

## The Sharing of Life Experience of Female Adolescent Delinquent Using Expressive Arts Therapy in Counselling Sessions

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to explore and understand the life experiences of young women involved with delinquent behaviours by using expressive arts therapy. Seven young women aged between 16 and 18 years old placed in the Tunas Bakti School were selected using purposive sampling. All study participants underwent the expressive art therapy in counselling groups. This study used a phenomenological method for understanding the experiences of their lives better. The strategy of triangulation of data from a variety of sources such as interviews, observation and document analysis were used to collect data. The findings have identified a number of themes which are family dynamics, risky behaviours and criminal activities, formal education, abuse, psychological issues and appreciation of religious. The implications of the findings are also discussed.

**Key words:** Expressive arts therapy, adolescents, delinquency, phenomenology, group counselling

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### INTRODUCTION

Delinquency among adolescents is one of the social issues that are often turned into a debate in society and politics. This phenomenon is widespread among adolescents so quickly in line with the current state modernization. Basically, delinquent behaviour is not acceptable and it has caught the public attention. Different cultures have different laws or regulations as well as the understanding of the delinquency. Delinquency can also be given a different meaning according to respective cultural group (Mohamad *et al.*, 2013).

Delinquency refers to behaviours which violate the criminal law committed by a person under the age of eighteen (Houston and Barton, 2005). In the United States, many states define an underage child as a person under the age of 17 or 18 years old (Siegel *et al.*, 2003) while Houston and Barton (2005) defined the individuals aged 7-18 years old who participate with criminal activities as delinquent teenagers. Cheney and Sheldon (2014) pointed out that in general, delinquent behaviour is deviant in terms of the norms of society and violates criminal codes and laws that have been defined.

For the Malaysian legal system, a juvenile is defined as a person under the age of 18 and prescribed under the criminal procedure to be treated differently from adults as specified under the Child Act Malaysia.

Therefore, given the fact that this study concerns the delinquent behaviours in Malaysia, the discussion of this phenomenon is within the scope of Malaysian perception. Delinquent behaviours can range from abusive behaviours such as misconducts of school rules, skipping school, truancy, smoking and vandalism to more serious crimes such as theft, robbery, drug abuse, rape and possession of weapons (Choon *et al.*, 2013). Whilst boys are more likely to engage in delinquent juvenile offenses but the percentage of committed delinquent offenses by teenage girls also recorded an increase (Quinsey *et al.*, 2004).

The number of cases of young women involved with delinquent behaviours has also recorded a year-on-year increase of 138 cases which were reported in 2002, 179 cases in 2003 and it rose again to 380 cases in 2004, 514 cases in 2005, 523 cases in 2006 and 673 cases in 2007. Similarly, the report of a study conducted by the Social Institute of Malaysia reported that cases of misconduct among girls increased within three years since 2005, an increase of 673 cases over the past two years with 523 cases in 2006.

In addition, there are many previous studies that found most adolescents who engage in this behaviour are those who do not get sufficient attention from the family. Most juvenile delinquent parents also do not show affection to them and do not have a close bond with their children (Brook *et al.*, 2001).

Most past studies often discussed delinquent behaviours by looking at the impact on individuals and communities (Mayer, 2001; Pisecco *et al.*, 2001; Wikstrom and Loeber, 2000) as compared to their own opinion on the action, responding to teenagers, seeing the involvement in delinquent behaviour with regard to their desire, perceptions, feelings, things that are required by them in life, a meaning for their life and life experience from the perspective of those involved with delinquent behaviours. Their perception, behaviours and feelings should be understood so that their implicit feelings can be disassembled and revealed. This is because sometimes they are not able to convey their thoughts and feelings verbally to adults (Graham and Sontag, 2001). In this context, researchers are trying to use the expressive art therapy such as the media to understand the experience of adolescents who are involved in delinquency. Through these works of art, the teenagers can express their feelings and thoughts through certain symbolic forms (Bennink *et al.*, 2003; Howard, 2001). Expression through creative arts can provide a space for adolescents who are experiencing a crisis in life to form an imagination which represents images naturally according to their creativity (Graham and Sontag, 2001).

Many previous studies used expressive arts therapy in order to provide relief to patients and study participants in solving a variety of contexts and difficulties faced by them (Evangelista, 2013; Hughes, 2010; Lazzari *et al.*, 2005; Malley *et al.*, 2002). Malchiodi (2008) defined expressive arts therapy as the use of various forms of art such as dance, drama, painting, music, colouring, photography, sculpture, writing, bibliotherapy, theatre and sand castles which belong within the context of psychotherapy, counselling, rehabilitation or medical. Additionally, sometimes art therapy is also referred to as the 'integrated approach' or 'Multimodal Approach' which combines two or more expressive tools in raising awareness, encouraging emotional development and improving relationships with others (Malchiodi, 2008).

The use of expressive arts therapy in this study refers to an artistic medium used in the counselling group to understand the life experiences of young women involved with delinquent behaviours.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Study design:** Based on the study's objectives, phenomenological approach was chosen to explore and understand in depth the life experiences of delinquent teenagers. According to Grbich (2007), phenomenology is an approach that can be used when a study is trying to

understand the underlying meaning and essence of an experience together with the ways the participants deal with it.

**Participant:** A total of seven teenage girls involved with delinquent behaviours between the ages of 16 and 18 who were detained in rehabilitation centres were selected by purposive sampling (purposive sampling). In purposive sampling, the researchers deliberately chose individuals and places to learn and understand the main phenomena (Creswell, 2008). All participants underwent group counselling sessions using the expressive arts therapy sessions 8 times. Each session took about 2 h. Some artistic activities which were carried out in this study were names collage technique, map of life sketch, extreme negative feelings and thoughts butterfly stories and waves painting.

**Data collection:** Data for this study were collected from three series of interviews with teenage girls involved with delinquency. Each interview took about 90-120 min. The conducted interviews in this study were based on in-depth interviews grounded by phenomenology. This approach combines the participants' life history interviews, in-depth and focused interviews to obtain information from responses drawn from phenomenology. Interview process conducted in this study was based on interview model which was developed by Seidman (1998). In addition to the sources of interview, this study also used the observation of group sessions using Expressive Arts Therapy and also diary writing. The use of multiple sources of data is a form of triangulation of various sources and strengthening of data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). All stored data were given certain symbols and indices that have a specific meaning for a review at the data analysis stage.

**Data analysis:** The data obtained were analysed through several stages. In the first stage, data analysis was performed simultaneously with the process of data collection being carried out. The second stage of data analysis in this study was based on phenomenological analysis following Giorgi and Giorgi procedures (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003). Results were obtained through verbatim transcript of the interview in question until the findings of the themes.

**Validity and reliability:** The process of validity and reliability studies have been carried out through a process of triangulation, a long term study, peer review and audit trail. Patton (2002) and Merriam (2001) identified four



Fig. 1: Participants' artistic products

types of triangulation which can be performed in a qualitative study but in the context of this study, the triangulation of data was done where data were collected through three series of in-depth interviews, observations and analysis of documents such as journal writing, paintings, the study participants' handicrafts and researchers' field notes. In addition, peer review was used as well to confirm the study findings (Merriam, 2001). Finally is the audit trail. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that an audit trail is an important category that needs to be taken into account by any qualitative researcher (Fig. 1).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show several common themes have emerged in this study. Although, these themes are the study participants' experiences, it also provides ideas to other teenagers about how the participants see, understand and react to their life experiences. To conserve confidentiality, the identity of the study participants was changed (name).

**Theme 1; Family dynamics:** Participants in the study shared experiences about their family dynamics. Some of the frequently shared family issues among the subjects were initiated from their parents who involved in crimes and the use of prohibited substances, turmoil and domestic violence that occur between parents, divorce, polygamy, poverty and hardship in many cases, parental neglect, shallow relationships and some of them were betrayed by their own parents.

Salma started her sharing session with the tales of her life by describing how she was brought up in a poor family and often there were upheaval and violence between her mother and father. Salma's mother was beaten by her father and ended up in a coma and not only

that, her father also set fire to their house because of getting too angry with her mother. The marriage ended in divorce. These conditions were some of the factors that made Salma kept drifting away in her life until she was finally veered into the wrong path. Salma expressed:

Salma: "... We lived miserably because dad never provided my siblings and I anything. Our life was poverty-stricken due to his lack of responsibilities towards his own wife and children. He always looked for our flaws. Pity mom, she was once beaten so bad that she ended up in a coma for three months. Mom suffered many fractured bones because of the strong blow from the hammer that dad used..."

Meanwhile, Khaty told the group that she grew up in an atmosphere full of negative elements imposed by her own father. Khaty has a hardcore drug addict father who often goes in and out of rehabilitation centres due to drug consumption cases.

Khaty: "... Ever since I was a young and naïve little girl, I have started to know drugs, cigarettes, alcohol, injections, fighting and others. I knew drugs and cigarettes from papa. When I was three years old, papa always asked me to buy cigarettes from the shop. I often observed the ways he smoked and later I also tried it..."

The agitated life experienced by Zaza started when she was taken away by her biological mother when she became a teenager. Before that, Zaza was raised by her adoptive mother until the age of 13 years. Zaza was handed over to her adoptive mother because Zaza's biological family was very poor and could not afford to raise Zaza. However, Zaza was frustrated and

disappointed over the attitude of her mother who was persistent in separating her from her adoptive mother acted when Zaza has grown up. Zaza expressed:

Zaza: "...When I was in school, all of a sudden my biological mother showed up and took me away from my foster family. I was totally surprised. I never thought such thing could happen to me. I opted not to follow my biological mother but I was still forced to go her house. I was so sad I had to be separated from my foster parents..."

**Theme 2; Risky behaviours and criminal activities:** The subjects of the study shared their life experiences which involved risky behaviour and criminal activities such as aggressiveness, pornography, suicide attempts, sexual conducts, pregnancy, miscarriage and out of wedlock birth, involvement with gangsters, running away from home, stealing, taking forbidden materials, illegal racing, hanging around aimlessly, pengkid and promiscuity. They also noted how the influence of friends, boyfriends and living environment are the main factors that have stimulated them to engage in such behaviours.

For Khaty, the situation made her disillusioned with her previous life and she then decided to experience temporary satisfaction by meeting friends and running away from home. The influence of friends encouraged Khaty to get involved with illegal racing, smoking and prohibited substances such as alcohol and ecstasy pills. Khaty expressed:

Khaty: "... I began to 'rempit' (illegal racing) when I was 15 years old, after moving into a new house. I got to know many bikers. I hung out with them, having drinks at the cafes and I got home really late at night. Sometimes I didn't even go home at all..."

Due to depression, Lily had once tried to commit suicide because of her father's ruthless attitude and led to her turning rebellious and ran away from home. As a result, Lily started to get involved with various social negative misconducts. Lily began to make friends and had a boyfriend and ventured out at night as well as started taking banned substances. The influence of friends and living environment has taught Lily to be acquainted with tobacco, alcohol and ecstasy pills. Lily expressed:

Lily: "...Ever since I became friends with him, I have learned so many things. For example, I began going out late, hung out and met my boyfriend down town or anywhere. My boyfriend once taught me to take 'ice'..."

After a string of abuses and emotional stress, Kamelia ran away from home and sought friends for a place to grumble. That move was the beginning of an episode that led Kamelia getting involved with social behaviours and negative activities. She was raped by a male friend, took prohibited substances, was involved in illegal racing and had no restraints of having sex with her boyfriend or any man who asked her. Kamelia expressed:

Kamelia: "... That night I didn't go home. I didn't want it at the time but my boyfriend insisted and wanted me to prove to him that I was still a virgin and because I wanted to prove it, I gave myself to him. Before I know it, I began to feel thrilled to have sex... I used to tag along when he went to illegal races... I also started to know drugs and alcohols since I was 15 years old..."

Rina's risky behaviours and criminal activities began when she stayed with her aunt. She started to hang out with friends in the neighbourhood. She started to go against her aunt, mingled freely with friends and indulged in prohibited substances for happiness, enjoyment and satisfaction in life. Rina expressed:

Rina: "... I used to go out at night quite often, hanging out with friends. I took drugs once. My boyfriend was the one who taught me to take drugs through injections..."

**Theme 3; Abuse:** All of the study subjects shared their experiences of physically, emotionally and sexually abused. All of them repeatedly mentioned and described the experiences which have caused traumatic effects and affected emotions in their lives. They said that the experience of physically, emotionally and sexually abused was an unforgettable, bitter experience. In fact, the experience is one of the factors that encouraged them to get involved in delinquent behaviours and unhealthy activities. Physical abuse committed by Lily's foster father has led to frequent truancy. The bruises caused by his ruthless beatings had triggered Lily with shame and fear that her teachers would ask questions. Ultimately, this matter was found out by her school teachers. Lily said:

Lily: "... One day, I went to school and many friends asked what had happened to me but I said nothing happened. I hid myself when my teacher asked and the next day, I was taken to meet the discipline teacher and he saw the bruises on my face..."

In the meantime, Kamelia also recounted her experiences as a victim of physical and emotional abuse by her stepmother and brothers. Kamelia's father was unaware that she was always beaten, scolded and yelled at by her stepmother because she was too busy with work. Kamelia stated:

Kamelia: "... Mom (stepmother) used to slap me and pull my hair. When I was hit, it felt so upsetting and painful. My eldest brother also used to hit me and there were bruises on my face and body. I was beaten, slapped and my hair pulled..."

For Fifi, her life got worse when one horrible, unforgettable incident happened to her. She was molested and almost raped by a schoolmate at the age of 10 years old. Fifi was then accused of being the cause and encouraged her friends to do it. Fifi claimed that at that time she had to admit that the incident did happen out of her willingness for the fear of getting bullied by the boy and beaten by the discipline teacher. Fifi expressed:

Fifi: "... I was raped when I was in Standard Three. When I was making rounds on the upper floor, I saw a group of Indian students was waiting in front of the toilet. I asked them to head out to class when they said no and then they grabbed me. One of them took away my skirt and panties and did it to me. I was blamed for it in this incident..."

**Theme 4; Psychological issues:** There are some psychological issues that have been shared and expressed by all subjects in the study. They expressed their feelings such as anger, resentment, hate, guilt and regret as well as stating some of their wishes and hopes, frustrations and sadness, rebellion, addiction to affection, finding happiness, satisfaction and enjoyment of life, issues on low self-esteem and also issues on trauma and emotional disorders that have been experienced in their lives. All of these psychological issues have been stated and expressed clearly and in depth by them in three series of interviews, while in Expressive Arts Therapy group sessions and also in their diary writing.

Salma's experience of being abused and raped has caused her trauma, emotional distress and severe

depression. Feelings of inferiority, humiliation and blaming destiny have geared Salma towards social behaviour. Salma said:

Salma: "... One thing that scared me the most would be when confronting mom when she was angry. She would lay her hand on me even though I begged furiously. Fear is a feeling that I could never avoid since I was small. I was also scared of men at first after I was raped. Not only that, the family from my father's side has always kept their distance ever since I was a little girl. Mom and I were demeaned all the time. I was always called as unwanted child. After my father left us all, I started to get involved with promiscuity. To me, dad is the cause of everything ..."

Kamelia used to be in depressed conditions and experienced trauma quite frequently which caused disturbed emotions. Kamelia expressed:

Kamelia: "... When I used to be beaten, I had this feeling of vengeance. I bore a grudge with my eldest brother because I hated him the most, he hit me until my face had bruises..."

Rina's experience of getting abused by her mother often disturbed and haunted Rina's life until she has become an adult. Physical abuse committed by her mother which had left permanent scars on Rina are difficult to forget. She held a grudge against her mother. Rina expressed:

Rina: "... I hated my mother and I bore this grudge against her. I was totally against her due to all the things she has done to me. I could no longer bring myself to deal with her attitudes. I told myself that she was not my mother and I was not her daughter anymore..."

**Theme 5; Appreciation of religion:** All men have certain doctrines and beliefs that characterize their lives. Holdings and is usually based on religious beliefs. In this study, subjects were studied by the author are mainly Muslims and Christians alone. Appreciation of religion implies acceptance of all the values given by the religion as a guide in daily life practices of its adherents. The study found that all subjects indirectly shared their experiences related to the appreciation of religion in their lives.

Sharing the subject of this study have given the impression to the author that there are several issues that can arise and be understood in terms of religious practice,

such as the daily practice of the subject and family, communication manners and dress. In Expressive Arts Therapy sessions, Salma's interviews and diary writing disclosed the fact that everything was done to seek for satisfaction, happiness and enjoyment of life. Descriptions of manner of dress, interactions, Salma parents' upbringing style clearly shows that her life was far from an appreciation of true faith. At the end of the session Salma expressed:

Salma: "...I give in with what God has planned out for me which blesses me with conscious to develop myself in religion. Now, when I am putting on tight and sheer clothes, surely I feel self-conscious and right away I would cover myself. More or less it has given me joy to keep on covering my 'aurat' as a Muslim..."

Khaty also shared about the way she dressed up, promiscuity, daily practice, her parents' upbringing which lacked of religious appreciation. Furthermore, Khaty made comparisons between her mother and father in terms of religious practice. Khaty expressed:

Khaty: "... Mama frequently prayed and fasted. She also recited the Quran even though it was quite rare. However, papa never prayed and never fasted and of course never recited the Quran..."

Zaza shared how she was raised up with love and affection as well as provided with adequate religious education by her adopted family. Zaza expressed:

Zaza: "... When I stayed with my foster family, I was good with my Quran recital and prayers..."

Nevertheless, her life was getting farther away from the upbringing which gained by her parents. Zaza finally was admitted to rehabilitation centre for protection and involuntary cases.

This qualitative study explores the life experience of ten teenage girls involved with delinquent behaviour by using the expressive arts therapy. As a result, the researchers managed to identify six themes which are the sharing issues of their life experience comprise of family dynamics, risky behaviours and criminal activities, formal education, abuse, psychological issues and appreciation of religious. These themes were extracted based on three series of in depth interviews and were supported and confirmed by resources of observation data during counselling sessions using expressive arts therapy and analysis of documents that had been produced by them by writing a diary.

The issue of family dynamics shared by the study subjects was the experience suffered by most of them. The findings also show that the ten adolescents involved with delinquent behaviours in this study had a dysfunctional family dynamic. They shared their parents' involvement in various types of criminal activities, taking prohibited substances such as alcohol and drugs, experiencing turmoil and domestic violence, divorce, polygamy, poverty and hardship in life, parental negligence and tenuous relationship are issues and life experiences experienced by them. These experiences have described a form of dysfunctional family dynamics experienced by all of them.

This form of dysfunctional family dynamic is also a key factor that influenced them into committing delinquent behaviours. This finding is consistent with the findings by Shader (2001). The findings show that the family plays a fairly important role in encouraging an adolescent to engage in delinquent behaviours. Family is the pillar that is able to educate youths from engaging in unhealthy behaviours such as delinquency. Failure of the family to play its role as an institution in shaping adolescents' character is a malfunction that causes the teenagers unable to identify which behaviours should be adopted or not. The teenagers who participated in this study often shared their experience which indicates they were not given adequate attention and neglected by their parents. This finding is supported by the findings by Gebo (2007). Gebo explained the parents' failure to pay attention to these delinquent juveniles is a factor of their involvement in delinquent behaviours.

In addition to sharing their experiences with family, all participants in this study regularly shared their experiences getting involved in risky behaviours and criminal activities. The condition of dysfunctional family dynamics had made them embracing the risky behaviours and criminal activities. The results show that they were involved in aggressive behaviours. When they are depressed, quite often they would run away from home and take prohibited substances. Promiscuity, 'rempit' (illegal racing) and hanging out were the risky and criminal activities they frequently getting involved in until they were detained and placed in rehabilitation centres.

Their failure to control their dissatisfaction towards the stress experienced with the family has caused them to lose their way of life and consequently find their friends as companions. Most of them also had a boyfriend and had sex with their boyfriends. Finally, they also had experienced pregnancy, miscarriage and birth of a child out of wedlock as a result of too trusting their boyfriends. This situation clearly shows that the influence of friends and peers is an element that leads adolescents to engage

in behaviours that violate the norms of society. Santrock (2002) in this context stated that peers play an important role in the lives of young adults. When they have lost confidence in their own family, boyfriend, friends and living environment have influenced them to get involved with risky behaviours and crimes. The findings in this study also support the findings by Shader (2001) which describe the influence of peers is a factor that has a high correlation in influencing teenagers' involvement in criminal activities and delinquency.

The theme of abuse is an issue commonly shared by all subjects involved in the study. They claimed that their lives were filled with emotional, physical and sexual abuse. As a result of their revelation, the researchers found they were emotionally, physically and sexually abused by people who are the closest to them such as their own parents and guardians. This situation clearly shows that the situation and ordeal which they had undergone caused them to lose their direction and faith and therefore they were involved in delinquent behaviours.

The findings are also in line with the findings by Futa, Nash and Garbin Hansen which depict on the abuse suffered by individuals in their life will have a long lasting impact and cause trauma in one's life (Futa *et al.*, 2003). There are short-term effects as well as long-term effects have been identified which give an impact on a person who was abused. These include the feelings of hopelessness, stress, low academic achievement, use of prohibited substances, low self-esteem, self-harm and suicide attempts (Westermeyer *et al.*, 2001).

There are a number of issues related to psychological development that have affected adolescents' emotional stability in the study. The results show that their experiences along with dysfunctional family dynamics, physically, emotionally and sexually abused experiences and other experiences which have left a deep impression in them. Due to these experiences, their lives were filled with psychological issues such as hatred, anger, resentment, frustration and sadness. Therefore they revolted to expressing frustration experienced by them. The pressure and stress experienced also have caused them to make harsh decisions and take the easy way by taking prohibited substances such as alcohol, smoking, taking intoxicated pills, hanging out, skipping school and getting involved with illegal racing as ways to de-stress.

Such disturbances have also evoked a sense of anxiety and depression until they took actions beyond their control such as attempted suicide. The findings in this study are supported by a research by Rahil *et al.* (2005) which describes that depression, stress and psychological issues such as those found in this study are the psychological issues that can cause teenagers to

lose their sanity and sense of considerations. They finally took the short path and only thought of attempting suicide (Rahil *et al.*, 2005).

The teenagers participated in this study shared their life experiences of growing up in an underprivileged condition in all aspects of life. The findings show that they did not get impeccable education especially proper guidance on appreciation of religion according to the mould of their adherents. Each religion has outlined a few guidelines to draft the perfection of its pure devotees' lives (Syed and Attas, 2009). Without an appreciation of religion, human beings are not able to go through life without any guidelines and procedures in life. This is because a person uses his wit alone in making decisions and taking actions (Syed and Attas, 2009).

Based on the experiences that have been expressed by the subjects in this study, there is a clear picture that most of them did not receive proper guidance from the person in charge of their well-being, namely their parents. In this study, the authors found that all these subjects involved with delinquency shared about how their lives have been distant from the appreciation and tangible values according to the nature of the creation of man as vicegerent on earth. This statement is corroborated also by the subjects' revelation themselves. They argued that the neglect of the religious elements is the main cause which dragged them to engage in delinquent behaviours. Sidek Baba pointed out that individual appreciation against the religion is also a framework which underlies the actions of an individual in dealing with different behaviours and daily problems. Appreciation of one's religion is also fundamental and a yardstick for them to get a guideline and guidance of life.

## CONCLUSION

Expressive Arts Therapy is a new innovation in the field of counselling. The use of this therapy is tremendously helpful to understand the experience of adolescents who engage in delinquency. The themes which have been peeled and discussed above clearly give us the life experience shared by the female adolescents who were involved in delinquent behaviours. Thus, the descriptions provided have contributed knowledge and insights to the authors about the scenario that occurred and happened to the teenagers that continuously labelled as criminals. In depth appreciation and extensive experience have given realization and awareness that the narratively shared and expressed issues should be given serious attention in order to prevent this menace to persistently widespread. In-depth understanding of their experiences is also a step that should be highlighted

accordingly to avoid them from continuously become victims due to our insensible participation. Something has to be thought intensively and this requires the commitment of all parties to seek a consensus.

### SUGGESTIONS

From the results of this study, there are some suggestions for future research that could be done. Firstly, conduct a study on the effectiveness of the use of expressive arts therapy to clients involved in a wide range of social problems among adolescents. Secondly, conduct in-depth studies on the themes that emerged from this study by using a phenomenological approach.

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