SEXUAL ABUSE AND CHILDHOOD TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE: A CASE STUDY ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH OF TRANSSEXUALS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: Some studies suggested that transsexuals are suffering Gender Identity Disorder resulted from traumatic experience of sexual abuse during childhood. These traumatic experiences are kept as personal secrets and influenced their upbringing. Their sexual orientation changed towards the opposite sex, and sexual attraction towards the same-sex persons is stronger than towards the opposite sex. Consequently, this sexual orientation undermined their psychological health in the long term. The objective of this paper is to examine the ways in which sexual abuse during childhood causes male victims to change their sexual orientation towards homosexual transsexuals. This study adopted qualitative method using informal, in-depth interviews on five (5) homosexual transsexuals living in Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. Four respondents had lived through the time of forcible sexual abuse of oral sex since childhood, while one respondent had sexually abused in his early adulthood. They reported as feeling traumatized and later turn into this behavior as a way of releasing anger and resentment against those who victimized them. This paper concludes that sexual abuse affected psychological health of a person, which may change one’s sexual orientation even though he/she is aware that the behavior contradicts the values that he/she and the Malaysian society holds. This study may implicates as a guide for responsible bodies such as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, the Ministry of Health, and researchers, in finding alternative intervention that help transsexuals to recognize their true gender identity, via medical, psychological, spiritual and moral support from the society at large.

Keywords: Homosexual transsexual, psychological health, sexual abuse, traumatic experience


Kata kunci: Transeksual homoseksual, kesihatan psikologi, penderaan seksual, pengalaman traumatik

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INTRODUCTION

The issues related to Independent Sexuality (Seksualiti Merdeka) appraisal from LGBT group (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) that sought for a freedom in terms of determining their sexuality (Straits Times, 22 November 2011), has called upon our study on transsexuals. Past research suggested that the emergence of LGBT is caused by various factors that are inherently difficult to analyze. This is due to subjective nature of one’s psychological well-being, which needs to be explained in detail (Ryff, 1989). One of the factors that have been said as influential is sexual abuse experienced by a person since childhood, while he/she is under the custody of his/her family (Friedman, 2002). Transsexuals often claimed that they do not want to be born and live their life as a transsexual and prefer to live as normal human beings (Meriam, 2000; Ghazali, Mohamad Nor, Mapjabil, Samat & Jaafar, 2012), therefore this study seeks to explore psychological factors that may influence their sexuality.

Transsexuals is an individual’s identification with a gender inconsistent or not culturally associated with his or her biological sex, and he or she may experience discomfort as a result of a desire to be a member of the opposite sex; or if a person experiences impaired functioning or distress as a result of that gender identification (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Ghazali & Mohamad Nor, 2012). Generally this condition is called ‘gender dysphoria’ (gender identity disorder) because those involved usually felt as if they exist in the wrong body (Ramli, 1991; Teh, 2002; Hassan, Yusooof, & Alavi, 2011). They will seek medical intervention in order to change their physical appearance to those of the opposite sex, and in extreme cases, commits sex change surgery (Benjamin, 1999; Ekins & King, 1997). Their gender identity disorder reveals in everyday lives, because these biologically male or female persons prefer, behave and identify themselves as the opposite sexes, and some of them practice homosexuality (for males) or lesbianism (for females).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Past studies have suggested several factors as the reasons for being transsexuals. One among others is by Swaab (2008) on prenatal and genetic causes. More importantly related to our study is that by Benjamin (1999) on psychological causes, which include psychic trauma that can grow and develop into a basic conflict that may result in deviation like transsexual. Roch, Ritchie, & Morton (2008) supports Benjamin’s suggestion and further acknowledges this most important factor, that is, the fact that transsexuals have bitter experience of being sexually abused by significant persons surrounding them. They had been forced towards sexual relationship with the same-sex persons when they were in their teens and at school. Some of them ended with love relationship with their predators for their survival and to fulfill erotic sexual desire as a result of being sexually abused at young age. Based on Benjamin (1999) and Roch et. al. (2008) arguments, we explore in depth traumatic experiences of male transsexuals in Malaysia, in order to fill in the research gap on this issue and to provide sound information on the psychological well-being related to sexual-psychological health of Malaysian society at large.

Of this issue, studies on pedophilia highlight that homosexual pedophilia has higher in percentage than heterosexual pedophilia and bisexual pedophilia (Hall & Hall, 2007). Of this matter, International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (10th Revision) defined that pedophilia is a sexual preference of adult with mental and behavioral disorders, who sought children, boys or girls or both, usually of prepubertal or early pubertal age (ICD-10 (2010), Section F.65.4) as victims for their elusive sexual satisfaction. Pedophilic sexual activity towards children exist in the forms of oral and anal sex, masturbation, stripping of children and watch children being stripped off, which American Psychological Association (2000) categorized these acts as Sexual Identity Disorder. Hassan (2012) claimed that boys with gentle and affectionate character tend to be the victim of homosexual pedophilic, who usually a person close or significant to the children. This activity is detrimental to the children’s psychological health in due course, especially, to their
sexual orientation. As a result, inversion of the victim’s sexual orientation towards the same-sex when they grow up as adult is of greater potential. Past, unforgettable experiences tend to shape one’s life and develop into their everyday practice, with or without realizing that such sexual activity is contradictory and harmful to their psychological health. They also have risk themselves to greater health problems, such as AIDS disease (Azwan, 2011) which also led to death at a relatively young age.

Past studies have discussed that differences in sexual desires between men and women brought to greater potential of sexual abuse by adult males to boys. Although sexual activity between adult men and boys is regarded as simply for fun, however it impacted the psychological health of the children (boys) in the long term. Of this matter Yusof & Nor’Izam (2010) suggested that a person can be sexually aroused in accordance with the provisions of the other individuals. In this case, adults who are sexually very aggressive tend to choose children (boys) in their proximity as their victims. It is often said that a man has higher sexual desire and sexual arousal than women, and these are influenced by genetics, hormone levels, and differences in sexual excitement (Ramanaidoo & Rathakrishnan, 2012). On the other hand, offenders of sexual abuse tend to be higher among men than women.

**Sexual Orientation Theory**

Sexual orientation theory has been used in understanding the formation of heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and transsexual peoples (Storms, 1980). This theory explains that there are certain characteristics in these peoples’ sexuality, which shaped their understanding and attraction towards the same sex or the opposite sex. Freud in 1922 and 1959 (cited in Storms, 1980) indicates that there is an unresolved issue or unfinished business in the stage of ‘Oedipus Complex’ between a son and his mother during the fixation processes, – a stage in which a boy is fixated on his mother and competes with his father for maternal attention. This resulted in the inability of the boy to express his actual sexual orientation function using his own sexual organ (Storms, 1980; see also Hassan & Ghazali, 2013). However Freud’s psychoanalysis work has been subject into critics by many (see for example, Crew, 1998, Clewell, 2004), and the causes for inverse sexual orientation and gender identity disorder are still being debated.

Studies explain male same-sex relation – homosexuality – involves erotic and sexual behaviors as main passions and self-gratification (Ekins, 1997). In relation to this, Blanchard, Clemmensen, & Steiner (1987) suggest that one type of gender dysphoria manifests itself in individuals who are exclusively attracted to men, referred to as homosexual transsexuals. Storms (1980) study discovers sexual orientation relates primarily to erotic fantasy orientation. His study proposes that homosexuals reported significantly greater fantasy involving the same sex and significantly less fantasy involving the opposite sex than did heterosexuals (Storms 1980: 283). Tripp (1975) meanwhile proposes a complex relationship between sexual orientation and sex role, in which, homosexuals are strongly attracted to the sex role characteristic of their own sex, i.e. masculine attributes – to the point of being sexually attracted toward men. Hassan and Ghazali’s study (2013) supports this, in which they asserted that “...facial appearance, specific body parts such as chest, calves and buttocks, and specific social behaviors, especially caring and affectionate...” (page 176) are sexual images of men that fascinate homosexual transsexuals.

Tripp (1975) divides homosexuals in two categories: first, men with lower libido (sexual drive/desire for sex) and attracted to others who have higher libido; and second, men with higher libido and believe that his sexuality is superior to the others. A homosexual transsexual has extremes in its libido/sexuality, whether in its highs or lows, when compared to heterosexual men. The following summary made by Storms (1980) forms some basis in understanding homosexual transsexuals:

i) A homosexual transsexual will show lower male libido or higher female libido in everyday life
ii) A homosexual transsexual will show significant changes in his male and female libido in everyday social life.

iii) A homosexual transsexual has higher erotic fantasies towards the same sex (males) when compared to a heterosexual who fantasizes towards the opposite sex (see also Hassan & Ghazali, 2013).

**Conceptual Framework**

Conceptual framework for studying sexual traumatic disorders as a result of sexual abuse during childhood is constructed below. This is prepared in order visualize relationship between ‘causal and effect’ elements, as suggested by Benjamin (1999) and Roch et al. (2008). In our case, causal elements are ‘homosexual transsexuals’ and ‘victims of sexual abuse’. Meanwhile, the long term effect is ‘disturbance/inversion in psychological health’. Storms’s Sexual Orientation Theory, which suggested that there are certain characteristics in peoples’ sexuality that shaped their understanding and attraction towards the same sex or the opposite sex, supports both causal elements and long term effects suggested by our study (Figure 1).

**Research Objectives**

The objective of this paper is to explore and provide evidence on the inversion of victims’ sexual orientation due to earlier homosexual activities with adults who are significant to them. In relation to this, our paper will discuss on whether or not they realize their inverse sexual orientation is unhealthy, the way they become adaptive to this, and the extent to which this lifestyle is performed as revenge to earlier adult misconduct upon them. Furthermore, this paper will analyze whether or not they are now simply following the inverse sexual orientation introduced to them since they were young, and making it their everyday sexual practice without traumatic feelings. Of importance, this paper will provide information on transsexual’s traumatic experiences at young age after being sexually abused by those who were significant to them, and later exposed them to inverse sexual orientation, i.e. homosexual transsexual, without realizing that their psychological health is at risk.

**Research Methodology**

Due to the sensitivity and difficulty of getting specific respondents and gathering of data, qualitative method is the best approach to be adopted for this study. Purposive and snowball sampling were used.
in choosing respondents that fit with the study objectives. Access to respondents would have been impossible without the help of an informant – who is also the authors’ friend, in which he introduced the respondents to authors. Five selected respondents were repeatedly interviewed in the course of six months’ time in 2012. Longer period was needed to establish relationship of trust with the respondents, to understand their psychological issues and to interpret qualitative information. The interviews were administered in informal sessions that probe into detail on the past lives of homosexual transsexual respondents. Two of the respondents were working and three were studying at the colleges. They were originated from rural areas of Malaysia and had experienced sexual abuse by peoples significant to them while they were at primary, secondary, tertiary, and pre-school levels. The use of small and focus group from Malaysian Bumiputra (the Malay and Kadazandusun ethnicity) had given credibility to data gathered, and fit Neutens and Rubinson’s (2002) suggestion that a small number of respondents is adequate for a small scale and focus studies, which will be backed-up with informal, in-depth interviews on issues related to the study. In-depth interviews had been conducted by authors based on a set of open ended questionnaire constructed beforehand. The interviews were recorded and transcribed; the verbatim words of respondents were analyzed using manual qualitative analysis (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003), in which specific codes were given to information related to the study objectives. Respondents’ verbatim words were analyzed and interpreted using narrative approach (Ghazali & Atang, 2008) in describing themes studied.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research findings from in-depth interviews were coded and summarized under specific themes that support the study objectives. For this paper, two themes will be explored under the theme of (i) traumatic sexual experience during childhood and (ii) traumatic sexual experience at early adulthood. Both traumatic sexual experience involved peoples that are significant to respondents, and led to respondents becoming inverse sexual orientation.

Traumatic sexual experience during childhood

Under this theme, four respondents revealed that they had been victims of sexual abuse forced by peoples who were significant (close) to them. These peoples were their cousins, friends and adoptive brothers1. According to the respondents, these peoples were attracted to them sexually, without them being noticed of their hidden motives, due to their young age. Attraction imposed on them was in the form of sexual desires, in which, the respondents were used as an instrument to exercise oral sex. The failure in holding back sexual desires amongst significant people ended up this vulnerable group becoming victims of circumstances, thus affecting their psychological health in terms of sexual orientation, as well as causing them to be sexually traumatic. The victims who were supposed to be sexually normal persons had been forced to adapt to certain sexual behavior, which affected their psychological health, and over the long course have adapted to it. Among the statements cited from respondents are:

When I was in Form One (age 13) I had fall under my senior. He called me and wanted me to do his way. He forced me to do something like sex. At the beginning he forced me to hold his private part, and then in other days got me familiar with other stages, and next, to do the oral.

(Respondent 1, Malaysian Malay, age 20, Interviewed in June 2012)

1 In Malaysia, adoptive brother (or foster brother) is an older male that has no blood relation with the younger person (a male or female), but they have close relationship and regard each other as close friends or siblings. Relationship is established informally at mutual consent between them.
He (his senior) made fun and hugged me from behind, and he wanted to sleep with me; like to be pampered and cuddled. He kissed my neck and wanted to do something like sex. He treated me well, and after he watched porn video I had given him oral sex.

(Respondent 3, Malaysian Malay, age 20, Interviewed in June 2012)

It started with my village friend (older than him) at my hometown when I was 10 years old. Just kissing, wandering the body, and oral sex. I was the one who had to do the oral.

(Respondent 4, Malaysian Kadazandusun, age 20, Interviewed in June 2012)

I never did sexual intercourse but I do oral sex. At that time I was at lower secondary school, and he – my senior - asked me to do such thing to him. All this happened when I was at the hostel. In one month I did (oral sex) to a person (his senior), and next month I had to do (oral sex) to another person.

(Respondent 5, Malaysian Kadazandusun, age 20, Interviewed in June 2012)

These statements from four transsexual respondents portrayed that they had undergone a series of sexual abuse by those who were significant to them, such as their seniors at the hostel, and a village friends who were senior in age than them. At this time the respondents were unaware that they became subjects of sexual abuse by people older and closer to them. The youngsters can be regarded as instrument for elder males to perform sexual misconduct that pleased them (elder males) through activities such as pampering, cuddling and oral sex. Such activities that were regarded as normal in the beginning turned to be harmful because it affected the youngsters’ sexual orientation and health.

Respondents admitted that they have learned and became generalized with these activities since they were at their hometowns, including in rural areas, which support Ramanaidoo & Rathakrishnan’s (2012) suggestion. A majority of them have used to these activities while they were still studying. Blanchard, Clemmensen, & Steiner (1987) suggest that these characteristics is one type of gender dysphoria which manifests itself in individuals who are exclusively attracted to men, including towards their facial appearance, and they are termed as androphilic. Blanchard (1989) explores this further and came to a term Autogynephilia, which means ‘love of oneself as a woman’, to refer to a man’s paraphilic tendency to be sexually aroused by the thought or image of himself as a woman. Laurence (2004) further supports this and argues that Autogynephilia is a strong internal desire of a man to be a woman, either physically or/and sexually, and enjoy having sexual relation with other males. Hassan & Ghazali (2013) also prove this desire among Malaysian’s male-to-female transsexuals. The explanation of this behavior has made clear by Roch et al., (2008) which stated that most of this group has experienced sexual abuse since they were a child. They were treated as a woman during the sexual abuse, and this repeated conduct imposed on them encouraged a feeling inside them that they are women. Consequently this led to their reverse psychological attraction towards the same sex. This type of mental disorder is listed as one of the major health disorder suffered by homosexual transsexuals (American Psychology Association, 2000).

This study has also supports Hall & Hall’s (2007) suggestion in that homosexual pedophilia is the ‘distributor’ of inverse sexual orientation to their child victims. The result is the emergence of homosexual transsexual group, a group that suffers inverse sexual orientation and experience severe identity disorder. This supports Ann & Alavi’s (1997) study on the effect of sexual abuse on children both boys and girls, in which, if they are not treated fairly, sexual abuse on them may cause severe sexual trauma. Behaviors related to sexual trauma include, detestation towards sexual relation, adoration to same-sex relation, sexually over-active, by which the victims tend to look for the next
victims for sexual release. These behaviors and mental disorder have affected the victims’ private life. Hughes (2006) study supports this, in which 28 per cent of the homosexual have been sexually abused when they were a child, which influence their sexual orientation towards the same-sex. Teh’s (2001) study also highlights that those who had experienced same-sex relation at the age of 11 to 15 years old tend to continue this activity when they reach adulthood. They suffer complicated traumatic experience which affected their psychological health.

**Sexual trauma at early adulthood**

One of our respondents had experience sexual trauma during his early adulthood while he was studying as an undergraduate in a university. Similar to the other respondents, he was introduced to the same-sex relation by his senior. According to this respondent, he did not expect such relation, which then led him into same-sex intimate relation and love affair with the person who introduced homosexuality to him, without his consent, at first. Their years of homosexual relation brought him into sexual trauma that is an intense desire for same-sex relation. Their love and homosexual relation ended when his senior finished studying and left the university, while he suffers long-term sexual trauma. His sexual trauma is expressed in his daily life, in which, he is now adopting same-sex relationship and regard this as the only way to fulfill his sexual desire. He expressed his sexual trauma as this:

*I have experienced same-sex relationship with my senior when I was at the university. There was where I learn (to be homosexual) and since then I had done this (homosexual relationship) with countless number of men. I like it when he (his boyfriend at the university) did something at my breast, and if he didn’t do that I won’t feel satisfied. And I will also do my part that was to give him oral. But now if I want to do oral or anal, I will choose (the person)...if he is good (physically) then I will be okay (will do the oral/anal). This is the way I satisfy myself after being exposed to this life before.*

*(Respondent 2, Malaysian Malay, age 33, interviewed in June 2012)*

The life of this respondent describes that there is a chance for a potential, vulnerable personality to perform homosexual activity at the early adulthood. One’s friendship with a homosexual opens a potential for such relation, which led him to being trapped in inverse sexual relationship for a long term. The love and desire between them provide the way for sexual relationship in order to satisfy erotic fantasy and sexual needs. Those who have been trapped in homosexuality found it difficult to forget their relationship with the men they love, which is similar to observation forwarded by Meriam (2000). Meriam has found that, in her counseling session, homosexual transsexuals have difficulty in forgetting their same-sex love relation, and will tend to repeatedly tell stories about their love and intimate relation with these men. Sexual images in the body or nature of their boyfriends as suggested by Hassan & Ghazali (2013) are unforgettable in their memories and affected them to admire these men. Such images have become their guide in choosing intimate partners.

Apart from this, Nor Mazlina, Edris, & Cheong (2011) suggested that the homosexuals have admired men since they were young (children). They like to be touched, cuddled and greeted by men who were close to them and often visited their family at home. Such admiration, if without knowledge and control, can lead into same-sex relation, especially if they are trapped under the ‘custody’ of homosexual seniors, as our study have discussed above.

Acton (2010) regards transsexual formation and issues around them are subjective matters and far too complex to be explained. Individuals have different factors, roles, and history that explain their homosexual transsexual transformation. Diversity in causes includes childhood and early adulthood sexual experiences as discussed here. Many other studies have also highlight external factors that help
support and promote transsexual behavior in everyday lives, such as the roles of media (Ringo, 2002; Ghazali & Mohamad Nor, 2012); the roles of community infrastructures (Nash, 2005; Ghazali, Mapjabil & Mohamad Nor, 2011, among others); and spatial diffusion and universalism of new cultures in geographical space (Oswin, 2008; Ghazali et. al., among others).

Thus, sexual trauma since childhood and early adulthood may potentially lead to sexually abused children and teenagers to turn into homosexual transsexual in later life. Sexual abuse may affect psychological health of the victims - though usually without them being aware of it - and potentially led them to develop inverse sexual orientation. Such sexual orientation may further affect their health and put them at higher risk of getting HIV/AIDS.

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

Our study suggests that some, if not all, homosexual transsexuals are those who had experience sexual trauma which then affect their psychological health. As they grow up into adulthood, they strengthen their inverse sexual orientation for internal and external satisfaction, in wherever they live, either in urban or rural areas. Development of such character and activity may form a base of reference, that is, homosexual transsexuals admire men in many specific aspects, which are similar to the normal ways women admire men. This study has increase information on elements related to the sexuality of homosexual transsexual peoples, especially those who had experienced sexual abuse when they were young. A detailed study in regards to sexual traumatic disorder among homosexual transsexuals should be carry out in the near future, in order to find solutions to these problems, and to create a gender-appropriate interventions to address this issue. This study has also supports Sexual Orientation Theory in that homosexual persons are those who romantically and sexually attracted to the members of the same sex. The cause of this behavior could be many, in which, as revealed in our study, is sexual abuse imposed by the same gender at their young age. The implication of this study is that, it can be used as a guide by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, the Ministry of Health, and social and psychological researchers who examine on sexual abuse and gender identity disorder. Assistance in constructing intervention either via medical, psychological, moral and spiritual support are of importance, and highly needed from the society at large, in order to help gender dysphoria group to recognize their gender identity.

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