

Conference Paper

An Application of the Theory of Planned Behavior in Predicting Child Abuse Reporting Intention of Malaysian Society

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Abstract

The incidence of child abuse is increasing at an alarming rate. However, it is widely believed that only a few cases are reported to the authorities. Under-reporting of child abuse is therefore a grave concern, especially in Malaysia. Why is it that, even though society in general agrees that child abuse is a heinous crime that must be stopped and prevented, only very few of them played their role by reporting suspected abuse? The answer is unclear due to scarce research conducted in this area. This study is therefore directed towards finding answers to this question. By applying the Theory of Planned Behavior, this paper examines the relationship between attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control and child abuse reporting intention. A multi-stage stratified cluster sampling method was used by this cross-sectional study in selecting the respondents from the Southern (Johor, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan) and Central (Selangor) regions of Malaysia. A total of 384 questionnaires was distributed to the individual citizens of Malaysia aged between 19 to 64 years old. The return rate was 90.4% and analysis was carried out on 347 completed questionnaires. The findings show that subjective norms and perceived behavioral control were found to have a significant relationship with the intention to report suspected child abuse. Subjective norm was found to be the most influential factor towards intention to report suspected child abuse. Interestingly, the study found that there was no significant relationship between attitude and intention to report suspected child abuse in Malaysian society. The findings of this study are useful to policy makers and child protection authorities.

Keywords: child protection policy, attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, Theory of Planned Behavior

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1. Introduction

Every child has the right to live in an environment free from abuse. In Malaysia, this right is upheld through the implementation of the Child Act 2001 (Amendment 2016)

and its corollary policies; the Sexual Offences against Children Act 2017, the 2009 National Policy for Children (NPC) and the 2009 National Child Protection Policy (NCP). According to this act, a child under the age of 18 has the right to be protected from any type of abuse (Malaysia, 2016). Hence, the government of Malaysia has a duty to protect every young innocent child from being sexually, physically, emotionally abused or neglected. However, despite the government best effort to protect these children, the incidents of child abuse keep on increasing at an alarming rate every year. It was reported that the number of child abuse cases has increased from 1,999 cases in 2006 to 4,652 cases between 2015 to 2016 (Utusan Online, 2017). It has further increased to 5,442 cases in 2017 (New Straits Time Online, 2018). Ironically, these figures do not represent the real magnitude of the problem. An in-depth study by the United Nations Secretary-General on violence against children reported that, "much violence remains hidden or unreported and figures, therefore, often underestimate the scope of the problem" (UNICEF Malaysia, 2001). Therefore, it is believed that the reported cases only represent two to ten per cent of the actual cases, whereas a lot more cases went unreported (UNICEF, 2002; Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2010; New Straits Times, October 8, 2018). However, the factors why society refrains from reporting suspected child abuse is unclear due to limited research conducted in this area.

Little research has been carried out in the area of child abuse reporting. Although some researchers have paid some attention to child abuse issue, most research concerning child abuse has focused on legal and policy aspect (Paul, 1991; Abu Bakar, 1993; Rizal, 2000; Jal Zabdi, et. al, 2008; Afridah, 2012; Noor Aziah, 2009; Shamsul Amri, 2009; Murugesu, 2010; Grant, 2011; Fatimah Muliana & Ahmad Zaki, 2012), organizational aspect of child abuse (Khadijah & Mohamed Fadzil, 2007; Jal Zabdi, et. al, 2008; Salina & Jill, 2011), and also psychological aspect of child abuse (Kasim et. al., 1994; Singh et. al., 1996; Hildard & Wolfe, 2002; Nolin & Ethier, 2007; Hirayama, 2013). The salient features of all these studies is that they have studied the reported cases of child abuse in an attempt to find out the risk factors, the impact of child abuse and the adequacy of the legislation in protecting children from abuse. Few studies have focused on reasons for unreported cases of child abuse (Grosoehme, 1998; Kenny, 2001; Alvarez et. al., 2004; Kenny, 2004; Feng & Wu, 2005; Khadijah & Mohamed Fadzil, 2007; Bryan, 2009; Salina & Jill, 2011; Choo et. al., 2013; Mogaddam et. al., 2016; Xie et. al., 2017). Even fewer studies have focused on society's reasons for not reporting suspected child abuse (Elliott et. al., 1997; Lau et. al., 1999; Qiao & Xie, 2017; Xie, Sun, Chen, Ping & Chan, 2017). Therefore, despite the existence of these studies, very few

studies have been conducted in Malaysia and almost all these studies have focused on the professionals. Study that focus on society's reason for not reporting suspected child abuse is almost non-existing. A careful review of existing literature indicates that probably no study has yet examined empirically the reasons of not reporting suspected child abuse among Malaysian society. This study is therefore directed towards filling this gap. Against this background, the objective of this research is to examine the relationship between attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control (PBC) and intention to report suspected child abuse.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

There is no agreed upon definition of child abuse. This is because child abuse is a social construct that changes over time in accordance with the historical evolution of values and perspectives. The child was once viewed as the property of the family and therefore was treated the way the family wishes (Crosson-Tower, 2010). Therefore, during those times, the father can use his children as child labors, sell them, or even kill them. These acts were not considered as child abuse during that time. In contrast, the same acts will amount to child abuse if committed in this century.

The National Child Protection Policy defines child abuse more specifically as referring to all forms of abuse, whether physical, emotional, sexual or neglect which may hamper a child's right to a healthy and dignify growth (MWFC, 2001). There are four types of child abuse. The first type is physical abuse. Physical abuse happens when a child is physically injured that can cause visible injury (Department of Social Welfare, 2017). Specifically, the Child Act 2001 has define child physical abuse as, "if there is substantial and observable injury to any part of the child's body as a result of the non-accidental application of force or an agent to the child's body that is evidenced by, amongst other things, a laceration, a contusion, an abrasion, a scar, a fracture or other bone injury, a dislocation, a sprain, hemorrhaging, the rapture of a viscus, a burn, a scald, the loss or alteration of consciousness or psychological functioning or the loss of hair or teeth" (Malaysia, 2006). Kicking, punching, beating until a child passed out, strangling or shaking are also considered as child physical abuse (Afridah, 2012).

The second type of abuse is emotional abuse. This type of abuse happens when a child is emotionally injured that can cause interference with the mental functioning (Department of Social Welfare, 2017). Specifically, a child is emotionally injured if "there is substantial and observable impairment of the child's mental or emotional functioning that is evidenced by, amongst other things, a mental or behavioral disorder, including

anxiety, depression, withdrawal, aggression or delayed development” (Malaysia, 2006). Emotional abuse is also known as psychological abuse.

The third type of abuse is sexual abuse. Sexual abuse happens when a child is exploited sexually (Department of Social Welfare, 2017). According to the Child Act 2001, child sexual abuse occurs if a child has “taken part, whether as a participant or an observer, in any activity which is sexual in nature for the purposes of any pornographic, obscene or indecent material, photograph, recording, film, videotape or performance or for the purpose of sexual exploitation by any person for that person’s or another person’s sexual gratification” (Malaysia, 2006). Other forms of child sexual abuse are incest, rape, sexual sadist, exposing genitals and molesting acts (Afridah, 2012). The recently enforced Sexual Offence Against Children Act 2017 (Act 792) has included child grooming (ie: sexually communicating with a child via social media or email) as child sexual abuse (Malaysia, 2017).

The fourth type of child abuse is neglect. Neglect happens when there is a continuous failure to provide basic needs of the child (Department of Social Welfare, 2017). Neglect can be defined as the persistent and serious failure to provide basic physical, emotional and developmental needs in terms of health, education, emotional development, nutrition, shelter and safe life for children (MWFC, 2001). Scholars agreed that lack of parental care and nurturance are the hallmark of child neglect (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Rutter & Sroufe, 2000; Sameroff, 2000).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) has emerged as one of the most popular theories in predicting and explaining human behavior. This theory is an extension of the earlier version of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). It provides a useful tool to understand human social behavior through the level of beliefs. It is this level of beliefs that help us understand why some people choose to engage in certain behavior while some others choose a different course of action. Three constructs of this theory (attitude, subjective norms, and PBC) represent three different types of beliefs. They are extremely useful in understanding the determinants of behavior, and therefore each serve as a point of attack in attempts to implement interventions or to change it. According to this theory, behavior is determined by intention to perform the behavior and intention is determined by three important factors: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and PBC. In the context of this study, in order for the society to report suspected child abuse, they must believe that: (1) reporting will lead to positive outcomes for both the child and his/her family, (2) significant people think they should report suspected cases of child abuse, and (3) they have control over reporting.

Attitude in the context of this theory refers to “the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of the behavior in question” (Ajzen, 1991). In other words, this attitude simply refers one’s personal evaluation of the particular behavior. Specifically, it is one’s evaluation about whether a particular behavior is positive or negative and the evaluation of whether the outcome of that action is positive or negative. A person, who evaluates the behaviors and the outcome of it positively, is more likely to perform that behavior. Previous studies have found that attitude is a significant predictor of suspected child abuse reporting (Feng & Levine, 2005; Keane & Chapman 2008; Fraser et. al., 2010; Park et. al., 2013; Lee & Kim 2017). On the other hand, a study found that attitude insignificantly affects reporting intention of suspected child abuse (Greytak, 2009). In the present study, a person’s attitude toward child abuse reflects an intention to report or not to report suspected cases of child abuse.

Subjective norms refer to perceived social pressures or expectation on a person either to perform or not to perform a particular behavior. It also refers to the degree of a person’s motivation, whether to comply or not to comply with those expectations (Ajzen, 1991). Previous studies carried out to examine the relationship between subjective norms and intentions have found a significant relationship between the two variables (Feng & Levine, 2005; Feng & Wu, 2005). On the contrary, a study found that subjective norms did not predict intention to report suspected child abuse (Greytak, 2009). In this study, subjective norms towards child abuse reporting reflect an individual intention to report suspected child abuse incident.

Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC) refers to “people’s perception of the ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour of interest” (Ajzen, 1991). This construct implied the confidence, one’s have over his/her ability to perform a particular behaviour. A person who perceived his/her ability positively and think that performing that particular behaviour is easy, is more likely to perform that behaviour. Previous studies have investigated the relationship between PBC and reporting intention. They found that intention to report suspected child abuse incident was strongly influenced by PBC (Feng & Levine, 2005; Feng & Wu, 2005; Lee & Kim 2017). But a study has also found otherwise (Greytak, 2009). In the context of current study, it is believed that the PBC would likely have an influence over intention to report suspected child abuse incident.

The research framework is derived from the TPB (Ajzen, 1991). The depicted figure of the framework of this study is as below.

The above framework demonstrates the relationships between three TPB factors (attitude, subjective norms, and PBC) and reporting intention. Based on literature, the following hypotheses were formulated;

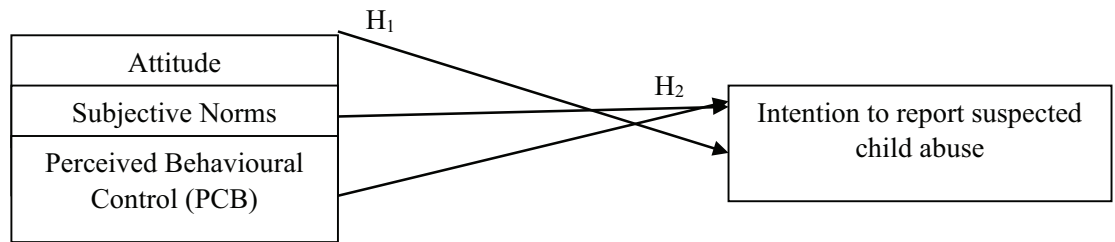


Figure 1: Research Framework

H_1 : There is a significant relationship between attitude and intention to report suspected child abuse.

H_2 : There is a significant relationship between subjective norms and intention to report suspected child abuse.

H_3 : There is a significant relationship between Perceived Behavioral Control and intention to report suspected child abuse.

3. Materials and Method

The study focuses on individual member of Malaysian society aged between 19 to 64 years old. A multistage stratified cluster sampling method was used in selecting the respondents. The selection process was divided into three stages. In the first stage, 2 regions, from the 5 regions in Malaysia were randomly selected. In the second stage, 4 out of 7 states were randomly selected within the chosen regions. Then, one district was selected from each state. Next, within each chosen district, a fixed number of 96 households were selected using systematic random sampling. Lastly, one individual was sampled per household. Therefore, a total of 384 (96 x 4) individuals served as the sample population of this study. This is in line with Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) recommendation which assert that population of 1,000,000 and above require a sample size of at least 384 respondents. Therefore, the sample size of 384 of this study is deemed adequate.

A questionnaire called Society's Child Abuse Reporting Scale (SCARS) was used to collect data from the respondents. SCARS were developed through the semi-structured interview and literature search conducted during the first phase of this research. All three independent variables, namely, attitudes (18 items), subjective norms (8 items), and PBC (6 items) were measured through five points Likert-scale ranging 1 as "strongly disagree" to 5 as "strongly agree". Content validity was determined by consensus among five Malaysians experts in child abuse. In terms of reliability, the value of Cronbach's alpha for attitude is 0.821, subjective norms is 0.858, and for PBC is 0.729. The value

for Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.729 to 0.858 and thus validity was assumed. As for the dependent variable, society's intention for child abuse reporting achieved the value of ($\alpha=0.938$) and the thus reliability is assumed. Factor analysis fulfills validity consideration with factor loading for each item exceeded 0.70. Furthermore, concerning factor analysis, since the sample size of this study is 347, the factor loadings required is 0.298. Factor analysis fulfilled consideration with factor loading for each item exceeded 0.30. The Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin (KMO) is 0.895 and it is excellently achieved as it is higher than 0.80. The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is significant (Chi-Square=8076.560, $p=0.000$).

4. Results

Analysis of respondent profile indicates that majority of respondents are Malay (52%), followed by Chinese (26%) and Indian (23%). In terms of gender, majority of the respondents are female (60%), while forty percent of the respondents are male. Most of the respondents were aged between 19-48 years old (75%). As for the respondent's state, 26% of the respondents lives in Negeri Sembilan, 25.3% from Johor, 25.1% from Malacca, and 23.6% from Selangor. Most of the respondents acknowledges that they are aware of current child abuse cases (87.8%). A total of 10.1% of the respondents reported that they know a child who has been a victim of abused, while 17.3% reported to have suspected child abuse occurred, but only 0.9% of the respondents have ever reported suspected child abuse incident to the authority.

Concerning descriptive statistic, average mean score for variables of attitudes towards child abuse, subjective norms, and PBC are ranged between 3.325 and 4.118 (out of 5) with a corresponding standard deviation of each variable are less than 0.60. Specifically, average score for attitudes towards child abuse, subjective norms, and PBC is 4.118, 4.046, and 3.325 respectively, indicating the respondents positively view towards all the three measured variables. The average mean score for society's intention for child abuse reporting 7.750 (SD=1.145) demonstrate a high level of intention to report child abuse among the society. As for multiple regression analysis, the findings indicate that the four independent variables of attitudes towards child abuse, subjective norms, and PBC collectively has explanatory power 15.1 % ($F=48.47$; $p=0.00$) of society's intention for child abuse reporting. The relationship between attitudes toward child abuse and society's intention for child abuse reporting is not significant as $p>0.05$. Thus, H_1 is rejected. The relationship between subjective norms and society's intention for child abuse reporting is significant at $p<0.05$. The H_2 is accepted. The relationship

between PBC and society's intention for child abuse reporting is significant at $p < 0.05$. The H3 is accepted.

5. Discussion

The present study examines suspected child abuse reporting intention among Malaysian society. The main objective of this study was to determine the relationship between attitude, subjective norms, PBC and intention to report suspected child abuse. The study was also intended to identify the most and the least influencing factors among the three independent variables derived from the TPB theory in examining the reporting intent. The findings of the current study indicated that the explanatory power of the TPB model is 15.1% which reflects that TPB theory is appropriate to illuminate the factors that influence the intention to report suspected child abuse cases among Malaysian society. The findings of the current study are consistent with Feng and Levine (2005), Feng and Wu (2005), Keane and Chapman (2008), Greytak (2009), Park et al., (2013), Lee and Kim (2017) and Alsaleem, Alsaleem, Asiri, Alkhidhran, Alqahtani, Alzahrani, Assiri, Alshahrany and Alsamghan (2019). Specifically, the variable of subjective norms and PBC were found to have significant relationships with the intention to report suspected child abuse. Hence hypotheses on the relationship between subjective norm and PBC are accepted. It is also found that subjective norms factor emerges as the most important factor influencing intention to report suspected child abuse. This shows that the decisions not to report is highly influenced by social pressure and motivation to comply with society's expectation. Thus, it is suggested that the government of Malaysia work in the effort to instill the culture of collective responsibility among society in regards to reporting suspected child abuse cases. Also, it must educate and motivate them to report suspected cases of child abuse. As for PBC, it was also found to have a significant relationship with the intention to report suspected child abuse.

This result is found to be consistent with previous studies done by Feng and Levine (2005), Feng and Wu (2005), and Lee and Kim (2017). This shows that those who perceived that reporting is difficult will less likely to report. Therefore, the Government of Malaysia, with the help of NGOs should play a role in disseminating information on how to identify abuse signs and symptoms, and on how and where a person can file a report of suspected abuse. This will not only increase the level of perceived easiness of reporting, but will also enhance awareness and knowledge about child abuse and therefore encourage reporting. Interestingly, this study found that there was no significant relationship between attitude and intention to report suspected child

abuse. Therefore, hypothesis on the relationship between attitude and intention to report suspected child abuse is rejected.

This finding is consistent with a study done by Greytak (2009). This result is probably because of the context and culture of Malaysia as an Asian country. Asian culture is known to have high support for corporal punishment as a form of child discipline, views that children are considered to be the private property of their parents, believe that children should always obey and defer to adults, taboos against speaking negatively against one's family, the importance of protecting the family from shame and the principle of non-interference by outsiders in internal family matters (Hong & Hong, 1991; Kiong et. al., 1996; Ashton, 2001; Qiao & Chant, 2005; Tang, 2006; Khadijah & Fadzil, 2007; Greytak, 2009; Feng et. al., 2010; Choo, 2013).

This indicated that the Malaysian society has a different perception of what constitute child abuse which is different from the Western understanding of child abuse, have a high tolerance towards corporal punishment, viewed cases of child abuse as internal family matters and thus refrain themselves from reporting. High tolerance towards physical punishment may signal lack of parenting skills and high level of stress especially financially related stress. Therefore, the government of Malaysia must design special programs to tackle the root cause of this problem and change the attitudes towards child abuse.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this current research will be valuable to the child protection authority, especially in encouraging the society to lodge a report of suspected child abuse. Since this study applied the TPB theory, it has provided a powerful & crucial information about human behavior through the level of beliefs. It helps us understand why some people choose to report suspected child abuse while some others choose to refrain from reporting. Therefore, this understanding is extremely useful in understanding the determinant of behaviors and therefore serves as a point of attack in attempts to implement interventions or to change it. This will later help the government in achieving the Child Act 2001 and its corollary policies; the 2009 National Policy for Children (NPC) and the 2009 National Child Protection Policy (NCPP), and also help achieved the National Key Result Area (NKRA) related to child wellbeing.

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