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 religious 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 re- cognition over the past three decades (Abeid, Muganyizi, Olsson, Darj, & Axemo, 2014). Sexual abuse can have a negative impact on an individual's physical, emotional and mental development and health (Mathoma, Maripe-Perera, Khumalo, Mbayi, & Selolwe, 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, Ahmad, & 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, Matthias, 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.

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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, Litonkic, & 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, & Anes, 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 of the issues surrounding sexual abuse. Culture plays an important role in how certain populations and societies view and perceive sexual abuse. If a woman resist against sexual intercourse, it may be perceived 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, & Anes, 2011).

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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 FGs. 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
software program. Transcripts were thematically coded according to the research themes that emerged from the discussion. Open coding was used to identify specific themes that emerged from the discussions. More specific axial codes were developed from the initial open codes. The codes were analysed using an interpretive description method. Coding was performed by a single coder and the consistency of coding was assessed by intra-observer reliability (Krippendorf, 2011). The calculated intra-rater agreement was in the 90th percentile range.

Results

**Participant background**

A total of 14 FGDs were conducted, involving a total of 75 participants. The FGDs were ethnically homogenous: there were 5 Malay, 5 Chinese and 4 Indian groups. The age of participants ranged from 19 to 28 years; the mean age was 23.08 years (SD ± 2.03 years). The demographic characteristics of the sample are described in Table 2. The ethnic distribution of the sample was as follows: 36% Malays, 37.8% Chinese and 26.7% Indians. The overwhelming majority of participants (98.7%) were unmarried. Most of the participants were undergraduate year 4 students (44%) and the most common field of study among the sample was the arts (45.3%). The majority of participants (86.7%) were living with both biological parents; 44% were living in the suburbs and 28% had more than two siblings. Participants’ household income ranged from less than MYR 1000 to more than MYR 4000 and, in the vast majority of cases, was more than MYR 4000 per month.

**Understanding of sexual abuse**

The three ethnic groups provided similar understandings of sexual abuse. A considerable number of Indian participants defined sexual abuse as an act forced on a victim without their consent. Most of the Malay and Chinese participants viewed sexual abuse as a form of sexual pleasure which involves taking advantage of someone. Several Malay participants perceived sexual abuse as an obscene activity because it involved exhibiting an individual’s private parts and they felt that this was a violation of an individual’s rights.

Most of the participants had no knowledge on what was meant by direct and indirect sexual abuse. Although some participants stated that they had heard of direct and indirect sexual abuse, many of them were unaware of the exact definition. Two Malay participants noted that they vaguely remembered this classification from previous readings but were unable to provide an exact explanation. However, there was only one Chinese participant who defined direct and indirect sexual abuse correctly. The participant described direct sexual abuse as an abuse with sexual contact and indirect abuse to not involve sexual contact.

‘**Direct sexual abuse involves having sexual contact with the victim, for example molestation or rape, whereas indirect sexual abuse refers to sexual acts without any sexual contact, like having sexual conversations or watching pornography**’.

(Bee Lee – Chinese, 21 years)

When participants were asked to give examples of sexual abuse, the majority of them classified sexual abuse into three forms which is physical, verbal and visual sexual abuse. In relation to physical forms of sexual abuse, many Malay and Chinese participants believed that sexual abuse necessarily involved vaginal or anal penetration. However, the majority of Indian participants held a different opinion. To these Indian participants, involuntary touching of an individual’s body parts such as buttocks, breasts and private parts were considered to be a form of physical sexual abuse. Two Indian participants explained this by saying that any unwanted, sexualised bodily contact was physical sexual abuse.

‘**I had experienced a guy trying to rub his private part against my hand while standing in the bus. He also had an erection. I think he was trying to abuse me sexually.**’

(Veena – Indian, 24 years)

Participants who mentioned about verbal sexual abuse being one of the forms of sexual abuse, were asked to further describe and provide examples. Many Malay participants perceived teasing somebody about their body parts is a form of verbal sexual abuse. All Malay participants in this study were Muslim by religion and therefore they held more religious explanations to the questions asked. According to them, such behaviour of teasing bodily parts was a sin to the Muslim religion.

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When asked to explain why, they noted that Islamic followers have to
respect and accept every human as god's creation. Nudism and obscene
acts are against the teaching of Islam. One Malay participant shared a
personal experience:

‘While chatting on friendster a guy requested that I take off my T-shirt
and put something in between my breasts. I told him I am a Muslim and it
is a sin if I do that’.

(Iqa-Malay, 24 years)

In addition, two Chinese and two Indian participants stated that
using vulgar language was also a form of verbal sexual abuse. However,
when questioned about whistling, the majority of Chinese and Indians
did not perceive it as a verbal sexual abuse.

‘Abuse is too strong a word to be used for whistling. It is more a har-
assment’.

(Black – Chinese, 22 years)

Most Chinese and Indian participants believed that whistling was not serious and was usually done for fun. The participants believed that
whistling was a common and natural way for boys and girls to express
to anyone, especially the opposite sex. Subsequently, two other participants commented that whistling was a form of greeting or an
indirect way of saying ‘Hi’ to the opposite sex. They added that it is
normal for a hero to whistle at the heroine or vice versa, even in mo-

With regards to visual sexual abuse, a handful of Chinese and Indian
participants showed their concern towards what they meant by visual
sexual abuse. Further probing revealed that many of them perceived
viewing photographs or videos with sexual content or nudism as visual
sexual abuse. An Indian participant cited the term ‘flasher’ while giving
her explanation. Flashers were believed to be people who display their
body parts (genitals, breast or buttocks) in an indecent manner.

‘Flashers are a form of it. Let’s say you were walking and then somebody
just pulls down his trousers and show his private part to attract you’.

(Abbie – Indian, 25 years)

A few Chinese participants mentioned the term ‘sexting’ while
giving examples on types of visual sexual abuse. Many Indians and
Malays were less aware of this term. When questioned, a few Chinese
participants defined sexting as the sending of text or picture message
containing sexual elements via electronic devices such as mobile
phones, laptops or computers. Furthermore, another participant
pointed out that videoing couples or one’s partner while making out and
uploading the video to the internet for public to view was also a form of
visual sexual abuse. Chinese participants also believed that these days
many teenagers snap photos of their nude body and share it with their
friends or sex partners through mobile phones.

‘I know of a guy who was sexting photos of his erect penis to my friend
asking her if she felt ‘turned on’

(KJ – Indian, 25 years)

Participants were also questioned on whether they perceived staring
as a form of visual sexual abuse. Many Malay participants believed that
staring was a visual sexual abuse, however the Chinese and Indian
participants did not. Malay participants perceived that staring at
someone made them feel uncomfortable and thus it should be identi-
cfence would also be easy targets for sexual abuse. One participant
reported that it was not rare for men to stare at certain body parts of a
woman. Chinese and Indian participants, on the other hand, perceived
staring as a sexual harassment rather than a sexual abuse. They believed
that sexual abuse was too strong a term for just staring because staring
did not do any harm. One Indian participant stated people had a right to
stare and that there must be something interesting or good about an
individual for one to stare at them. There were a few Indian participants
who did not believe that visual sexual abuse ever existed. They were
more inclined to perceive only molestation and rape as sexual abuse.

Perceptions of victims of sexual abuse

When asked what kind of person was most likely to be a sexual
abuse victim, the vast majority said that women and girls were more
vulnerable than men. Chinese and Malay participants perceived that
their soft personality, petite appearance and relative lack of physical
strength made a woman more vulnerable. Two Chinese participants
commented that men were physically stronger and could easily handle
situations if they were in trouble. Most Indian participants perceived
that gender did not determine the likelihood of a victim getting sexually
abused and reported that although girls and women may be more
vulnerable, sexual abuse was not uncommon among the opposite sex.
Some Indians suggested that individuals with low self-esteem or low
confidence would also be easy targets for sexual abuse. One participant
quoted an example:

Table 2

Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-demographic characteristics</th>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (in years)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>(14.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22–24</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>(74.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 and above</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>(10.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>(36.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>(37.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>(26.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>(36.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>(24.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taoism</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>(17.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>(21.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>(1.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>(1.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not married</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>(98.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current educational level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate year 1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>(8.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate year 2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(6.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate year 3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>(30.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate year 4</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>(44.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate year 5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>(10.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational background of degree</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering &amp; technology</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>(14.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>(45.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pure science</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>(20.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health science</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>(20.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family household income</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; MYR 1000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>(9.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYR 1001–2000</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>(20.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYR 2001–3000</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>(20.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYR 3001–4000</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>(16.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; MYR 4001</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>(34.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family structure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two biological parents</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>(86.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(6.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents deceased</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(6.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residential area</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>(13.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-urban</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>(44.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>(42.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Siblings</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(4.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>(28.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>(24.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>(20.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>(24.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1MYR (Malaysian Ringgit) = 0.24 USD.

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acts are against the teaching of Islam. One Malay participant shared a
personal experience:

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assment’.

(Black – Chinese, 22 years)
‘I know of 5 girls who sexually abuse a boy because he was timid and quiet…. forcing him to undress and run around the classroom’.
(Nita – Indian, 24 years)

The majority of Malay participants held opinions relating to Muslim culture. They believed that Muslim women are supposed to obey men simply because men are believed to be more dominant than women.

Although sexual abuse can happen to anyone of any age group, all participants in this study indicated that children were at a high risk of sexual abuse. When questioned further, some participants explained that children were innocent and more likely to obey commands. They believed that children can easily be persuaded to trust someone.

‘Children can be easily manipulated with gifts or chocolates so that they gain trust towards the perpetrator and obey when told to keep the sexual experience a secret’.
(Bella – Indian, 23 years)

A few participants stated that besides their innocence, children are not able to identify an experience of sexual abuse as right or wrong.

When participants were asked to discuss whether character and personality made an individual more prone to sexual abuse, the majority of Malays and half of the Chinese and Indian participants agreed that they did. When questioned further, most of them related personality with the way a person dressed. Participants gave examples of how women who dressed in sexy and revealing outfits could become potential victims. However, some Indians and Chinese participants disagreed that dress was a factor that increased the risk of an individual experiencing sexual abuse. Two Indian participants stated that sexual abuse also happened to people who dressed formally, in traditional clothes.

‘I do not agree. The famous case of Siti Suhaila few years ago… she was raped and killed by a bus driver although she was fully covered (she was wearing a ‘baju kurung with a hijab’, which is a Malay traditional costume).’
(Sera – Indian, 28 years)

Some Chinese participants commented that if sexy attire was associated with sexual abuse the incidence of sexual abuse would be high in the Chinese community, because short and skimpy clothes are commonly worn and are acceptable in the Chinese community:

‘In the Chinese community, it is common to dress up skimpy and with short skirts or dresses nowadays. I don’t think that clothing has much to do with the victim becoming prone to sexual abuse’.
(CH – Chinese, 22 years)

I believe the more you see, the less interested you will be’.
(Black – Chinese, 22 years)

‘For me is like the way she dresses up. If her dress reveals a lot of her body parts…it can be dangerous. So, it is important to dress up appropriately according to place we go to.’
(Jenny – Chinese, 22 years)

A few Chinese and Indian participants also commented that individuals have the right to dress as they choose, provided they are comfortable and that their attire is not against the law of the country. Malay participants were more inclined to accept the Islamic perspectives. A handful of Malays remarked that wearing tight, transparent or covering up allowed women to escape from the male gaze and eliminate sexual tension from the world. One Chinese participant commented that it might be easier for a perpetrator to attempt sexual intercourse if the victim was wearing a dress or skirt. Overly sociable and talkative characters were also thought to increase the risk of a person becoming the victim of sexual abuse. This factor was mentioned by most of the Indians and Chinese participants. It was said that very talkative, gregarious individuals saw themselves as daring, but appeared ‘easy’ to others. One participant also said that women and girls who only mixed with male friends were definitely vulnerable to sexual abuse. On the whole, Malay participants cited reasons that were related to Malay culture: for example, they felt that flirting and being too close to a friend or someone of the opposite sex was against their Muslim religion.

Regardless of gender, a considerable number of participants believed that attractive, good looking individuals were at greater risk of sexual abuse. Most of them referred to fair complexion and beautiful features as attractive. Two Malays and a handful of Indian participants commented that women with a curvy body, big bottoms and big breasts are sexually attractive. Several of them explained that women who are sexually attractive would easily arouse the sexual desires of a man. One Malay participant defined an attractive male as a handsome and masculine man:

‘A handsome looking guy with a six pack could be an unfortunate person because many women believe that guys with six packs are sexy’.
(Iz – Malay, 23 years)

However, the majority of Chinese participants did not think that attractiveness made someone more vulnerable to sexual abuse.

‘Looks do not matter…. in a perpetrators’ mind, all females are created physically …. with a vagina to satisfy his sexual needs’.
(Mun – Chinese, 23 years)

When participants were asked whether lack of awareness of sexual abuse made an individual likely to become a victim, many agreed. Most participants also mentioned that public understanding and awareness of sexual abuse was limited.

‘Due to lack of knowledge and awareness, some people just think that the people around them are all good and would not least convict a sexual abuse because they do not know much’.
(NC – Chinese, 22 years)

Two Indian participants agreed, stating that not only do children fall into this category but even adults may not be aware of the types of sexual abuse to which they could be subjected. Many believed it was crucial to educate children and teenagers about sex in schools. A significant number of participants also commented on how individuals with disabilities were more vulnerable to sexual abuse. When questioned further, some participants explained that victims with physical or mental disabilities had no knowledge of sexual abuse and were also less likely to disclose their experience of sexual abuse because of their difficulty in communicating. Secondly, it was felt that such individuals might not be able to even recognise sexual abuse as a negative act.

‘People with disabilities are less fortunate…. they may not have the ability to identify any sexual abuse experienced as right or wrong’.
(Vissa – Indian, 23 years)

The majority of participants agreed that certain environmental surroundings could increase the risk of an individual experiencing sexual abuse. When asked to explain, some commented that dark places which are not properly lit or places with no people around can be dangerous. These environments were perceived as conducive for sexual abuse because the chances of the perpetrator being spotted are slim. Some participants commented that sexual abuse was more likely to take place in the context of a broken family, such as in a single-parent family or following the divorce or death of one of the parents. One participant shared a story:

‘I know of a widowed mother-in-law who forced her son-in-law to sleep with her when the wife was not around because she was deprived of sex.’
(Mandy – Chinese, 23 years)

Regardless of ethnicity, many participants believed that parents who were alcoholic, drug addicts, single or divorced might seek to relieve their stress by preying on their children and hence that such
situations might result in sexual abuse of a child by his or her parents.

Discussion

The majority of the participants in this study defined sexual abuse as a sexual act that involved force, which is performed without the victim’s consent and more than half of this group were of Indian ethnicity. Only one out of three participants had ever heard about direct and indirect sexual abuse and was able to define the exact meaning of the words properly. The rest of the study sample perceived that sexual abuse can be classified into three different forms; which is the physical, verbal and visual forms. Therefore, the findings imply that there is a need to educate the public on how to recognise sexual abuse and what are the different ways it can happen. One way of doing this should be to highlight facts about sexual abuse during sex education lessons in schools. It is important to create the awareness on sexual abuse among the minds of young individuals before it is too late.

In relation to physical sexual abuse, the findings in this study indicated that the word ‘sex’ is better understood among the study participants in comparison to the word ‘abuse’. The reason being, many participants had a misconception on what was meant by sexual abuse. A large majority of the study participants believed that unless vaginal or anal intercourse had taken place the act cannot be known as a sexual abuse. This misconception was common among the Malay and Chinese participants. Similar misconceptions were also reported in a study carried out in Botswana and Swaziland (Mathoma et al., 2006). According to Mathoma et al. (2006), although sexual abuse in many situations might have resulted in sexual intercourse, there are many non-penetrative forms of sexual abuse that respondents in that study (Mathoma et al., 2006) failed to reflect on. In general, the Indian participants in our sample had a more accurate understanding of what constituted physical sexual abuse. Malays on the other hand were more likely to perceive whistling, staring and sexual teasing as forms of sexual abuse compared to all other ethnic groups. These perceptions stemmed from certain behaviours that are being forbidden by the Islam religion, suggesting that Malay participants placed greater emphasis on the principles of their religion and hence had more conservative thoughts towards defining what was sexual abuse. On the other hand, Chinese and Indians were more broad-minded and did not consider whistling, staring or sexual teasing to be forms of sexual abuse. Most of the Chinese and Indians were more inclined to perceive whistling, staring and sexual teasing as sexual harassment and not a sexual abuse. To their understanding, sexual harassment did not involve bodily contact and was believed to be harmless. In addition, sexual abuse was perceived to necessarily involve sexual penetration. This finding suggests that education on sexual abuse has to be fine-tuned for different ethnicities in order not to interfere with their religious beliefs. Changes have to be made to the social and cultural norms that already exist within a particular community. These issues can possibly be tackled by offering health talks and campaigns against sexual abuse at the different places of worship.

Many participants expressed their concerns on women being more vulnerable to sexual abuse than men, which is consistent with many previous studies (Aboul-Hagag & Hamed, 2012; Andrew, Corry, Slade, Issakidis, & Sawanston, 2004; MacMillan, Tanaka, Duku, Vaillancourt, & Boyle, 2013; Song, Ji, & Agardh, 2014). Women are often perceived as weaker compared to men, not only physically but also when it comes to decision-making. There is a practise among many ethnic groups in Tanzania called ‘Chagulaga mayu’ that serves as a kind of test of sexual compatibility and fertility (Jewkes, 2002). This practise involves a festival where unmarried women are chased by men who will then have sexual intercourse with them at the end of the ceremony. In the regions of Tanzania where this tradition prevails, women have no choice but to accept the sexual actions and desires of men and so this kind of behaviour is not regarded as sexual abuse.

Study participants also felt that children and young people were at greater risk of sexual abuse because they were innocent. It is known that an individual’s innocence is strongly believed to be an advantage by most perpetrators (Abeid et al., 2014). In addition, children usually do not disclose experiencing sexual abuse, assuming nobody will believe them (Foster & Hagedorn, 2014; Mathoma et al., 2006). Children may also lack awareness and knowledge of sexual abuse and hence may not feel it is important to tell someone about their experience. On the other hand, perpetrators of sexual abuse usually establish a trust relationship with their victims so that the victim will not feel what is happening is wrong. In some cases children may care deeply for the perpetrator and not want them to get into trouble (Foster & Hagedorn, 2014) and thus the abuse goes unreported. To avoid such situations, parents should teach their children ways of keeping themselves safe. For example, with regard to body parts, those that are private and should not be touched by anyone should be made aware to them at an early age. They should also be taught that nobody should take photos of their private parts and advised that if this happens to share the uncomfortable situation with their parents.

The Malay participants shared a conservative attitude to the relationship between sexy or revealing outfits and sexual abuse. Unlike Chinese and Indian groups, most Malay participants considered women who dressed sexily as easy targets for sexual abuse. Similar findings were also reported by Mathoma et al. According to Mathoma et al., women in mini-skirts and hot pants were believed to excite and lead men to abuse them sexually (Mathoma et al., 2006). Our results are also consistent with those of a Mexican study two decades ago (Lira, Ross, & Russo, 1999). Our participants also revealed concerns over enforcing the right dress codes for the right places on the right occasions. Therefore, it is important that dress codes be chosen appropriately, according to the place and the event, so that one does not set negative impression to others based on the way they dress. Dress codes that do not expose much of the body are definitely safer. Victims who dress up sexily are partially responsible for the sexual abuse they experience because of their attire. Participants in this study also perceived that talkative and gregarious individuals were thought to be at greater risk of sexual abuse because they were perceived as ‘easy’. Such behaviour in an individual reflects the upbringing and disciplinary actions imposed by parents on them when they were young. Therefore, it is the duty of parents to educate their children on adequate moral behaviours and behavioural limits in order to prevent sexual abuse from happening. They have to be aware that being too friendly with strangers can bring about danger.

Individuals with disabilities, whether physical, mental or intellectual, were also regarded by the study participants as easy targets for sexual abuse. A study by Young, Nosek, Howland, Chanpong, and Rintala (1997) in the United States (Young et al., 1997) found that women with disabilities were at greater risk of sexual abuse because of their increased exposure to institutions, medical care settings and de-humanisation, compared with their non-disabled peers. Similar findings were also reported by Skarbek, Hahn, and Parrish (2009). The study (Skarbek et al., 2009) found that the likelihood of individuals with physical, emotional or cognitive disabilities were three times more likely to experience sexual abuse compared to those without disabilities. To overcome this, there should be a regulation implemented to evaluate caregivers such as babysitters and nursing homes. All caregivers should be well trained on safety and standards of care. At the same time, the government and civil society should play a role in ensuring that such victimisation is prevented. Programmes for preventing sexual violence have to be implemented to prevent disabled adults and children from being sexually abused. As a result, these programmes have to be evaluated as a matter of priority to successfully stop sexual abuse from happening.

This study shows that sexual abuse is more likely to occur in certain environments. There are several reasons why quiet, private and dark places are favoured settings for sexual abuse (Lira et al., 1999). By definition, such environments are less populous and perpetrators are less likely to be interrupted while preying on their victim (Abeid et al.,
2014). Besides these sort of environments, being part of a broken family can also be a form of unpleasant environment especially for youths and adolescents. Adolescents who experience changes in the family structure, such as parental separation, divorce, remarriage or the presence of the parent's lover have been shown to be at greater risk of sexual abuse (Tyler & Cauce, 2002). Following a study in United States, children who live without either parent are 10 times more likely to be sexually abused compared to those who live with both biological parents (Sedlak et al., 2010). The study also reported that children who lived with a single parent who had a live-in partner increased the risk of sexual abuse by twenty folds, compared to living with both biological parents (Sedlak et al., 2010). The movement of adults in and out of a household makes the children living in such families more vulnerable to opportunistic perpetrators. However, not only individuals from broken families are more likely to experience sexual abuse, but there are also situations where sexual abuse has resulted in a nuclear family to break. This was supported by Roberts, O’Connor, Dunn, and Godling (2004) that reported sexual abuse survivors are more likely to be currently living in a non-traditional family that is with a single mother or step family after the experience of sexual abuse (Roberts et al., 2004). This implies that not only maintaining an intact family helps prevent individuals from being exposed to sexual abuse, but younger individuals have to be made aware on the consequences of sexual abuse. Therefore, adequate sexual abuse prevention curriculum has to be implemented to reinforce personal safety among school students (Weatherley et al., 2012). To carry out these sort of programmes, full co-operation and support will be needed from the Ministry of Education, Malaysia.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate that perceptions of sexual abuse vary among the different ethnic groups in Malaysia and are influenced by religion. Of the three ethnic groups studied, Malays were found to be more conservative and influenced by religion compared to Chinese and Indian individuals. Chinese and Indians had a better understanding and were more open-minded in their perceptions towards most aspects of sexual abuse.

This research will be useful in providing an insight on how education about sexual abuse can cater to the diversity in opinions among different ethnic groups. The findings firstly help to enhance understanding of Malaysian youth perceptions of sexual abuse. Secondly, the findings can be used to develop new public service campaigns to reduce sexual abuse in our community. Extensive future research on identifying sexual abuse is needed to help improve public understanding of sexual abuse as research on sexual abuse in Malaysia is woefully lacking. Greater public awareness of sexual abuse and the nature of the perpetrators should help to reduce the problem.

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