

Stigma, Discrimination, Treatment Effectiveness And Policy: Public Views About Drug Addiction In Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Drug addiction is almost always linked with negative views among the society, depending on one's comprehension of the depth of the problem. To date, there are limited studies done in Malaysia to evaluate public attitudes about drug addiction. It is worthwhile investigating public attitudes about drug addiction as every individual plays a part to help the battle against drugs, regardless of their social position in the society. Without collaboration from the society, the government's effort to restore Persons With Drug Addiction (PWDA) and to transform them into valuable citizens would not be accomplished because of the general public's biased state of mind that does not have the desire to acknowledge entirely, and accept the addicts. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the public views of drug addiction pertaining to four areas namely stigma, discrimination, treatment effectiveness and policy governing PWDA in Malaysia via a cross sectional study design. Results obtained from this study portrays that the public is convinced that PWDA are able to contribute to the society following recovery and the public is willing to cooperate for the wellbeing of PWDA especially in terms of supporting the advancement in policies governing PWDA. At the same time, the study also shows that public held stigma and discrimination against PWDA which can eventually deprive their basic rights for survival such as housing and employment. Hence, this study suggests that a shift is required in the attitude and mentality about how the society approaches drug addiction as it could encourage more addicts to seek treatment and rehabilitation, improving their quality of lives.

Keywords: drug addiction, stigma, discrimination, treatment effectiveness, policy

INTRODUCTION

Drug addiction is defined as a chronic, relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences and changes in the brain, which can be long lasting. These changes in the brain can lead to the harmful behaviors seen in people who use drugs (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2020). Drug addiction continues to be a major problem in Malaysia, with almost half of the Malaysian prison population of 30,000 having been indicted for various drug related offences (Chie et al., 2015). Many studies have been conducted in the past to explore the experiences of drug users themselves, for instance the factors influencing relapse to drug use after rehabilitation (Ibrahim & Kumar, 2009), motivational factors that contributes to their readiness to change after rehabilitation (Ibrahim et al., 2010) and society acceptance perceived by former drug addicts after rehabilitation (Noor & Kumar, 2017). Although it has been documented that PWDA lack the support from the society, studies investigating this aspect is still limited in our country. On that account, this study aims to investigate the views about drug addiction from the public's perspective in Malaysia which has a substantial number of PWDA. The findings obtained from this study would be beneficial for the public as it may improve the awareness about drug addiction and to be able to better understand the experiences of PWDA which are important as the public play an essential role in the promotion of recovery from both addiction and prevention of relapse. Without the cooperation from the public, it will be very difficult for PWDA to be reintegrated into the community, to find

meaningful roles and to feel useful to the society. In addition, the results gathered from this study may be resourceful for the National Antidrug Agency (NADA), Malaysia to be better able to address and manage matters related to drug addiction in Malaysia by attempting different approaches to ensure the cooperation from the public to create a country independent of drug menace. Therefore, in view of these observations, the specific objectives of this study includes to investigate whether there are stigma and discrimination among the public towards PWDA, to investigate the effectiveness of treatment provided for PWDA in Malaysia from the public's point of view and to explore public's opinion on policy support in regards to PWDA.

METHODOLOGY

Study design: A descriptive and cross-sectional study design was used to conduct this research.

Study location: The study was carried out at Kuala Lumpur Central (KL Central) whereby the management were informed beforehand that participants will be recruited from their premise.

Period of data collection: Data was collected within a period of 12 days starting on the 26th of February 2018 until 9th of March 2018.

Study population: Malaysians, aged 20 years old and above were chosen as the study population. Since, the study aims to investigate views about drug addiction, it is expected for the respondents to have a fair level of critical thinking and reasoning, therefore the cut-off age 20 is chosen (Elmore, 2012).

Sampling method: Non-probability sampling was used to obtain samples for this study. The respondents were recruited via a convenience sampling method. It was proven that convenience sampling technique is effective during exploration stage of research (Dudovskiy, 2017). Typically, convenience sampling tends to be the preferred sampling technique among students as it is inexpensive and an easy option compared to other sampling techniques (Taherdoost, 2016).

Sample size: Based on the priori method of sample size calculation analysis, a sample size of 382 is needed for the power of 0.95 (95%). However, throughout the study, only 327 respondents (n=327) suited the criteria stated and have completely answered the questionnaire distributed.

Inclusion criteria: Malaysian citizens who are 20 years old and above, who must be able to read and understand English language.

Exclusion criteria: Those who are not well-versed in English were excluded from participating in this study. People below 20 years of age and foreigners were also excluded.

Ethical clearance: Ethical clearance was obtained from Perdana University Research Committee (IRB ID: PU IRBHR0162), Serdang Campus, Malaysia.

Study instrument: A self-report questionnaire was used in which the questionnaire is comprised of two (2) sections. In the first section (Section A), respondents were asked to answer close-ended questions related to their personal particulars such as age, gender, race, religion, highest education obtained, occupation, whether or not they know any person who uses drug(s) and if the participants have taken drug(s) other than those required for medical reasons.

Whereas the questions from the second section, (Section B) was adapted from a cross sectional study conducted in America whereby the questions were adapted from the year 2006 version of General Social Survey (GSS) (Barry, McGinty, Pescosolido & Goldman, 2014). There is a total of 11 questions in this section beginning with 2 questions to assess stigma, followed by 3 questions to assess discrimination, 2 questions to get feedback

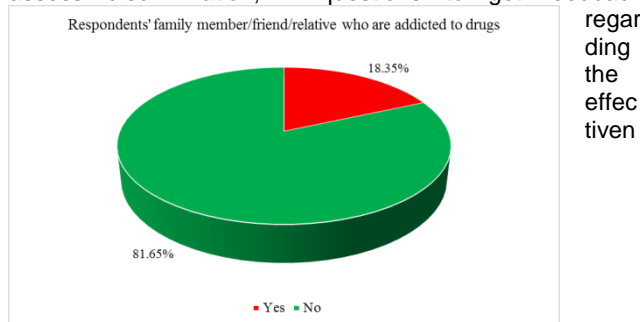


Fig. 1: Respondents' family member / friend / relative who are addicted to drugs

2. Stigma against PWDA

Results have been proven to confirm the existence of stigma among the general public against PWDA as majority of the respondents were unwilling to have PWDA marry

ess of treatment for drug addicts in Malaysia and finally 4 questions assessing on the public's opinion about policy for drug addicts in Malaysia. These are all close ended questions categorized by 7 point Likert scales. Later, the responses from the 7 point Likert scales were collapsed to dichotomous measurement for discussion purposes as how it was done in the previous study.

Method of data collection: The process of collecting data took place at KL Central where participants were recruited via convenience sampling, screened for eligibility, requested for consent and then given the questionnaire. Researcher waits until each respondent have answered the questionnaire and collected the questionnaire as soon as they have answered. All the responses are then filed for references. Once the period of data collection has ended, the data obtained from the responses were keyed-in to the SPSS statistical software for analysis.

Data analysis: All the data obtained from Section A and Section B of the questionnaire was analyzed using SPSS (Statistic Program for Windows Package Version 23.0) by using descriptive analysis. The findings obtained from Section A were illustrated in the form of pie chart with percentage (%) and numbers (n). Meanwhile the findings obtained from Section B were shown in the form of bar chart with percentage (%) and numbers (n).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Demographic data

Demographical data clearly indicates that nearly all the respondents do not know anyone in their social circle who uses drugs (n=267) compared to the number of respondents who have a family member, relative or a friend who is addicted to drugs (n=60) (Fig. 1). In terms of respondents' drugs use experiences, almost all the respondents have not used drugs other than those required for medical purposes (n=303) compared to some of them who have used drugs in the course of their lives (n=24) (Fig. 2).

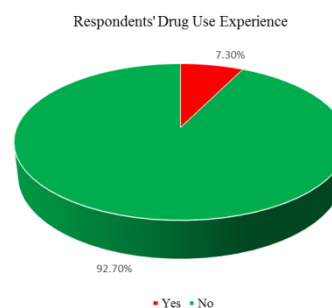


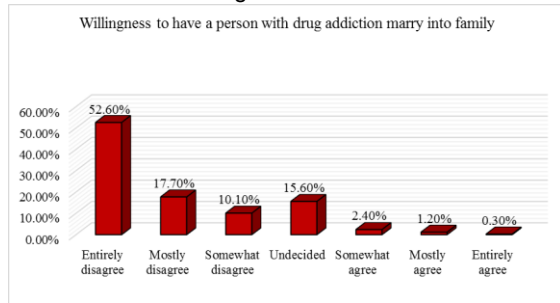
Fig. 2: Respondents' experience using drugs

into their family (80.4%) (Fig. 3). Undeniably, it is a tough experience to deal with a spouse who is addicted to drugs behaving irrationally, falling sick very often, lying, cheating, manipulating, stealing, losing job or engaging in any other

intolerable behaviors (Parrott & Parrott, 2017) which could be why people may not want to take up the risk of having PWDA into their family. Fig. 4 shows that majority of the respondents were unwilling to work closely with PWDA on a job (67.9%). It is usually common that workers with other chronic diseases like cancer or diabetes, are more accepted compared to PWDA where people would say it is due to moral failing he or she have become an addict (Grinspoon, 2018). Similarly, in a study comparing public attitudes about drug addiction and mental illness in

the respondents held significantly more negative views towards PWDA compared to those with any kind of mental illness.

Public were more skeptical about the effectiveness of treatments and were more likely to oppose policies aimed at helping drug addicts (Barry, McGinty, Pescosolido & Goldman, 2014).



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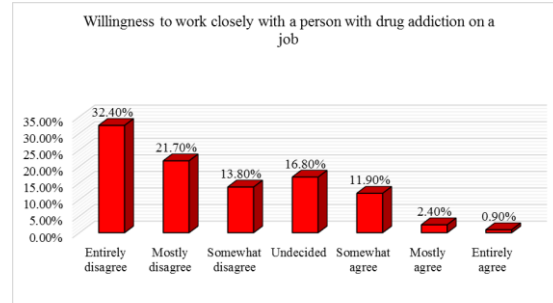


Fig. 3: Respondents' willingness to have PWDA marry into their family

Fig. 4: Respondents' willingness to work closely with PWDA on a job

3. Discrimination against PWDA

More than half of the total number of respondents has agreed that discrimination against PWDA was a serious problem (54.8%) (Fig. 5) which is a good indicator, whereby it tells us that people are aware that PWDA shouldn't be discriminated. However, the subsequent results show that most people aren't aware that they are actually discriminating PWDA through their opinions and attitudes by supporting the idea that PWDA should be denied housing (39.6%) (Fig. 6) and employment (39.4%) (Fig. 7).

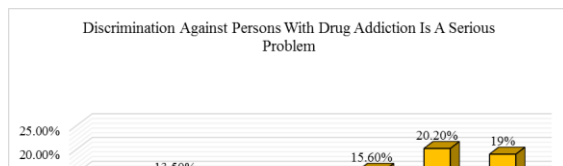


Fig. 5: Respondents' discrimination against PWDA

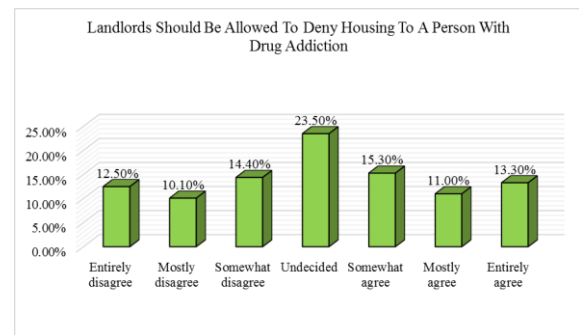


Fig. 6: Respondents' opinion on whether landlords should be given the authority to deny housing to PWDA

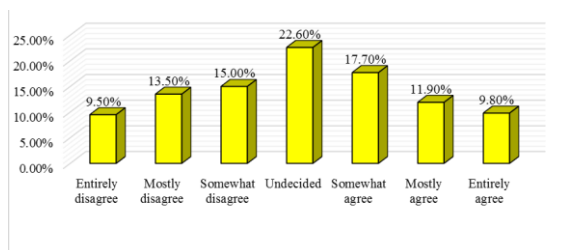


Fig. 7: Respondents' feedback on whether employers should be given the authority to deny employment to PWDA

A safe and peaceful environment could be difficult to be achieved if PWDA were neighbors (Forbes, 2014) and the one who has to deal with these pressures are the landlords when neighbors lodge complaints. However, examining from a different perspective, if PWDA were denied housing, they have no other way but to turn to the streets as they have been identified to be a vulnerable group of people to being homeless (Satkunasingam, 2014)

which can affect both their physical and mental health as it makes them more susceptible to various illnesses (Alhabshi & Abdul Manan, 2012). Although most respondents claimed that they are undecided (n=74) (22.6%), the overall results reveals that most respondents have supported that employers should be allowed to deny employment to PWDA without being aware of the fact that when they do not have a job, they will be less able to afford for drugs

which in turn, forces them to venture into crime (Kurtz, 2013). It results in drug users to have history of convictions which can again be reluctant for employers to hire them (Bauld, Hay, McKell & Carroll, 2010).

With regards to opinions about treatment effectiveness and recovery, about half of the respondents were likely to view treatment options for PWDA as effective in controlling symptoms (51.7%) (Fig. 8). Soon after the National Anti-Drugs Agency underwent a transformation from Compulsory Drug Detention Centers (CDDCs) into Cure & Care (C & C) Centers in July 2011, (Ghani et al., 2014), the C & C centers have brought about positive improvements in clients where they have reduced their drug use within a short period of time, stopped injecting drugs, practices a healthier lifestyle and avoided criminal

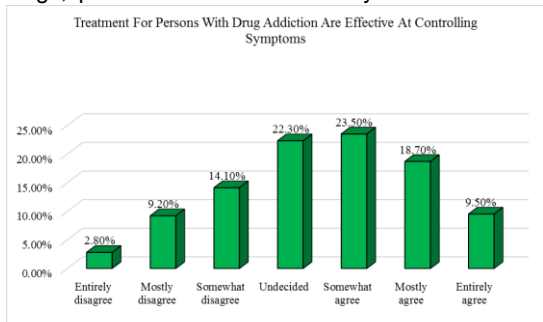


Fig. 8: Respondents' opinion on the effectiveness of treatment provided for PWDA at controlling symptoms

amed & Marican, 2014).

Similarly, nearly all the respondents in this study believed that PWDA to get well and return to productive lives (67.2%) (Fig. 9). Even people with chronic medical diseases like hypertension, diabetes and asthma also relapse and studies have shown that the relapse rates are similar to those people recovering from addiction (Sack, 2017). Former addicts need supports from the family and surrounding for not returning to drugs. Without support, the former addicts have a higher tendency to relapse because of low self-esteem and confidence (Mohamad Noor & Kumar, 2017).

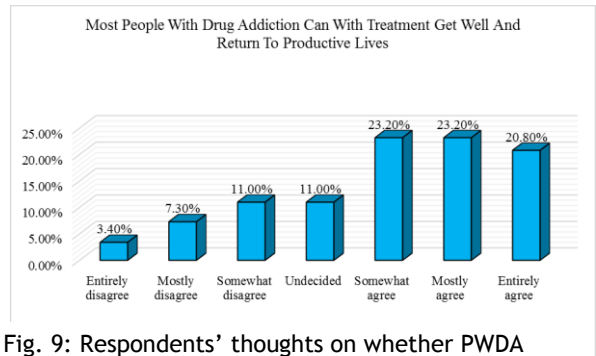


Fig. 9: Respondents' thoughts on whether PWDA can get well and return to productive lives

In terms of policy support, most of the respondents have supported that insurance companies should come forward to offer coverage for the treatment of drug addiction the same as for other medical services (46.7%) (Fig. 10). Not only it works but it is also cost effective to begin the treatment for drug addiction while patients' family lives and careers are still unbroken. By providing insurance coverage, many illnesses and injuries associated with drug addiction can be prevented from the start such as industrial and recreational injuries, hepatitis C, brain injuries, sleep disorders and end stage psychiatric disorders (Breithaupt, 2001).

Most of the respondents have suggested that the

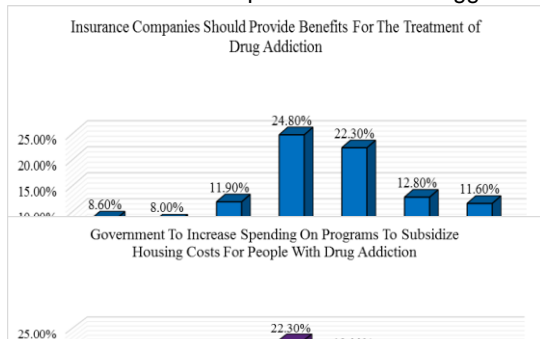


Fig. 12: Respondents' perspectives on whether government should increase spending on programs to subsidize housing costs for PWDA

Malaysian government should increase spending on the treatment of drug addiction (64.9%) (Fig. 11). Though, the government's expenditure on the costs of rehabilitation for PWDA has increased year by year (Malay Mail, 2016), the government's efforts and initiatives to fight drug addiction will go waste if there is no support from the society including families, employers and employees in the public and private sectors, educational institutions, media, community associations and NGOs which is essential to create a healthy and nurturing environment for all (Lee, 2016).

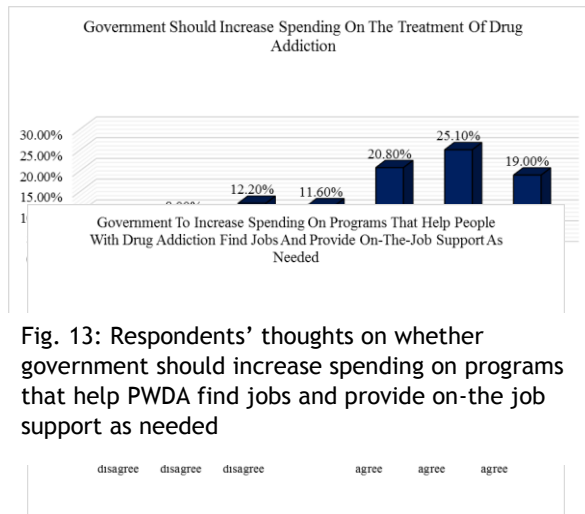


Fig. 13: Respondents' thoughts on whether government should increase spending on programs that help PWDA find jobs and provide on-the job support as needed

Most of the respondents also supported that the Malaysian government should increase spending on programs to subsidize housing costs for PWDA (42.3%) (Fig. 12) to at least curb the problems of homelessness which has been a rise in our country as affordable housing has become a major issue not only for PWDAs but for Malaysians as a whole (The Malaysian Insight, 2018) when the rate of affordable housing supply has dropped from 75% in the year 2015 to only 35% in the year of 2016 (Loh, 2017). Hence, the availability and accessibility of low income housing for those least able to compete in the housing and job market should gradually increase that does not require abstinence from drugs or engagement in mental health services as a precondition to housing (Gomez, McAuliffe, Convey, Weeks & Owczarzak, 2011).

In addition, most of the respondents encouraged that the government should increase spending on programs that help PWDA find jobs and provide on-the job support as needed (68.2%) (Fig. 13). By providing job opportunities together with on the job training for PWDA, it will ensure their contribution to the society (Yasmin, 2017) as well as to increase the local manpower and most importantly to prevent Malaysia from being too dependent on foreign workers which could turn out to be the downfall of the country's economy (Tho, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Results obtained from the study gives us a hint that it will be worthwhile to better understand how portraying drug addiction as a treatable brain disease might lower stigma and discrimination among the general public against PWDA. This is essential because, although the public may believe that PWDA are able to contribute to the society following recovery from drug addiction and are willing to cooperate on the wellbeing of PWDA especially in terms of supporting the advancement in policies governing PWDA, it may not serve actual purpose if the public continues to have stigma and discrimination against PWDA which can eventually deprive their basic rights for survival such as employment and housing. By understanding that addiction is a progressive brain disease, people should realize that it can take time for the brain to heal and normalize. Therefore, it is time for everyone including families, employers and employees in the public and private sectors, educational institutions, media, community associations and NGOs to work together in unity to fight the ongoing war against drug addiction in order to create a healthy and nurturing environment for all.

Limitation of the research: The study however has several limitations such as small number of samples, the chosen location for data collection was only confined to one place or state with is Kuala Lumpur and only the basic descriptive statistics were utilized for analysis.

Recommendation for Further Research: A few recommendations can be considered while expanding the study in the future. For example, using a larger number of samples reaching out to Malaysian citizens all over the country. Besides, researcher(s) may opt for a web-based method of data collection as samples can be easily recruited via the Internet. Lastly, since our country comprises of a multiracial and multicultural society, it would

be interesting to explore a correlation to investigate the relationship between variables such as types of religion and the differences in the views about drug addiction.

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