

The Influence of Perceived Discrimination on the Self-Concept of Substance Users

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Abstract

This study aimed to determine the relationship of perceived discrimination with the self-concept among substance users. A cross-sectional survey using a paper-pencil approach was used to gather the data. In total, 58 substance users, all male with age ranging from 18 to 54 years old, were recruited using purposive sampling. The Everyday Discrimination Scale (EDS) and The Robson Self Concept Questionnaire (SCQ) were both translated to the Malay language and administered to the sample group of substance users. The results obtained, showed moderate positive correlation between perceived discrimination and self-concept, $r(56) = 0.43, p < .001$. This demonstrated, substance users who experienced a high intensity of perceived discrimination, developed strong self-concept. Furthermore, results also showed no significant relationship between perceived discrimination and age, $r_{pb}(56) = 0.26, p < .05$. Suggesting experiences of perceived discrimination was not affected by age group among the substance users. Results show that perceived discrimination could be affected by the traumatic experience of discrimination or the misinterpretation of social cues. Whereas, self-concept development could have been influenced by two factors; social support and the surrounding environment. The intensity of perceived discrimination due to their distorted perception of their status and not due to their age. Regardless of age, every participant in this research study has experienced discrimination. Experiences of traumatic discrimination could have lead substance users to believe they are being discriminated against. Substance users could have faced greater perceived discrimination as they grow older, due to the limited opportunities to contribute to society. Instead, their distorted perception could have to lead them to believe that their status as a former addict is the cause of the discrimination.

Keywords: Substance abuse; self-concept; perceived discrimination

1. Introduction

As of 2018, the number of drug addicts has been steadily increasing. According to the National Anti-Drug Agency (NADA) out of 25267 drug addicts, 72 % of them are from the age 19 to 39 years old, this group of adolescents and emerging adults has been the rising concern for a government body and non-government organization (NGO) as the future of the country is dependant on the performance of these young people. One of the major initiatives to curb these issues was to treat substance abuse as a form of illness that needed to be treated instead of imprisonment. Several types of research point out that many substance users use drugs as a form of coping with negative experiences within their surrounding environment. It was discovered that substance users often have a low self-concept due to discrimination from others, but this only occurs after they engage in substance abuse. This study, therefore, addresses the issues off increased substance abuse and relapse cases

by looking at two possible links, the relationship between perceived discrimination and substance abuse, and, self-concept and substance abuse.

Several studies discovered, perceived discrimination has deteriorating effects on a substance user's physical and mental health. This condition was created from prolonged drug usage as a means of coping with stress (Haslyn & Adam, 2012). In the study by Gerrard, Stock, Roberts, Gibbons, O'Hara, Weng, and Wills (2012), perception of discrimination and its stress can be a factor for substance abuse. Several other studies also had similar results (Zapolski, Rowe, Banks & Faidley, 2018; Livingston & Komro, 2017; Respress, Small, Francis & Cordova, 2013). It was highlighted that a higher level of perceived discrimination and experiences was more likely to push a person to engage in drugs. The relationship between self-concept and substance abuse exist, as several types of research point out, many drug users and potential drug users often have a

negative self-concept and the initial drive to use drugs is fueled by the need to acquire a more positive self-image (Yang, Chen, Choi, & Kurtulus, 2018; Kathleen, Margaret & Rachel, 2009; Fenley & Williams, 1991). These studies indicated substance users have trouble coping well under stress which leads them to engage in unhealthy behavior that delivers instant gratification, such as using drugs. However, a study by Shafie, Sukor, Ibrahim, Yatau, Yusof, Rahimi, and Wahab (2018), Masihi and Homaei (2019) showed self-expression during therapy was able to shift substance user's perception from a negative self-image to a positive one, which greatly increased the addiction recovery rate. In conclusion, self-concept is an underlying factor that can stir people to adopt either healthy or unhealthy behavior for coping with stress.

The first question that arose from this, was whether the self-concept of the substance user was dependant on their beliefs of discrimination. Where the stress of discrimination gave way to the formation and reinforcement of negative self-concept among

substance users. The next question arose, was the role of age on the perception of discrimination among substance users. In which, older substance users have a higher tendency to experience a stronger perception of discrimination. The present study has, therefore, looked into the relationship of perceived discrimination on the self-concept among substance users with relation to their age to determine the relationship.

2. Method

2.1 Sample

Data were collected using a cross-sectional survey method. A total of 58 substance users were recruited using purposive sampling. Table 1 shows the demographic distribution of the sample. All the reported participants were male with ages ranged between 35 to 44 years. Most of the participants were from the Indian ethnicity and the least is from the Chinese ethnic group. Moreover, the majority of the participants had been addicted to substances like others (alcohol) and Methamphetamine.

Table 1. Summary of 58 participants' demographics

Demographic	<i>f</i>	%
Gender		
Male	58	100
Ethnic Group		
Chinese	1	1.7
Indian	55	94.8
Others	2	3.4
Age		
Less than 18 years	1	1.7
18-24 years	8	13.8
25-34 years	13	22.4
35-44 years	19	32.8
45-54 years	14	24.1
More than 54 years	3	5.2
Type of drugs		
Methamphetamine	21	36.2
Ganja	4	6.9
Ecstasy and Amphetamine	2	3.4
Psychotropic pill	4	6.9
Others	27	46.6

2.2 Measures

Two instruments were used, The Everyday Discrimination Scale (EDS) and Robson Self Concept Questionnaire (SCQ). The Everyday Discrimination Scale (EDS) was used to measure perceived discrimination that is experienced by substance users (Williams, 1997), whereas, the self-concept of a drug addict was measured using the Robson Self Concept Questionnaire (SCQ) (Robson, 1989). Both EDS and SCQ were a self-report scale which was scored using a 6-point Likert scale and 7-point Likert scale respectively. The Malay versions of EDS and SCQ were used in the study. Both translated questionnaires showed good face validity and high internal

consistency of ($\alpha = 0.96$ and $\alpha = 0.79$) for each EDS and SCQ.

2.3 Data analysis

Descriptive analysis was used to measure the degree of self-concept and intensity of perceived discrimination among the sample. The degree of perceived discrimination was determined from the total score. A score of 15 and below will indicate a weak level of perceived discrimination, while, scores of 16 to 29 will indicate a medium level of perceived discrimination, and scores above 30 will indicate a high level of perceived discrimination (Williams, 1997). The degree of self-concept of the sample was determined from the total score obtained. A score of

70 and below will indicate a weak level of self-concept, while, scores of 71 to 134 will indicate a medium level of self-concept, and scores above 137 will indicate a high level of self-concept (Robson, 1989). Pearson correlation was then computed to determine the magnitude and direction of the correlation between perceived discrimination and self-concept. The correlation value ranging from -1, indicates a perfect negative linear relationship, and +1, indicates a positive linear relationship. A value of zero suggests that there is no linear relationship (Clarke & Cooke, 1987). All analysis was computed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23 (IBM Corp., 2015).

2.4 Data management

An initial of 80 participants were recruited for this study but only 60 participants were chosen after criteria filtering. The criteria for participation include genders of male or female, age range from 18 to 55 years, from four major ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, Indian, and others), posses no history mental or

physical retardation, and are enrolled in substance abuse rehabilitation program. 20 participants were rejected as they had learning disabilities and from the remaining 60 participants, 2 participants were unwilling to participate in the study hence their data were excluded. Therefore, a total of 58 participants was recruited for this study. There were no missing or inconsistent values from the data collected from the 58 participants.

3. Result

Table 2 below, reports the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) of the variables, which are, degree of self-concept and intensity of perceived discrimination. Among participants, the self-concept had an average score of 113.53 (SD = 20.95), this indicated that overall participants possess moderate levels of self-concept (Robson, 1989). Whereas, perceived discrimination had an average score of 29.50 (SD = 14.09), that indicated on average, participants possess a high level of high levels of perceived discrimination (Williams, 1997).

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of measure of self-concept and perceived discrimination

Mesures	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
Self-concept	53	182	113.53	20.96
Perceived discrimination	0	45	29.50	14.10

Note. Minimum and maximum represent the lowest and highest cumulative score obtained for each measure.

3.1 Self-concept and perceived discrimination

It was hypothesized that there will be no relationship between self-concept and perceived discrimination among substance users. The results showed that perceived discrimination and the self-concept were positively correlated, $r(56) = 0.43, p < .001$. This demonstrated a moderate positive correlation (Clarke & Cooke, 1987) between perceived discrimination and self-concept. It goes to show that, substance users that had experienced the higher intensity of perceived discrimination, developed stronger self-concepts.

3.2 Perceived discrimination and age group

It was hypothesized that there will be no relationship between age groups and perceived discrimination among substance users. The point-biserial correlation results showed that there was no correlation between the two variables, $r_{pb}(56) = 0.26, p > .05$. Therefore, age groups did not affect the perception of discrimination among substance users.

4. Discussion

Descriptive analysis showed that substance users experienced the high intensity of perceived discrimination, which was similar, with findings of previous researches. It was stated that regardless of the surrounding environment of the substance user, their past experiences with discrimination would affect their present perception. This research study

speculates two reasons for the high intensity of perceived discrimination experienced by substance users; the traumatic experiences of discrimination (Frischknecht, Hermann, Heinrich, Hoerst, Weber-Fahr, Vollstädt-Klein & Ende, 2013) and over analyzing of social cues (Earnshaw, Smith & Copenhaver, 2012; Foo, Tam & Lee, 2012).

Traumatic experiences have been identified as a cause for distorted perception, this suggested that substance users who had experienced high levels of discrimination will also develop distorted perception (Frischknecht, Hermann, Heinrich, Hoerst, Weber-Fahr, Vollstädt-Klein & Ende, 2013). Altered perception can also cause substance users to perceive social cues differently than normal people. The misinterpretation of the social cues such as body language, facial expression, and voice intonation, can lead to misunderstandings that further reinforces the substance user's perception of being discriminated against. This behavior has also been researched by (Earnshaw, Smith & Copenhaver, 2012) and obtained similar findings. Hence, this misinterpretation of social cues could be a contributing factor for high experiences of perceived discrimination among substance users. The two factors discussed above were consistent among the participants of previous researches and in this research study, resulting in similar findings.

As for the self-concept, the descriptive analysis of this research study showed that there were moderate levels of the positive self-concept among the substance users, whereas in previous researches, it was stated that substance users often developed the negative self-concept. The contradictions in findings, between this research study and previous researches, can be discussed within two aspects; the surrounding environment (Solinas, Thiriet, Chauvet & Jaber, 2010; Bagheri & Tagvaei, 2017) and social support (Chen, 2006). The two aspects have been identified by several types of research as influencing factors on self-concept development. The controlled environment of the rehabilitation centers created a calm and stable atmosphere for the substance users to practice their self-discipline and succeeding at it. Having little to no stressors to diverge their attention leads them to master their self-discipline and at the same time increase their self-confidence (Solinas, Thiriet, Chauvet & Jaber, 2010). Having a sense of control and accomplishments can lead to the development of a positive self-concept. Social support through researches is known for its effects on the recovery rate and it has the same function in the rehabilitation process (Johansen, Brendryen, Darnell, & Wennesland, 2013). Support and encouragement received from peers at the rehabilitation centers, motivates substance users to achieve more leading to a rise in self-confidence (Chen, 2006). This as discussed, will increase the likelihood of positive self-concept to develop.

Results obtained from the correlation analysis showed that substance users that have higher self-concept experienced a higher intensity of perceived discrimination and vice versa. This finding was not parallel to the findings obtained from other researches and the differences lie within the sample group's treatment program and distorted perception. Previous researches used substance users from a drug detoxification program, whereas, in this research study, substance users were from a rehabilitation program that aimed on teaching them self discipline and coping skills before integrating them back into society. The increase in the self-concept suggested that the rehabilitation program was effective at treating the withdrawal urges, as this accomplishment would have fueled the development of positive self-concept (Saleem, Tahir & Najam, 2013). However, the intensity of perceived discrimination became greater suggesting that the substance user could now be in the process of being integrated back into society. Distorted perception due to past traumatic discrimination experiences could have lead to this occurring. The integration process would encourage substance users to begin interacting with the local community, however, with the substance user's inability to perceive social cues, could lead them to more experiences of discrimination due to the misunderstanding (Earnshaw, Smith & Copenhaver, 2012). The substance user's past experiences together

with their distorted perception could be the influencing factor for the high perceived discrimination, even though, they possess a strong self-concept.

Point-biserial correlation analysis showed there was no relationship between perceived discrimination and age groups, where, previous researches stated otherwise. The differences in findings can be explained in terms of, participant's demographics and their distorted perception of their status as substance users. This research study, recruited participants undergoing treatment at a rehabilitation center, who has yet to be integrated into the community, whereas, previous researches mostly used substance users in a Methadone maintenance program or former substance users that are in the workforce. The difference lay in the exposure to the community. Substance users from the rehabilitation center, are isolated from the community and had no opportunity to be affected by discrimination. Therefore, age was not a factor affecting perceived discrimination among substance users. Substance users at rehabilitation centers perhaps experienced the high intensity of perceived discrimination due to their distorted perception of their status and not due to their age. Regardless of age, every participant in this research study has experienced discrimination. Experiences of traumatic discrimination could have lead substance users to believe they are being discriminated against (Frischknecht, Hermann, Heinrich, Hoerst, Weber-Fahr, Vollstädt-Klein & Ende, 2013). Substance users could have faced greater perceived discrimination as they grow older, due to the limited opportunities to contribute to society. Instead, their distorted perception could have lead them to believe that their status as a former addict is the cause of the discrimination.

5. Recommendation

The small sample size used in this study is considered as a limitation. In future research, it is recommended for a larger sample size with balanced demographics distributions. Secondly, further research can be conducted on the more specific components of self-concept such as self-image, self-esteem, and ideal self, which affects self-concepts differently. This would help focus on the roles of the self-concept among substance users. Future researches can also widen their field of study to include the effect of the environment on the self-concept of substance users. The findings of this research study suggested there was a difference in self-concept between substance users in a controlled environment and those that were not. In upcoming studies, researchers could compare the self-concept between substance users undergoing treatment, underwent treatment, and not on treatment, to determine if there is a significant difference.

6. Conclusion

This study analyzed and tested the influence of perceived discrimination on the self concept of substance users. The questions was whether the self-concept of the substance user was dependant on their beliefs of discrimination, and, whether age affected the perception of discrimination. Pearson correlation and point bi-serial correlation was used to determine the relationships between variables. The results indicated there was a significant relationship among perceived discrimination and self concept, but findings did not match that of previous studies. The results attained can be explained by comparing the treatment background of substance users and also looking into the possibilities of distorted perception among the substance users. Results obtained also indicated there was no relationship between perceived discrimination and age, suggesting that substance user's perception of discrimination could be affected more by their status then their age. Therefore, future studies could look into comparing the factors influencing perception of discrimination or self concept among substance users and non substance users.

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