Society and Underreporting of Child Abuse Cases in Malaysia: Theoretical Consideration

Jamhirah Abdullah, Mizan Hitam, Wahabuddin Raees, Garoot Suleiman Eissa and Nabila Huda Ibrahim

1Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia, 2International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)

Abstract: Child abuse has become a serious problem in Malaysia. The increasing number of reported cases of child abuse is only the tip of the iceberg compared to the real number of cases. The society, in general, agrees that child abuse is a heinous crime that must be stopped and prevented. In reality only a few people play their role by reporting suspected cases of abuse. Underreporting is, therefore, a serious concern. Reasons for not reporting have been poorly studied and more research is needed to understand this phenomenon. Icek Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) has the potential to explain underreporting in Malaysia and how Malaysian society can contribute to reporting of child abuse cases. Ajzen’s theory’s explanatory capacity can be enhanced if it considers the construct of knowledge along its three essential constructs: (1) attitudes towards the behavior, (2) subjective norms and (3) perceived behavioral control.

Key words: Theory of planned behavior • Child abuse • Underreporting • Malaysia • Mandatory reporting

INTRODUCTION

Every child has right to have a good quality of life to have a better future. Despite government’s continuous effort to safeguard the safety of children in Malaysia, child abuse cases continue to increase at an alarming rate every year. According to the Director of the Social Welfare Department, 98% of abuse cases went unreported, while reported cases represent only 2% of the actual cases of abuse [1]. UNICEF Malaysia Report states that “often only the most acute cases of child abuse are reported” [2]. The reason for reporting of acute child abuse cases was compulsory reporting of abuse by medical practitioners required by 2001Child Act. This indicates that report of abuse was normally lodged by medical practitioners only when a child had suffered significant abuse and needed medical attention. Despite the fact that the society views child abuse as vicious crime that ought to be stopped and prevented, only a few of them play their role by reporting suspected abuse cases. Section 27 of the 2016 Child Act, states that any person or member of society may provide information to the welfare officer if a child is suspected of physical, emotional, sexual abuse or negligence. Despite the fact that the Law permits every individual to report any suspected child abuse case, generally the problem of underreporting among Malaysian public and society is extremely serious. Huckle was arrested outside Malaysia and charged with 91 counts of abusing 23 Malaysian children. Yet, no single report of his abuses had been lodged with the authorities in Malaysia [3]. The lack of information about Huckle’s case while suggesting serious underreporting of child abuse cases implies that the Malaysian society is complacent about its social responsibility. Refraining from filing a report of suspected child abuse poses a serious threat to children’s safety and socio-economic fabric of Malaysian society and state. Underreporting of child abuse is, therefore, a grave concern which the society can help remedy.

Gross violation of child rights does not only hamper a child’s right to a healthy and dignified growth, but it also poses a threat to the economic and social development of a country. Therefore, reporting child abuse at an early stage can help stop the abuse and prevent further damage to the child and society in the future. Reporting will help in preventing future crimes. Researches suggest that victims of abuse are more likely to become abusers and criminals when they become adults [4]. Thus, reporting suspected child abuse cases does not only help reduce the possibility of future crimes, but it also helps to put an end to the vicious cycle of child abuse. Therefore, reporting suspected child abuse should not be the sole responsibility of mandatory reporters or those obliged by Law only such as family members,
medical officers, medical practitioner and childcare provider, but the society as a whole should play their role in reporting child abuse. Therefore, structurally, this paper, first, provides theoretical analysis of underreporting of child abuse cases. Second, this paper argues that Icek Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) has the potential to explain society’s role in reporting of child abuse cases and applies TPB to child abuse reporting in Malaysia with the intention of reducing underreporting of child abuse. Finally, the paper discusses tools of child abuse reporting by Malaysian society.

Society and Child Abuse Reporting in Malaysia: Theoretical Consideration : Many studies in Malaysia have been conducted to determine the intention to report child abuse among nurses [5, 6], educators and teachers [7], multidisciplinary collaboration [8], physicians [9] and dentists [10]. However, no study is found focusing on Malaysian society’s intention or other non-mandatory reporters who have no direct involvement with the child. Hence, more research is needed to understand reasons for society’s non-reporting attitudes in Malaysia. A strong case can be made that Icek Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is appropriate theoretical tool for explaining Malaysian society’s intention for child abuse reporting and reporting of child abuse [12]. TPB has been empirically tested and applied to nurses to find out the factors of nurses’ intention to report child abuse [6]. TPB, discussed later, can explain conditions of ‘perceived behavioral control’. Studies from various backgrounds have applied TPB to explain workplace dishonesty [11] food consumptions decision [12], predicting healthy eating [13], internet purchasing [14], explaining information security policy compliance [15], intentions of teaching online [16], entrepreneurial intentions [17] and pro-environmental behaviour among school students [18]. TPB for understanding human social behavior is based ‘levels of belief’. According to Ajzen, understanding one’s level of belief can help a reader to understand why some people choose to engage in certain behavior while some others choose a different course of action. Ajzen argues that human behaviour is influenced by three major factors: (1) attitudes towards the behavior, (2) subjective norms and (3) perceived behavioral control [19]. According to him it is axiomatic that the more positive the attitude, the more favourable the subjective norm, the higher the perceived behavioral control and the stronger will be the intention to perform such behavior. Intention to perform that behavior will materialize once the opportunity arises [20]. Therefore, in Ajzen’s views the three above elements represent three levels of belief and therefore they can be considered as determinants of social behaviour. In Ajzen’s analysis there is a close connection between intention and action. In fact, action is manifestation or reflection of the existence of intention on the part of the actor. The intention is formed first. Only then action follows. Therefore, these factors first result into formation of intention and then the intention is transformed into action or behaviour. This is to say that behavior is preceded by intention. We may not observe behaviour in the absence of intention. He suggests that a change in the behavior would require a change the actor’s intention which can happen only with change in any of these three factors. According to Ajzen, they are internal causes of social behavior and for the purpose of accuracy as supported by empirical evidences; the researchers concerned with reporting of social behaviour should focus on these internal elements only. Factors such emotions and demography are external causes of the action and therefore do not constitute core elements of individual level of belief and that of TPB. Figure 1 shows the three constructs determining the intention that results in behavioral performance. There will be occasion to discuss TPB’s core assumptions before its application to child abuse reporting by public in Malaysia.

![Fig. 1: Theory of Planned Behaviour](image)

**Attitudes Towards Behaviour:** The first construct of Ajzen’s theory is attitudes towards the behavior. This construct refers to “the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of the behavior in question” [20]. It simply refers to the person’s evaluation of his behavior. One’s belief about the consequences of his behavior will determine his attitude
towards that particular behavior. The expectancy-value model which is the most popular model of attitude formation and structure embedded in that belief form the foundation of our attitudes. According to expectancy-value model, attitudes towards the behavior are automatically and simultaneously acquired as the behavioral outcomes are valued positively or negatively [12]. It is the estimation of the probability that one’s action will lead to a certain outcome and the evaluation of the outcome itself [21]. For example, if one believes that his action/behavior will lead to positive consequences, he is more likely to perform that action or behavior.

Subjective Norms: The second construct of Ajzen’s theory is subjective norm. This construct refers “to the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform that behavior” [20]. It is one’s belief about the likelihood that important referents approve or disapprove of performing the behavior and the motivation to comply with those expectations. Subjective norm is determined by a total set of accessible injunctive and descriptive normative beliefs. Injunctive normative beliefs are those norms that we infer from the way others perceive the expected action. What importance would others or society at large attach to the action the actor may perform? Will others approve or disapprove his intended action? Descriptive normative beliefs are based on the observed action of those social referents. The important others may be spouse, parents, girlfriend boyfriend, friends and brother or sister [12].

Perceived Control Behavior: The third construct of Ajzen’s theory is perceived behavioral control. Perceived behavioral control refers to “people’s perception of the ease or difficulty of performing the behavior of interest” [20]. This implies that people’s confidence in their ability to perform certain behavior strongly influences their behavior. Put differently, a person who positively judges his ability to perform a certain behavior is more likely to perform that behavior compared to a person who negatively judges his ability to perform that behavior. Moreover, the perception of ease or difficulty of performing that behavior is highly influenced by the individual’s experience as well as the experiences of acquaintances and friends [20]. Other factors that influenced one’s perception of ease or difficulty of performing certain behavior are anticipated obstacles and impediments and also opportunities & resources in which individuals believe they possess. The more favorable one’s evaluation of the behavior, the more positive the past experiences of performing that behavior, the more resources and opportunities one believes he possesses, the fewer obstacles and impediments he anticipates, the greater should be his perceived control over the behavior [20]. This construct is based on the assumption that one consistently follows what his beliefs impose provided he possesses the skills and abilities needed to perform the behavior [12].

Intention Towards Behavior: Intention towards behavior refers to the degree to decide for acting [17]. An individual has complete control over performance and opportunities or resources such as knowledge, skills, time or information to perform an intended behaviour [21]. The individual’s intention towards the behavior is great as they possess complete control over performance including resources, knowledge, skills or time towards the behavior.

Behaviour: Behaviour is the effect of intentions and it can only be done if an individual has complete control over behaviour. Perceived behavioral control is a proxy for actual control that often relies on investigators as it is difficult to know how much control people have about a given behaviour. The combination of intentions and perceptions of control may predict the behavior [12]. Behavior performance may happen if the individual has the intention and control over the behavior.

Application of Tpb in Child Abuse Reporting in Malaysia:
TPB can assist to determine how far all societies and Malaysian society in particular would have the intention to report any incident of suspected child abuse. The first postulate of TPB, the attitudes towards behavior, indicates the favorability of the evaluation towards intended behavior. The attitude is determined by individual’s belief about the consequences of the action he intends to perform [20]. What it suggests that the public in child abuse reporting should have positive attitudes towards the outcomes of reporting child abuse. Malaysians aware of the positive outcomes of reporting child abuse such as saving victims from the perpetrator, preventing future abuse cases or punishing the offender, may likely to report the suspected child abuse. Obviously, attitudes of Malaysians towards child abuse may differ from one another. Malaysians should think that what they report about child abuse and discipline might influence the decision-making process [6]. Feng and Levine [6] believe that society should keep in mind three important issues when reporting child abuse: (1) appropriateness of physical discipline, (2) punishment to abusive parents and
(3) professional responsibility of reporting child abuse. Feng-Levine concluded that the society will likely to report severe child abuse if they were less approving of physical discipline, more agreeable to punish the abusers and more positive to report child abuse as a professional responsibility.

Furthermore, John’s [10] study of dentists’ on reporting child abuse revealed that society’s intention of reporting will be influenced if they are uncertain about the causes of child abuse, possible consequences to the child, issues of confidentiality, fear of litigation and possible consequences to the family of reporters. John et al. argue that dentists who belong to mandatory reporters were influenced by such attitudes in reporting the suspected child abuse. In another study, Shechter et. al. [9] found that societies are more likely to report if they are certain about the causes of child abuse. Therefore, what is important that the society should have more positive attitudes towards understanding the nature and causes of child abuse. Institutions dealing with child abuse reporting should focus on creating more awareness in society about the nature and causes of child abuse. The will help improve society’s willingness to report child abuse.

The second construct, subjective norms, suggests that society can serve as a pressure group in prevention and reporting of child abuse incident. Whether an individual may or may not report a child abuse incident depend on social pressure he may think the society will exert [20]. An individual may report child abuse if he or she receives pressure from an important person in his/her life. An important person in everyone’s life influences decision to perform the intended behavior, reporting of child abuse in this case. For example, study by Kautonen et. al. [14] found that reporting of child abuse by members of society is like starting a new business. Obviously, intention to start-up a new business requires moral and all sorts of support from family members, friends and neighbours. Similarly, in reporting child abuse a non-mandatory reporters in society should be supported by their family members, friends or neighbor. There is a higher chance of intention to report child abuse if their family and friends support the individual. A study done by Miles [22] indicated that nurses, who thought others wanted them to report the abuse, increase the reporting intention. Hence, it is undeniable that individual around us may influence our decision making to report the happenings of child abuse.

The third construct, perceived behavioral control, is an important determinant for behavioral intention. Aloulou [17] investigating individual’s intention of self-employment argued that perceived behavioral control influences one’s decision to perform certain action or not to perform. In reporting child abuse, an individual needs to think whether the reporting is easy for him or not. Feng and Levine [6] in their study of nurses found that the real difficulty nurse faced with in reporting child abuse was lack of knowledge and resources for reporting. In order to report a child abuse case, an individual should have resources that may influence them to have greater perceived control behavior to report child abuse.

Assessing the intention of reporting child abuse, one significant construct should be added up to Ajzen’s TPB. This construct is knowledge. An individual who lacks knowledge on signs of abuse, does not feel the social pressure to report suspected abuse, does not have sufficient knowledge of reporting procedures, has never experienced pleasant experiences of reporting and does not have a positive view of reporting procedures, is more likely to refrain from reporting. All studies [9,23] on underreporting of child abuse suggest society’s lack of knowledge as one of the important reasons for not reporting child abuse. Hence, training of mandatory reporters and educating the larger society to recognize what constitute child abuse and how to deal with it should be given more importance by government and institutions dealing with child abuse.

**Child Abuse Reporting Tools:** The Malaysian society and public can report suspected child abuse through various mechanisms. First, the public can report child abuse through the 24-hour national helpline variously known as Talian Nur or Talian Kasih. Second, the public can call the Teledera line to report child abuse they have observed. Third, public can email the abuse or write a letter to the Department of Social Welfare of Malaysia. Fourth, they can also report to the nearest police station or report to the child abuse team. Finally, public can refer the case to the nearest hospital. It is important to note that the identity of the reporters will remain anonymous in the event they choose to and they do not need to provide evidence prior to reporting. Reporters’ anonymity is an important factor in preventing public from reporting child abuse. The media and government awareness programs should highlight reporters’ anonymity in reporting child abuse. An organized media and awareness campaign should also highlight that ‘mandatory reporters’ such as family members, medical officers, medical practitioner and childcare provider are obliged to report. According to 2001 Child Act 2001, it is the legal duty of the mandatory
reporters to report suspected and actual child abuse cases. Failure to comply with the Law can result in criminal charges against the mandatory reporters.

**CONCLUSION**

TPB is the most appropriate theory to explain society’s intention to report child abuse. This theory focuses on three important determinants, attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. In order for the society to report child abuse, they must believe that reporting will lead to positive outcomes for both the child and his/her family; significant people think they should report and they have control over reporting. Application of TPB to societal child abuse reporting suggests that knowledge is also an important construct to explain and measure society’s intention in reporting child abuse.

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