

## Gender Differences among Drug Abusers in the Process of Readiness to Change

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**Abstract:** Although gender-related issues are often cited as playing an important part in determining patterns of illicit drug use, little is known about the differences between men and women drug users within treatment settings. This article is provided to measure gender differences in terms of readiness to change among rehabilitees of Malaysian National Narcotics Rehabilitation Centre (PUSPEN) via the stages of Change Readiness and Treatment Eagerness Scale (SOCRATES). A total of 609 people consisting of 490 men and 109 women drug users from six drug rehabilitation centers in Peninsular Malaysia responded to a survey by using stratified random sampling and systematic random sampling. Data were analyzed using t-test analysis to compare the readiness to change among men and women rehabilitees in terms of recognition, ambivalence and taking steps. The results of the study showed significant differences between gender in terms of taking steps, however no significant differences were noted in the dimensions of recognition and ambivalence. Input to the identification of changes associated with readiness to change among gender would be able to provide a new data to formulate more effective strategies for rehabilitated drug addicts among the gender.

**Key words:** Gender differences • Recognition • Ambivalence • Taking steps • Drug addicts

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### INTRODUCTION

Drug abuse has been known as the nation's most serious health problem because it strains the health care system and has adverse effects on families, public safety and the country's economy [1]. Malaysia like other developing countries is also facing a plethora of social problems resulting from economic, developmental and societal growth. One of them is drug addiction, which has long been recognized as a serious problem at an epidemic proportion since the early 1970's [2]. In the social problems of drug addiction, Malaysia also faced with the challenge to treat and rehabilitate drug addicts. Federal, state and the government spent billions of ringgit for drug education interventions. Although many people believe that such programs are underfunded, this spending still amounts to a great deal of money. Many studies have revealed that the failure of an addict to abstain their addiction is caused by various factors. Among the difficulties affecting the addicts to change is caused by internal factors such as the difficulty of

changing and maintaining drug-free lifestyle [3,4,5,6]. Statistics released by the National Anti-Drug Agencies of Malaysia [7] from January-June 2010 showed a total of 12,079 people were involved with drugs. This figure represents an increase of 361.91% over the same period last year in 2009 (2,615 people). Of this number, 8,984 (74.38%) were new drug addicts in which the increase of 507.44% compared to 1,479 people for the same period last year. While relapse cases is also about 3,095 people (25.62%), an increase of 172.45% over the previous year (1,136 people). Thus, efforts to enhance the treatment was carried out to find the best way to overcome addiction by looking for changes in the aspect of awareness and readiness to change among gender.

Readiness to change has been conceptualized as a combination of the patient's perceived importance of the problem and confidence in his or her ability to change [8, 9]. According to previous research [10], many people entering treatment are not ready to make the changes required for recovery and are unprepared to modify their behavior. A lack of readiness to change is a common

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scenario in treatment and client motivation is a critical determining factor in treatment outcome [11]. A study in Malaysia shows that majority of respondents indicated high readiness which was demonstrated in the dimensions of recognition and taking steps to change and recover from drug addict [12]. In recent years, concerns have been raised regarding the effects of gender and gender-related circumstances on treatment processes and outcomes [13, 14, 15]. Researchers and practitioners have all argued that many of the factors critical to successful treatment differ for men and women and women are more likely to experience circumstances that interfere with their ability to successfully navigate treatment processes [16, 17, 18, 4]. Differences in readiness to change were also evident based on gender. Women were more likely to be in the action stage, independently of either severity or the presence of legal coercion. Another study found that women and men demonstrated more similarities in the pattern and severity of their substance use than differences [19]. Their research found that treatment-seeking women showed greater readiness to change their substance use compared with men.

Specifically, the objective of this study was to measure the differences of readiness to change among men and women drug users by measuring the three dimensions of readiness to change which are recognition, ambivalence and taking steps. The results of this study could provide useful input and information to improve the recovery module and drug rehabilitation programs more effectively to drug addicts.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary data was obtained through a survey using self-administered questionnaires. Items from established instruments- The Stages of Change Readiness and Treatment Eagerness Scale (SOCRATES), developed

by Miller and Tonigan [20] were used to suit the objectives of the study. The SOCRATES is a 19-item instrument that was developed as a measure of motivation for change in drug use. There are three subscales, determining three constructs: (i) Awareness of the problem (Recognition), (ii) Ambivalence about the problem (Ambivalence) and (iii) Taking steps to change the problem (Taking Steps). Table 1 outlines definitions of the subscales. Respondents' responded to items on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Undecided or Unsure), 4 (Agree) and 5 (Strongly Agree). From the analysis, it was identified that the Cronbach alpha of all constructs showed a high reliability for ambivalence (0.82), recognition (0.88) and taking steps (0.91). Thus, the instrument used in this study showed a good level of reliability. The respondents were chosen by systematic sampling procedure. A total of 609 questionnaires were personally distributed to the drug addicts (490 men drug users and 109 women drug users) who are undergoing treatments and rehabilitations in six Narcotics Rehabilitation Centers in Peninsular Malaysia.

Counselors from the respective centers helped to disseminate and collect the survey. High response rate (100%) for this study is due to high degree of cooperation by the respondents and the counselors at the centers. In addition, the drop and pick method utilized in this survey was very effective. Data were analyzed using t-tests to compare the level of readiness to change among men and women drug addicts.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 showed information on the respondents' background. From the aspect of age, a majority of those who were involved in this study were from those aged between 35-44 years for men drug addicts. While for women drug addicts, a majority of them consisted of

Table 1: SOCRATES subscales defined

Subscale: Recognition	
High Score	Acknowledgement of problem and desire for change
Low Score	Denial of problem
Subscale: Ambivalence	
High Score	Ambivalence; uncertainty about drug habits
Low Score	Certainty about drug habits
Subscale: Taking Steps	
High Score	Concrete efforts to change behavior & maintain changes through prevention
Low Score	No efforts to change

Table 2: Respondents' background (n=609)

Respondents' Profile	Men (n=490)	Women (n=109)
<b>Age (Year)</b>		
15-24	119	35
25-34	139	52
35-44	165	11
45-54	58	6
55-64	4	2
<b>Race</b>		
Malay	436	91
Chinese	22	10
Indian	26	3
Others	2	3
<b>Relationship status</b>		
Single	342	38
Married	90	42
Widower	51	24
<b>Education Level</b>		
Standard 6	154	18
SRP/PMR	154	34
SPM/STPM	124	34
Degree	1	3
Others	5	13
<b>Treatment phase</b>		
Phase 1	168	40
Phase 2	172	14
Phase 3	102	25
Phase 4	42	24

Table 3: Results of t-test summary of differences readiness to change among gender

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	SD	df	t
Recognition	Men	497	27.9497	5.29	607	1.30
	Women	112	27.2411	4.86		
Ambivalence	Men	497	15.1046	2.99	607	.05
	Women	112	15.0893	2.98		
Taking Steps	Men	497	33.2254	6.27	607	2.28*
	Women	112	31.7500	5.79		

\*p<0.05

15-24 age group (35 persons). For both genders, Malay ethnic formed the largest number involved in this study. This figure is consistent with a high addiction rate among Malays in 2009 as recorded by the National Anti-Drug Agency of Malaysia (87.09% of the total number of drug addicts detected). In terms of marital status, a majority of men drug addicts was still unmarried (342 people) compared to married women respondents (42 people). For both genders, majority of them were in low education levels and most of them were at the early stages of treatment and rehabilitation services (phase 1 and 2).

**Readiness to Change:** In this study, the SOCRATES scale was used to assess and understand the structure of motivation and readiness to change among men and women drug rehabilitees. Assessing and understanding for change not only provide helpful information for treatment planning, but can also serve to enhance the client's readiness and their addictive behaviors. Table 3 shows the results of the analysis related to readiness to change subscales of recognition, ambivalence and taking steps based on gender.

**Recognition:** Recognition refers to the awareness of drug addicts that they have problems related to drug addiction. From the aspect of recognition among gender, the study showed there was no significant difference between men and women rehabilitees,  $t(607)=1.299$ ,  $p>0.05$ . Mean scores for the dimension of recognition showed that men (mean = 27.949) and women (mean = 27.241). This situation gives the impression that both men and women drug addicts showed a similar level of recognition from the aspects of conscious awareness that they have addiction problem.

**Ambivalence:** In this study, ambivalence refers to the doubt situation as to whether the drug addicts can control their addiction problems. The analysis carried out showed that there was no significant difference between men and women rehabilitees,  $t(607) = .49$ ,  $p > 0.05$  with the mean score for men rehabilitees = 15.104 and female rehabilitees = 15.089. This situation gives the impression that both men and women rehabilitees showed a similar level of doubt to change and free from the influence of drugs.

**Taking Steps:** Taking steps refer to the efforts to make positive changes to overcome their addiction. Analysis carried out showed that there was a significant difference between men and women rehabilitees,  $t(607)=2.283$ ,  $p<0.05$  in terms of taking steps to change their addictions. The mean scores for the dimensions of drug taking steps for men (mean = 33.225) showed better than women rehabilitees (mean = 31.750). These findings indicated that men rehabilitees were more ready to make positive changes to overcome their drug addiction than women. Overall, the readiness to change based on gender showed differences in terms of taking steps, while in terms of recognition and ambivalence, both men and women rehabilitees did not show significant differences.

## CONCLUSION

The results showed a new research input on the differences of readiness for change among gender in Malaysia. The process of readiness for change among men and women rehabilitees showed some significant findings that are useful in particular to drug rehabilitation counselors and it may be used as an input to improve the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs. Overall, the study found that men and women rehabilitees showed the same level of recognition regarding their addictive behavior. Despite under going treatment in drug rehabilitation centers, both men and women rehabilitees still demonstrated some level of ambivalence with regard to changing their addictions. While, some of the previous studies showed that women drug addicts are more ready to change their addictive behavior, the present findings revealed otherwise. Men rehabilitees tended to report that they have done some changes to overcome their addictions. The lack of women rehabilitees' motivation to change may have implications on treatment outcome and therefore need to be addressed by the counselors. Overall, regardless of genders these findings implied that further research on the addicts' motivation and readiness to change are needed as their motivation to change have bearings on the success of the treatment outcome.

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