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Transgender Coping Strategies Dealing with Family Members in Penang, Malaysia

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Abstract

This qualitative study was conducted in Penang, Malaysia. The study aims to analyze patterns of family member's acceptance level due to their children's transgender identity existence. In the same time, this study aims to gather in-depth understanding on transgender coping strategies towards family member's acceptance level due to their transgender identity. Selection of 18 respondents was through the snowballing sampling technique due to the difficulty of getting the targeted respondents. Respondents who have participated in this study were among transgender populations between the ages of 18-40. Two (2) major themes have been identified in this study. The significant findings include: The existence of family acceptance and rejection towards their children's transgender identity and (2) Youth transgender experienced negative and positive coping strategies towards family member's acceptance and rejection due to their transgender identity. The study findings indicated that a total of 7 out of 18 respondents have experienced family members' rejection due to their gender identity. This study suggests that both government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) could play a role in educating family member and society in coping with their love one who identify as transgender.

Keywords: *Coping Strategies, Family Social Support, Youth Transgender, Gender Identity*

Introduction

Less research has concentrated on family-based humiliation and exclusion, that is, particular demonstrations of prohibition or dismissal by close family members and relatives due to their personality as transgender person (Perlin, Menaghan, Lieberman & Mullan, 2011; Hughes, Kiecolt, Keith, & Demo 2015). According to Human Rights Watch, Transgender individuals in Malaysia faced discrimination and exploitation from various of government and state authorities which involved cops, state religious department authorities, public health staffs, school teachers and family members. Official victimization towards transgender individuals is

aggravated by different types of social injustice which the government official provides less security which makes this transgender population feels unsecured in daily life. In the same time, transgender individuals were forced to leave from their occupations and removed from their homes especially by their family members. Besides that, these were some physically and sexually take by surprise, and denied access to medicinal services in light of their sex characters (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

As a result of violence against transgender people throughout the world, Transgender Day is often celebrated in European countries and the United States to commemorate or honour the memory of transgender who were murdered by a group of people who are not responsible (Smith & Leaper, 2005). Families often have a wide range of emotional reactions when their children reveal their gender identity which are opposite of the original gender at birth. There was some situational where family members were not willing to accept their children's transgender identity until makes them worried about their children's future. Most cases of this kind where family members reacted negatively towards not accepting the existence of this kind gender identity, which has been widely, documented worldwide (Factor & Rothblum, 2007; Galupo, Krum, et al., 2014; Richmond et al., 2012). Past previous research has additionally centered around the part of relational disgrace or exclusion, that is, particular occasions of physical violence, transphobia and sexual exploitation persevered by transgender people because of their sex nonconforming status (Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing & Malouf 2001; Testa, Sciacca, Wang, et al 2012; Reisner, Gamarel, Nemoto & Operario, 2014; Graham, Crissman, Tocco, et al (2014).

There have been some cases, where some of the parents have admired the courage of their children to cope with the new gender identity in their daily lives despite resisted from the local community who are against these marginal groups (Connolly, 2006; Wren, 2002). However, there are several scenarios in which the mother of a child who has transgender identity assumes that their children's identity and behaviour are the result of bad parenting. Some parents see their child's ability to make an appearance as transgender without feeling embarrassed and ashamed, which is a symbol of the failure of parents to educate their children toward proper behavior, which was against to the culture and customs of common local society (Connolly, 2006). Disclosure or discoveries of their children's identity of transgender were determined in terms of give a strong impact on their family institution as an overall view (Lev, 2006).

The initial shock of their children's identity is not necessarily indicated towards rejection attitude or non-acceptance, but their parents may need a period in term of making positive decision in receiving these transgender children. However, when the parents have taken a long period of time in making decision whether to accept their children's transgender identities, but at that moment parents are likely to create a bad relationship with their children due to disagreements understanding between the two parties (Goldberg & Adriano, 2007; Lev, 2006 & Connolly, 2006). Past previous research had mentioned that not exclusively do transgender people experience lack of social support from essential close cluster group yet in addition information propose that a remarkable extent encounters undisputable dismissal experiences from own close family members and relatives because of their sexual orientation personality or expression (Bradford, Reisner, Honnold, & Xavier 2013; Graham, Crissman, Tocco, et al. 2014; Factor & Rothblum, 2007; Koken, Bimbi, & Parsons, 2009).

However in Malaysia's scenario, there are still lack or literature studies in exploring the patterns of family member's acceptance level due to their children's transgender identity existence. In the same time, there are still lack of research exploring the transgender coping strategies towards family member's acceptance level due to their transgender identity around the world especially in Malaysia. There for this research is very important in contributing towards literature studies on transgender community especially having a better understanding on transgender women coping strategies dealing with family member's acceptances and rejections due to their life style as a transgender.

Study Objective and Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted in Penang, Malaysia. The study aims to analyze patterns of family member's acceptance level due to their children's transgender identity existence. In the same time, this study aim to gather in-depth understanding on transgender coping strategies towards family member's acceptance level due to their transgender identity. Selection of 18 respondents from a snowballing sampling method has been employed due to the difficulty of getting the desired respondents. Respondent who have participated in this study were amount the youth transgender who are not infected with HIV/AIDS. The respondents' age were ranging from 18-40 years. These ranges of age were chosen as it matches the define ages of Malaysian's youth which were the ranges of 15-40 years (Institute for Youth Research Malaysia, 2012). According to Malaysia Youth Development Policy in 1997, an individual is as a youth range from 15-40 years old of age. However, the policy also specifies that youth development programs and activities are focused to young youth age between aged 18-25 in Malaysia (Malaysia Youth Development Policy, 2015). Each of the interviews from the respondents were analysed and has been transcribed carefully in order to ensure the accuracy of the data. A content analysis was conducted to better understand the emerging themes and sub-themes of the collected data.

Data Collection

The researcher conducted a total of 18 face-to-face audio-recorded interviews. Prior to the interview, the researcher verbally reviewed an information sheet with each participant, describing the nature of the study, its risks and benefits. A semi-structured interview was used as a guidance to (1)analyze patterns of family acceptance Level due to their children's transgender identity and (2) gathering Gather in-depth understanding on transgender coping strategies towards family member's acceptance level due to their transgender identity. The semi structured interview instrument has somewhat allowed participants to respond more freely and answer questions in an open-ended way.

Results

Two (2) major themes have been identified in this study. The significant findings include: The existence of family acceptance and rejection towards their children's transgender identity and (2) Transgender youth experience negative and positive coping strategies towards family member's acceptance and rejection due to their transgender identity. Discussion on the two main findings are presented and discussed in the following.

Transgender Identity Acceptance and Rejection from Family Members

In this study, a total of 7 out of 18 respondents have experienced family members' rejection due to their gender identity. From out of this 7 respondents, 3 of them have reported often being verbally abused by their parents and family members because of their gender expression especially their behaviour towards women character. Besides that, 3 respondents have experienced physically abused such as slapped and punched from their father, brother and cousin because of their gender identity. There been only one respondent reported experienced sexual harassment and almost being raped by respondent's father. For example two respondents have expressed as follows:

"My mother became very angry with me because I was expelled from my school because I was caught having oral sex with one of the boy student in my school. The moment I return home, my mother asked my cousins and brother to beat me. I had suffered minor injury in my face and body".
(Respondent 3)

"My dad always drinks alcohol in house; he always touches me in my private part. He always asks me to have sex with me. Couple of time he have attempted to raped me, even I have told about this incident to my mother but she doesn't believe my story. Sometime she beats me up because she can't accept me because of my gender expression".
(Respondent 18)

Besides experiencing family members' rejection, majority of respondent in this study (11 respondents) have reported experienced family member's acceptance due to their current transgender identity status. This is indicated from few of the respondent's statements as follows:

"So far ok my relative can accept me as a woman. They never object my character because I like to be a woman since my younger age".
(Respondent 13)

"My sister wants me to be a girl since last time. She told me that my behaviour like a women. She's working in Kuala Lumpur, whenever she comes back home, both of us will go shopping together".
(Respondent 17)

Transgender Youth Coping Strategies Towards Family Member's Acceptance and Rejection Due to their Transgender Identity

This study identified two types of coping strategies which are negative and positive coping strategies mechanism towards dealing with members' acceptance and rejection due to their gender identity. A total of 7 out of 18 respondents have experienced family members' rejection due to their gender identity. There have been reported three major types of negative behaviour which are verbally abuse, physically abuse and sexual harassment have been shown toward these 7 respondents. This was shared for example by one of the respondents:

"I and my mother are not in good terms because she cannot accept that I'm a transgender. Since childhood I was upset and stress because I have always wanted to be a girl. Every

time I acted like a girl's behaviour, my mum will beat and slap. That's why when I'm 21 years of age; I'm not going to live with them. When I was 13 years old, I manage to run away from home because of this matter" (Respondent 12)

Beside dealing with negative coping strategies mechanism, this study found that 11 out of 18 respondent have experience positive coping strategies mechanism due to their family members' acceptance towards the respondents' transgender identity. This was shared for example by one of the respondents:

"When the mother found out that I'm dressing up like a woman, mother started talking to me about this matter. So I told about my women feeling inside me and what's happening to me. After I explain to my mum, then she accepts my identity. I was relieved and happy because mother start to accept my gender identity. Then I really motivate to continue my studies until diploma level. Since that moment, whenever I have problem, I will discuss with my mom and big sister because they really understand what I'm going thru". (Respondent 5)

Discussion

Social support is a tremendous element which helps to adapt towards social problems and avoid mental health issues (Grant et al., 2011; Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011) on the grounds that it helps the individual form flexibility towards the stressor and can decrease the impacts of gender phobia. Social support can originate from any group of friends, companions, family, one's working environment, associations, religious connections, and so on (Mathews, Stansfield, & Power, 1999).

Majority of the respondents (11 respondents) have been accepted due to their transgender identity from their family member. This study indicates five types of positive coping strategies mechanism have been identified in this study which are (1) openness between family members, (2) high self-esteem, (3) interest in studies, (4) dressing up as a women and (5) motivate towards undergo sex reassignment surgery (male-to-female), when these respondent faces acceptance from their family members due to their gender identity.

(1) Openness between family members

In this research clearly shows that the respondent showed a positive reaction towards their parents who are currently aware of their gender identity. Respondent began to share their problems and feelings with their family members, especially challenges faced as a transgender. Parents begin to understand the psychosocial impact in their loved ones. Respondents acknowledged that their depression level is diminishing as a result of moral support shared by family members which bring a good social interaction between both parties.

(2) High self-esteem

This research clearly shows that some of these respondents began to have high self-confidence in their daily life after their family members began to receive their gender identity. These respondents felt full confidence in their lives without fear because their family members don't scold because of their behaviour as opposed to the original gender. Moral supports given

by members of their family have been encouraging in promoting themselves, especially seeking a good employment assorted with their gender identity and gender expression.

(3) Interest in studies

Since family members have begun to receive these respondents' gender identity and gender expression, they have started to show high interest in their academics since secondary school. During past school days, some of these respondent admitted that they were not interested in their education as a result of high rejection level in accepting their femininity personality. This situation has caused these respondents felt lack of interest in their studies during their school days.

In the current days, their family members began receiving their feminine personality and this positive event has encouraged these respondents to be interested in their studies. Some of these respondents are aware that devising good progress in education will enable them to continue their education to the next level especially postgraduate or diploma level. Besides that, they have attempted to demonstrate that with their femininity personality, they have capability of holding higher position in employment engagement. They felt that having higher education indirectly trying to promote gender equality to the local society. They try to show to the world that transgender community have same capability in improving their quality of live especially in the aspect of higher education. In this research, there are two respondents who have diploma academic level and they feels that having higher education makes that easy to seek employment engagement.

(4) Dressing up as a woman

This research clearly shows that, with the support from family members who started to accept their son's transgender personality, this action defiantly have gave them higher spirit towards wearing women's clothing in daily life. If we compare their past events, all 18 respondents were being scolded for wearing women's clothing which is considered contrary to the norms of local society, particularly men wearing women outfits. However, some of their family members have started to allow the respondent to wear women's clothing.

(5) Motivate towards undergo sex reassignment surgery (male-to-female)

Since having a long term conflict between respondents with family members as a result of the rejection of the feminine personality, finally some family members finally have decided to accept the respondents 'personality without any conditions. Family members acknowledge that these respondents are their own predecessors of their own family members and they should provide moral support for as a method in creating better family relationships. Some of these respondents have mentioned that having good relationship with their family member who accepted their gender identity, these respondents felt motivated and more eager to undergo sex change surgery in the future for the purpose of satisfying their instincts of women inside themselves which existed since childhood.

As indicated by the overview by Crant et al. (2011), 57% of respondents were essentially dismisses or excluded by their family as an results of reveling their life as transgender. Besides that, relationship with their family members seems to be warm and less communication occurred between both parties. Nevertheless good social support and appreciative between close friends

or family members can create high self-esteem during gender transition (Galupo, Bauerband et al., 2014; Galupo, Henise, & Davis, 2014).

Meanwhile this study shows that 7 out of 18 respondents have experience negative coping strategies mechanism due to their family members' rejection towards the respondents' transgender identity. When transgender person discover acknowledgment and recognition from family and companions, transgender individuals are all the more efficiently ready to incorporate their new gender identity personality into their lives. Without such social assistance, it is a great deal harder to lead optimistic and beneficial life style (Cook, 2004). A report by Valentiner, Holahan, and Moos (1994) expressed that the less access to social support an individual had, the more probable they were to utilizing avoidant adapting method, which can prompt tension and depressive signs.

Besides that, five types of negative coping strategies mechanism have been identified in this study which are (1) depression and anger, (2) low self-esteem, (3) lack of interest in studies, (4) run away from home and (5) hiding their transgender identity from family members when these respondent faces rejection from their family members due to their gender identity.

1) Depression and anger

One of the negative coping strategies mechanism faced by these respondents are going into depression stage which express lots of anger and uncontrolled emotions in their self. These respondents admitted that they felt sad due to rejection from their own family members which against their gender identity.

2) Low self esteem

According to the respondents that family members can't receive them because of their gender identity is considered shaming their family name which contrary towards the norms, culture and religion. Family members are worried about their children's. Some family member have reacted negative behaviour such as physical abuse and verbal abuse as a response of not accepting towards respondents 'gender identity. Due to this family members' rejection towards the respondents' transgender identity, some of these respondents does admit that they started to experience less confidence in their daily life. Besides that some of these respondents expressed felt hopeless and experiencing fear feeling in their daily life especially facing discrimination from local society.

(3) Lack of interest in studies

During past school days, some of these respondent admitted that they were not interested in their education as a result of high rejection level in accepting their femininity personality from their own family members and local society. This situation has caused these respondents felt lack of interest in their studies during their school days. Majority of these respondents felt not motivated in their studies because they felt not being loved from their family members. Some family member have reacted negative behaviour such as physical abuse, verbal abuse and sexual harassment as a response of not accepting towards respondents 'gender identity. These negative situations faced by these respondents have influence they behaviour towards lack of interest in studies during past secondary school time. There are some

respondents' remark that having a good education doesn't change their high rejection level in accepting their femininity personality from their own family members and local society.

(4) Run away from home

One of an approaches being used by these respondents during dealing conflict with their family members by running away from their parent's home. These respondents felt not welcome by their own family who are against with their gender identity and gender expression in daily life. Some of these respondents left their home before reaching at the age of 18 year old. By moving out from their family member's shadow, they feel happy because they can live as a women lifestyle by wearing women outfits. Besides that, majority of these respondents left their parents' home at the age of 17, after completing their secondary high school. Even though they left their parents, once in a blue moon these respondents will visit they parents because they still love their family.

(5) Hiding their transgender identity from family members

All 18 respondents does agree that in one period of time in their life, they have try to hide their gender identity and gender expression from their family members when these respondent faces rejection and social exclusion from their family members. Most of the time, these respondents use to wear women outfits whenever their family members are not around. This situation most of time have been terrifying whenever they been caught by their family members for wearing women outfits. They were been scolded and beaten as a punishment for their act which shaming their family name.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, there have been mixtures of acceptance and rejection level towards respondents' gender identity from their family members. This research showed that a total of 11 respondents stated that their family members can receive their gender identity currently. In the same time, their social relationships with their family members are in good terms. However at the beginning stage, majority of these respondents' family members of can't accept their new identity. In fact, respondents often faced conflict with family members due towards with their gender identity. But when their parents are getting older and time passes by, now their love ones currently accepted them because of their unconditional love towards them.

Besides that, this research had identified two types of coping strategies which are negative and positive coping strategies mechanism towards dealing with members' acceptance and rejection due to their gender identity. This study suggests that both government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) could play a role in educating family member and society in coping with their love one who identify as transgender. The findings of this study can be a useful guidance in terms of better understanding about younger generation who have difficulties in life due to their gender identity.

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