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Social Well-Being of Juvenile Sex Offenders with Conduct Issues in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents' ability to converse and form meaningful connections with others, as well as to keep up a social network that helps them to avoid isolation, is greatly aided by their level of social well-being. Juvenile delinquents with conduct disorder exhibit more psychopathology and commit more serious crimes than those without a conduct disorder diagnosis. However, it has been proven that positive peer interactions lessen behaviour problems in adolescents where the negative behaviour in teenagers can be diminishes with increased peer support. To explore how the juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues socialized with peers, seven juvenile sex offenders between the age of 14 to 17 with conduct issues were participated in interviews. The data were collected from two detention centers in Selangor and Perak, Malaysia, and analysed using thematic analysis. This study found that social well-being includes social interaction, peers support, closeness in peer relationships, peer acceptance, and a sense of belonging among juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues in detention centers. It is concluded that social well-being is vital in building emotional resilience among juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues. Positive social well-being allows adolescents to move forward and self-growth while negative social well-being regresses the individual in cognitive, and socio-emotional development. The findings demonstrated the significance of adolescents' social well-being, which helps them maintain their health and develop social and emotional abilities in the detention centre.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature on positive relationship. Although there are many past researches on this variable, this paper discusses in the positive psychology perspectives.

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1. Introduction

Social well-being is defined as a measure of how individuals interact with others and create meaningful relationships (Cicognani, 2014). In general, humans have the basic need to belong and to connect. Over the years where society has changed, human social interaction has diminished. When someone has a meaningful connection, the researcher claimed that this individual tends to eat healthier, exercise more, and is less likely to smoke or involve in criminal activities (Martino et al., 2017). Having others to rely on for support helps an individual to manage their stress (Li et al., 2021). It has also shown that people with strong social networks have a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, arthritis, and infections (Xia & Li, 2018). Social wellness also played a vital role in mental health. For example, those who have meaningful relationships experienced happiness whereas those who isolated themselves showed higher risks of depression, anxiety, and suicide (Wang et al., 2018). Not to forget, social engagement keeps the brain healthy as a person ages. It reduced the risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease (Zhou et al., 2018). Therefore, social well-being plays a significant role in the development of adolescents. This helps individuals communicate and develop meaningful relationships with people around them while maintaining a support network that allows overcome loneliness (Davis, 2019). Peer support is essential throughout adolescent development (Wang et al., 2021). Researchers also found that youth's negative behavior decreases when they receive more peer support. For example, having a friend pour their hearts out and share a similar interest in feeling connected helps the person cope with things in their life where they need emotional support. When it comes to an individual, an individual perceives others by the impression others give them. Children and adolescents seek validation from peers in the given environment due to the need to fit in the crowd and accept.

A sex crime is a severe crime involving sexual assault, molesting, rape, and sexual conduct with a minor (McCartan & Richards, 2021). This crime applies to adults, youth, and adolescents (Reale et al., 2019). Sex crime that juvenile sex offenders commit is usually between the ages of 14 to 18. In 2020, Malaysia's sexual crime rate dropped by nine percent (1,582 cases) compared with 2019, and this percentage is a total of adults and adolescents who committed sex crimes whereas children involved in crime increased by 10.5 percent (5,342 cases) compared with a year before (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). Juvenile sex offenders against peers or adults often have histories of non-sexual criminal offenses such as general delinquent and conduct disorder (Kaltiala et al., 2022). These juveniles showed higher levels of aggression and violence compared to adolescents involved in sexual crimes against children (Rosa et al., 2018). While juveniles who sexually offend children generally displayed more severe personality or psychosexual disturbance as they have been characterized as suffering from deficits in self-esteem and social competency (Lillard, et al., 2019). It was also shown that juveniles who had victimization histories suffered from depression and expressed less emotional indifference toward the needs of others than peers (Jolliffee et al., 2019). Etiological factors were believed to be the reason for juvenile sex offenders' developmental such as maltreatment experiences, exposure to pornography, substance abuse, and exposure to aggressive role models (Siria et al., 2020). Juveniles who committed sex offenses will locate in either prison integrity or detention center depending on the crime that has been committed by the teenagers (Nagamuthu et al., 2019). Juvenile delinquents who committed sex crimes and murder are most likely to be placed in prison integrity while other juvenile sex offenders who did not commit murder will be placed in the detention center (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat Malaysia, n.d.). In

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Malaysia, committed crimes by individuals will be depending on the Penal Code (Act 574) and serve their sentence based on Prison Act 1995 (Act 537) and Child Act 2001 (Act 611). Individuals who committed sex crimes will be sentenced under sections 375, 376, or 377. Tunas Bakti Schools (TBS) and Henry Gurney Schools (HGS) are the only detention centers in Malaysia. Juvenile delinquents under section 91(1)(f) Child Act 2001 will be sent to HGS under the Malaysian Prison Department (JPM) while those under section 65 Child Act 2001 will be sent to TBS under the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia (JKMM) (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat Malaysia, n.d.).

Conduct disorder (CD) is defined as a repetitive, persistent pattern of severe aggressive and antisocial behaviors (Martel, 2018). Adolescents diagnosed with conduct disorder may have co-occurring problems such as academic deficiencies, poor peer relations, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Pardini & Fite, 2010). Early-onset CD has been found to be strongly associated with a significant decline in educational performance and remaining socially isolated with an increase in substance misuse during adolescence. It was found that children with early-onset CD have lower IQ than later-onset CD and boys are more likely to have CD (Sagar et al., 2019). There is about 50 percent of children and adolescents with conduct disorder develop antisocial personality disorder (APD) (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), 2017). While conduct disorder is a mental and behavioral disorder and the delinquent is a legal term, some juvenile delinquents may be diagnosed with conduct disorder (Kivi, 2022). In Pakistan, there were over a hundred children sentenced to death with or without mental disorders due to the crime they committed, and Pakistan does not have enough juvenile prisons and imprisoned the children in adult prison which caused more harm to the child mentally and physically (Hasan & Adil, 2020). Juvenile delinquents with conduct disorder show more psychopathology and commit severe crimes than those who do not diagnose with conduct disorder (Choi et al., 2017). There is also a limited reach of intervention or the help that is needed for juvenile delinquents with psychiatric disorders although there is a high percentage of more than half who are diagnosed with conduct disorder among the young offenders. Therefore, it needs a new study to focus on juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues of their social well-being in the detention center.

Social stigma plays a huge role in influencing an individual's mindset, behavior, and belief. Social stigma has existed since the late nineteenth century (Chandrashekhar, 2020). Furthermore, stigma involves discrimination, stereotyping, prejudice, and negative attitudes against an individual based on their characteristics (Caddell, 2020). Discrimination and stereotyping have been there for centuries. Researchers found that ex-offenders tend to suffer from all the consequences of how others perceive them as they are trying to be employed. Living a life that influences an individual's belief system, behavior, and thinking are part of social norms. These beliefs tend to have both negative and positive impacts on an individual. For instance, a child is isolated by a group of his classmates due to his clothes to school. His parents bought the clothes from a thrift shop where pre-loved items are placed there. Based on research, children aged 11-12 have lower self-esteem when they experience stigma at an early stage (An et al., 2020). Children accepted and continued to live with the stigma of the way society sees them. In conclusion, this leads the researcher to study juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues and social well-being in the detention center in Malaysia.

In the current study, social well-being is linked with the mental health of an individual. Poor social well-being showed a higher risk of depression, antisocial behavior, and

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suicide (Nguyen et al., 2019). Social deprivation and isolation were found to have effects on the brain of adolescents and their behavior compared to other stages of their development (Orben et al., 2020). While placing juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues in the detention center, without proper support and care given to these individuals, there is a higher chance they will be the risk factors. The objectives are to explore the social well-being and the challenges of juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues in Sekolah Tunas Bakti under the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia (JKMM). The purpose is to promote healthier social wellness among juvenile delinquents with mental health issues and to cope with the challenges faced in the detention center.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design and Participants

A qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach was adopted to achieve the objectives of this study. Phenomenology is the collection and analysis of individual experiences related to a specific phenomenon from their point of view. This approach is used to understand the human factor and provides an explanation of how people experience a phenomenon and placed it into context.

2.2. Sampling

Criterion sampling was used to recruit the participants in this study. The participants were selected based on the inclusion such as, aged between 14 to 17, male, sex offenders, and have at least three out of 15 criteria such as having forced someone into sexual activity, having been physically cruel to people, and being often truant from school, beginning before age 13 years in the past 12 months under conduct disorder (CD) based on DSM-V within the past 12 months. The criterion sampling was used to recruit the participants as not all juvenile sex offenders to show symptoms of conduct disorder.

2.3. Sample

Seven Malay male juvenile sex offenders between the age of 14 to 17 years old were recruited in this qualitative study. There was a total of 20 male juvenile sex offenders involved in the screening process while seven of them were selected to participate in the interview based on the screening result. The Table 1 below present the details of the participants:

Table 1: Demographic Information

Participant (P)	Age (N)	’eriod in Detention Cente	Type of Offense
P1	15	Six months	Sexual assault
P2	17	Six months	Rape
P3	17	Seven months	Sexual assault
P4	14	Three months	Rape
P5	15	Two months	Rape
P6	15	Eight months	Sodomy
P7	17	Two months	Sexual intercourse

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2.4. Data Collection Procedure

The interviews were conducted at Sekolah Tunas Bakti (STB) in Sungai Besi, Selangor and Taiping, Perak. Permission from the *Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat* (JKM, Social Welfare Department) (JKMM 100/12/5/2: 2022 / 495) and Sekolah Tunas Bakti in Selangor and Perak was obtained with written approval. Before the data collection, the information letter and consent form were given to the participants. All participants signed an informed consent form to protect their identity and to ensure the transparency of the sample selection process. After receiving their consent, the participants were asked to answer the questionnaire. The researcher selected participants that have at least three symptoms of conduct disorder based on the DSM-V for the one-to-one interview session. The interview sessions were audio recorded for transcription and data analysis purposes with the consent of the participants.

2.5. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report recurring patterns within the data collecting, categorized as distinct themes under which the relevant portions of information belong (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For themes to be extracted from the data, detailed information was required; the purpose of the extracted themes was to answer the research questions posed in this study.

3. Results

This study found a total of five themes such as social interaction, peers support, closeness in peer relationships, peer acceptance, and sense of belonging that are related to the research questions of the study.

3.1. Social Interaction

All seven participants reported that they socialized with other detainees who did not fall under the same category of offense as them. Four participants stated that they initiated the conversations by asking for basic information about their peers such as asking their names, the participants introduced themselves, and the reason their peers were in the detention centers. One participant stated that they interact with their peers by doing the activity together such as attending baking workshops. One participant stated that he gets along easily with anyone in the detention center which makes it easier for him to socialize around. One participant also stated that they had similar backgrounds such as they came from the same village.

> *I ask them why they are there then we started the conversation. It has been 6 months since we are friends. (Participant 2)*

During the time in the detention center, all seven participants socialized with their group of friends by doing activities together in the detention center by going for workshop training, sports activities, having deep conversations before bedtime, watching television, and learning new skills. All participants make the initiation to invite their peers to spend time together.

> *We spend time together by going to workshop training together, leisure, mealtime, and telling jokes to one another… Sports, go for the workshop,*

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and keeping one another accompanied by spending quality time together during this time… I just go to them and invite them if they want to go workshop together. If the person does not want to go, I ask someone else to go together with because maybe the person who does not want to go may be busy because some tasks are required to complete. (Participant 1)

3.2. Peers Support

All seven participants reported that they rely on one another during their time in the detention center through emotional support, financial support, physical support, sharing knowledge, teaching one another new skills, and supporting peers academically. Three participants reported that the reason they chose their peers as their friends were because their peers provide them with emotional support.

For example, we only get a supplier for soap once a year. So, if finish using the soap, ill share my soap with them. (Participant 3)

During the down times, all the participants reported that they provide emotional support to one another. Three participants reported that their peers would comfort them by entertaining them by joining karaoke sessions, telling them some jokes just to make them laugh, or watching television together. One participant reported that he received a gift from his peer so that the participant feels better.

We just watch tv together to show that we are there for one another by accompanying them when they are sad… They will ask me as they see me a little differently that day. They will ask me if we can talk about it… I remember how my friend spent almost every day by my side to make sure I am really alright because I was going through a tough time. (Participant 5)

3.3. Closeness in Peer Relationship

In the detention center, the three participants stated that their relationships with their peers were like family as they treat one another like brothers. Another four participants described their closeness with their peers were remarkably close to the point that they do activities together while the other two remaining participants stated that they were not close with their peers but close enough that they spend time together.

We treat one another like siblings. That is how close we are. (Participant 3)

3.4. Peer Acceptance

Two out of five participants reported that they do not have any in common as they accept one another as who they are. The remaining five participants reported that they accepted their peers due to similarities in personality, interests, and family background.

We do not have much in common, but we accept one another and respect one another. (Participant 5)

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Six out of seven participants then reported that it was not difficult for them to stay friends with someone who they have a conflict with. On the other hand, one participant reported that it was difficult for him to stay friends with a person who he had a conflict with.

> *It is easy for me to continue to stay as a friend with that person because I've known him for long enough. (Participant 7)*

3.5. Sense of Belonging

Four out of seven reported that they were fearful of losing their circle of friends if their peers abandoned them. One out of the four participants stated that he was afraid that his peers may hold grudge against him. However, three participants reported that they were not afraid of their peers rejecting them as one participant stated that he still has other friends to associate with.

> *Yes, I am because I do not like to feel of being abandoned by them and they hold grudge against me. (Participant 1)*

4. Discussion

The study aims to discover and describe the social well-being of juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues in Malaysia.

4.1. Juvenile Sex Offenders with Conduct Issues in Socializing with Peers

In the detention center, forced socialization is used to create a new social identity for the delinquents. This contributed to the individuals unconsciously adapting and socializing with other delinquents since juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues had to serve their sentence of three years. The previous finding stated that individuals with conduct issues will have difficulty getting along with other delinquents in the detention center as they show aggression in behavior when things do not go in their way (Healy, 2018). The detention centers in Malaysia have better exposure compared to those in western countries such as the United States of America (Singer et al., 2022). Conversely, the findings reported that these groups of delinquents socialized with their peers as others do whereas delinquents with conduct issues learned to interact by doing activities together, accept one another, and are dependent on one another.

Socialization among peers also helps to develop personality and human potential in learning about society and culture. It also contributes to individuals' happiness level when they interact with their peers to create meaningful friendships. Secondary socialization is when adolescents socialized outside of the home setting which often starts with school (Perez-Felkner, 2013). Through the school setting, adolescents will try to fit in and try out different peer groups that make them look good or feel good and even those who accept them (Ciranka & Bos, 2019). They will imitate what their peers do just to make their peers think they have similarities (Riedijk & Harakeh, 2018). Even so, adolescents measure their self-worth by getting the approval and attention of their peers to make others think highly of them. This will often mislead adolescents in the wrong direction of character development and personality. In this context, juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues re-socialized with their peers in the detention center where they were under a controlled environment that gives them a new identity by

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reapplying the norms, values, and beliefs to build up a whole new person. For example, juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues were asked to treat one another as family members where they show care and love to their peers instead of going against one another. Peer group also helps to mold the types of traits the adolescent ends up with (Selvam, 2017). For example, adolescents found themselves changing to be better people due to the peer group with a positive impact. To conclude, good social well-being is depending on positive social interaction and good influence from peer groups to support juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues in the detention center.

4.2. Challenges Faced by Juvenile Sex Offenders with Conduct Issues When They Socialize with Peers

There are many times when juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues face challenges just like any delinquents in the detention center when it comes to peer conflict (Hoban, 2019). When both understanding level does not match, it will end up in conflict. Peer conflict such as miscommunication and stepping over the limit causes two individuals to involve themselves in an argument. Furthermore, the effects of conduct issues on juvenile delinquents are when these individuals have difficulty controlling their aggressive behavior when they are in conflict (Xie et al., 2020). Aggressive behavior involves physical violence that injures other individuals which may cause the break of peer relationships. Harsh language or usage of words can also harm their peer relationship where words can be either as sweet as honeycomb or as sharp as a sword. In addition, peer conflict can be challenging where problem-solving, and compromising were not what they are expecting. To empathize, give and take can be difficult skills to learn but it also teaches them to control their emotions and learned to be compromising. Not only resolving conflict is challenging but also a longer timeframe to resolve the issue leads to bigger conflicts that will occur over time (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2020). To bump into one another every day in the detention center while the conflict is not resolved will create friction in their friendship. This is when effective communication skills and regulating emotions played an important role in contributing to good social well-being. As well as it takes two or more individuals to have mutual understanding and concessions to resolve the conflict.

Poor social well-being can lead to social isolation and increase the risk of mental health issues where juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues like depression and anxiety (Loades, et al., 2020). Cognitively, the person will decline in their school performance and verbal ability (Umbach et al., 2018). It was supported that juvenile delinquents' recidivism and reincarceration are based on the social group that they fit into. It is either their peers who help them to grow or decline in social development and mental health. It was proven that bigger groups create loneliness while smaller peer groups showed strong peer relationships (Asher & Paquette, 2003). Other researchers found that social isolation occurs when their peer group shows sudden violence toward them (Tomé et al., 2012). Individuals in an abusive relationship tend to avoid contact with their friends and family due to the unwillingness to reveal their real situation. A lack of peers does lead to social isolation (Lynn Mulvey et al., 2017). For example, a delinquent only has one friend to rely on and trust. When that friend is released from the detention center, the delinquent feels empty when their one and only friend is not there with them.

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5. Implication of Study

Unquestionably, social relationship places an important role from the moment an individual attend school at the age of four when the individuals exposed themselves to people who are not their immediate family members such as parents and siblings. From the age of 4 to 17, individual imitated their peers' actions, and the usage of words are the source of learning social interaction. As the child developed their social development, the child tends to input things that they assumed it is fun and beneficial to them, but it can also harm them when they are not properly aware of the dos and don'ts. Theoretically, juvenile delinquents were created due to environmental factors. Other factors that could contribute to the choices made by adolescents to involve in such situations is the thrill that boosts their endorphins such as taking drugs and taking a risk by falling from a high distance. Some adolescents like challenges and go against the norms of society on how to live their life. For example, going to school, getting good grades, getting into higher education, getting into a nine-to-five job, and forming a happy family.

Apart from this, adolescents are still at the stage of discovering themselves as there are major pressures around them such as family, peers, and society. It is discussed that pressures can be positive and negative. Positive pressures allow the adolescent to move forward and self-growth while negative pressures regress the individual in cognitive, and socio-emotional development. For example, constant mental abuse by talking down adolescents will lead them to self-doubt, low self-esteem, low confidence, and the feeling of losing their identity as a person. Educators and parents should take note in guiding and supporting the child in developing their values and beliefs so that the child brings out their inner strength to face the challenges.

6. Conclusion

Healthy social well-being includes social interaction, peers support, closeness in peer relationships, peer acceptance, and a sense of belonging among juvenile sex offenders with conduct issues in detention centers. Social well-being helps these individuals to cope with difficult times where it builds healthy, nurturing, and supportive relationships. A supportive social network helps these individuals to develop assertive skills and become comfortable with who they are in the social situation by surrounding themselves with a positive social network that increases their self-esteem. It also enables them to create boundaries that encourage communication, trust, and conflict management where having good social well-being is vital to building emotional resilience.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Department of Psychology, UCSI University.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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