostility towards others. Lack of self-control showed considerable associations with verbal insult where among five participants who lack of self-control, three had being verbally insulted.

Emotional distress had considerable strong associations with aggressive behaviors. All participants who had experienced emotional distress exhibited anger with four out of five participants indicated hostility. Verbal insult and emotional distress showed no association with use of weapon among adult males.
b) Adult Females

Physical punishment and verbal insults were found highly associated with aggressive behaviors among the adult females. The most significant associations were with lack of self-control and use of weapon. Among seven participants who lack of self-control, five participants had experienced either physical punishment, verbal insult, or both. Meanwhile, two participants who had used weapon had also experienced physical punishment and verbal insults during childhood.

High number of participants who displayed hostility had also experienced childhood traumas. Among eight participants who are hostile towards others, five had experienced physical punishment, verbal insults, or both. Lastly, among ten participants who displayed anger, six had experienced physical punishment, verbal insults, or both. Emotional distress showed the least association with aggressive behaviors, except for anger where four of six participants who had experienced emotional distress admitted easily being angry.

c) Boys

Physical punishment and verbal insults showed strong associations with aggressive behaviors among incarcerated boys. All participants who exhibited anger, lack of self-control, and use of weapon had experienced physical punishment when they were younger. In addition, only one participant who exhibited hostility had never experience physical punishment.

Aggressive behaviors also showed significant associations with verbal insult, particularly anger, lack of self-control, and use of weapon. On the other hand, verbal insult indicated significant association to hostility where among four participants who had being verbally insulted, three displayed hostility towards others. Emotional distress exhibited the least association to aggressive behaviors among boys. The strongest associations were between lack of self-control and use of weapon.

d) Girls

The associations between childhood trauma experiences and aggressive behaviors were found to be the highest among incarcerated girls. This is particularly true in case of emotional distress where all participants who admitted emotional distress indicated all subcategories of aggressive behaviors (anger, lack of self-control, hostility, use of weapon). In addition, only one participant had experienced verbal insult and she exhibited all the subcategories of aggressive behaviors.

The associations between physical punishment and sexual abuse with all subcategories of aggressive behaviors were considerably strong. Of four participants who exhibited anger, three admitted physical punishment and of five participants who displayed hostility, four had experienced the same trauma when they were younger. In addition, all participants who showed lack of self-control and had used weapon admitted being physically punished. In sexual abuse, the strongest association was with anger, lack of self-control, and use of weapon.
Figure 3: Pattern of associations between physical punishment and aggressive behaviors in all groups

Figure 3 showed the pattern of associations between physical punishment and aggressive behaviors among participants in the four groups. As shown in the figure, each group exhibited different pattern of association, except for boys and girls where both exhibited the same pattern. Among those who had experienced physical punishment during childhood, adult males showed significantly more likelihood to behave aggressively, especially by being hostile or suspicious towards others. Adult females are more likely to display anger compared to the other aggressive behaviors. Similarly, boys and girls who had experienced physical punishment are likely to exhibit hostility.

Figure 4: Pattern of associations between verbal insults and aggressive behaviors in all groups

Pattern of associations between verbal insults and aggressive behavior among participants in all groups was shown in Figure 4. Each group demonstrated significantly different pattern of associations. Both adult males and adult females who had experienced verbal insults are likely to display anger. In comparison, boys are likely to display hostility. Among those who had experienced verbal insults, adult
females exhibited highest tendency for lack of self-control compared to the others. None of the adult males who had being verbally insulted had carried or use weapon compared to other groups. Among girls, the association is unclear since only one girl admitted verbal insult while indicating all subcategories of aggressive behaviors.

**Figure 5:** Pattern of associations between emotional distress and aggressive behaviors in all groups

Figure 5 showed the pattern of associations between emotional distress and aggressive behaviors among all participants. Similar to the previous associations, each groups exhibited different pattern of associations. Among those who had experienced emotional distress, adult males displayed the highest association with anger and hostility. Adult females had the highest association between emotional distress and anger. In comparison, adult females with emotional distress are more likely to lack in self-control than the adult males counterpart.

Girls who had being emotionally distressed exhibited similar association towards all aggressive behaviors, showed that emotional distress may result in any aggressive behaviors among girls. Boys with experience of emotional distress are more likely to display any aggressive behaviors, except for anger. This is very distinctive when compared to the other groups, where anger is more likely to be highly associated with emotional distress.

4. Conclusion and Future Recommendation

In conclusion, childhood trauma experiences were found frequent among adult prisoners and incarcerated juveniles. Each group presents a distinctive pattern of childhood trauma experiences which may be helpful in finding the specific risk factors of offending among the adult or juvenile offenders. In addition, significant associations were identified between the childhood trauma experiences and aggressive behaviors among adult prisoners and incarcerated juveniles. Similarly, each group demonstrates individual pattern of associations, which can be helpful in identifying the highest risk factor and the individual consequences.

In the current study, several limitations were identified. The first limitation is the number of the participants. Although the numbers of participants in the current study were found sufficient based on the saturation theory, it is recommended for higher number of participant to be involved in such study,
especially for juvenile. The current study serves to pioneering the qualitative study involving childhood trauma experiences and aggressive behaviors among prisoners and incarcerated juvenile in the country, thus it is recommended that in the future, a more in-depth qualitative study could be planned.

The second limitation is the method of data collection. The data in the current study is based solely on the qualitative method. No quantitative study was presented in this study. Therefore, it recommended for combination of quantitative and qualitative method for future study. Quantitative method may serve to provide additional data for the qualitative study and could be conducted prior to the qualitative phase.

**Acknowledgment**

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**Reference**


