

An Ethnographic Study of Male Juvenile Delinquents' Information Behavior in Malaysia: A Work in Progress

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Abstract. This paper reports a study in progress whose intent is to explore the male juvenile delinquents' information behavior. Specific research objectives are to examine the male juvenile delinquents information needs, on how the needs of information by juvenile delinquents emerged among them, and to identify whether the information needed by them were met or not. The method of data gathering involved using an ethnographic approach in which the researcher relied on, up-close, personal experience, participation, and observation. The study involves eight participants of the prison integrity schools in Malaysia.

Keywords: Information Behavior, Information Need, Male Juveniles, Prison Libraries, Ethnographic Study.

1. Introduction

The totality of human behavior relates to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking, and information use. It includes face-to-face communication with others, as well as the passive reception of information as in, for example, watching television advertisements, without any intention to act on the information given (Wilson, 1996). According to Eskola (1998), research on information needs, seeking and use began in the 1940's. She added that, in the beginning of the 1980's, researchers began to realize that questions pertaining to information needs, seeking and use could not

just be seen from the system point of view. Campbell (2006) agreed and added that the information behavior research has also not ignored the prison population. Her ideas can be strongly supported by using the Wilson's model of information behavior. According to Campbell (2005), the information behavior for inmates can be understood as a consideration of motivation. The information professional understands the information behavior of inmates but the policy makers generally do not. This prevents decisions which can give motivation to inmates from being made.

A prison is a building used to confine offenders or suspects awaiting trial. In other words, prisons are institutions that physically confine people who have been charged with or are likely to be charged with a criminal offense; they may be held on remand in prison if they deny, refuse or are unable to meet conditions of bail, or are unable to post bail. A defendant that is found guilty will be convicted and may receive a custodial sentence which requires imprisonment. But the most severe punishment is the death penalty. Inmates who have served in prison for long periods of time will be expected to be able to change their attitude to be better persons. While society expects them to be better persons, they will have difficulties reinstating themselves into society and understanding the technological changes that have occurred. In achieving transformation of inmates, there is a need for them to access and use information, especially for their training and education. As such, the prison library plays an important role for inmate training and education.

Past research (Omagbemi and Odunewu, 2008; Kennedy, 2006; Curry, 2003; Barlotti, 2003; Lehmann, 2003; Dixen, 2001; Lemon, 1997; Liggett, 1996; Stevens and Usherwood, 1995) has shown the importance of establishing prison library services to rehabilitate and provide education to inmates. Based on these studies, the role of the prison library is essential for juvenile delinquents. The denial of information services to prisoners can be detrimental to the objectives of the prison (Omagbemi and Odunewu, 2008). The library plays an important role in supporting the prison's mission to rehabilitate the inmates (Lemon, 1997). Stevens (1995), identified a number of areas in which the work of the prison library is important in the reform and rehabilitation process. The prison library will help them to be better persons, provide them with new knowledge, and support their educational interest, as reflected from the following remarks by an inmate:

"Having a good book to read in prison is like sitting down to a steak dinner, well almost. I usually pass along your books to other inmates, so your gift keeps giving" A prisoner from Chattahoochee, Florida.
<http://plgatsimmons.wordpress.com/2011/03/01/fwd-prison-book-program-2/>

2. Juvenile delinquents in Malaysia

According to Section 2, the Prisons Act 1995 (Act 537), a young prisoner refers to a prisoner under the age of twenty-one years. In Malaysia, the population of teenagers is the second largest compared to most other age groups. Based on a

report from the Policy Branch/Crime Prevention, Public Affairs Department, Bukit Aman (Utusan Malaysia, 2011), in Malaysia today, a juvenile is likely to be involved in various social ills and serious crime. In 2010, people in the age group of 0 to 24 years counts for 46.5% of the population, while the ones aged between 25 to 44 years amount to 33%, and the ones, aged 45 and above is 20.5%. From the total population, only 0.32% of adolescents engage in criminal activity. Although this number is very low, the number of teenagers that are involved in criminal activity, especially school and college students is increasing.

From the 8,113 teens aged between 16 and 18 years who were arrested during the year 2006, 3,545 of them were school / college students. There are also cases involving students aged 7 to 10 years. In 2008, a total of 3,643 violent crimes were reported and 5,166 property crimes were committed by youths between the ages of 7 to 18 years (Figure 1). During the first two months of the year 2009, a total of 295 students aged between 13 to 18 years were involved in various criminal cases including murder. Among the criminal cases committed by students are stealing motorcycles, burglary, injuring others, and rape (Nurul Adlina Kamaluddin, 2009). Motorcycle thefts topped the list with 975 cases (The Star, 2010).

Increased numbers of crime incidences among teenagers have caused many young people to waste their time in prison. Based on studies of the Research Institute of Malaysia, in collaboration with the Youth Development Center for Psychology and Development Malaysia; the youths ranked the causes for this problem as follows : 48.1% said that it was due to their boring lives, 38% because of their hobbies, and 27.8% said they were influenced by friends. According to Hassan (2004), 80% of juveniles involved in crime come from families with incomes of less than RM1000 and have a large number of family members. This will create pressure and an uncomfortable situation at home for the juvenile.

The Malaysian government fully supports education for young prisoners. Young prisoners will gain formal education and will be allowed to sit for public examinations under a special program of the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Prisons Department. Under the program, teachers will be sent to prison to teach the young prisoners, particularly ones aged 21 years and below. The knowledge obtained will be useful when they are released later. The academic programs provided by the Prisons Department of Malaysia are : 3M recovery classes, Pre-PMR classes, PMR classes, Pre-SPM classes, SPM classes, STPM classes and Diploma classes (for long distance education programs). The existence of the academic classes indirectly encourages young prisoners to use the prison library to obtain information related to their education. The nation's 1 Malaysia aspirations were conceived by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato' Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak. 1 Malaysia stresses on eight core values, some of which are associated with education. According to Najib (2009), education and knowledge are important prerequisites for any

nation to succeed. He hopes that the reading culture among Malaysians can be enhanced and made as a habit. He also expects that this will open up the Malaysian mind. This matter should also involve juveniles, who are imprisoned. The importance of education should be emphasized to them in order to prevent them from relapsing into criminal activities. The importance of having prison library in Malaysia is stated in the Malaysia Prison Regulations 2000; 'a library shall be provided in every prison, and, subject to these Regulations and to such conditions as the Director General may determine, every prisoner shall be allowed to have library books and to exchange them as often as practicable'. (http://www.prison.gov.my/portal/page/portal/english/undang2_en)

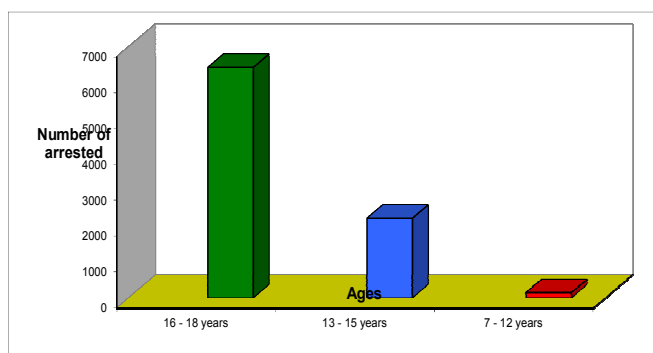


Figure 1: Statistics of teenagers who were arrested due to criminal activities in the year 2008. Source: Utusan Malaysia (2009). Number of teenagers involved in crime increasing. Retrieved 17 February, 2009 from <http://www.dbp.gov.my/lamandbp/main.php?Content=articles&ArticleID=1128&IID=&PHPSESSID=78e100f2d293e3e03fcb09b09d64c01>

3. Research Objectives

A considerable amount of research has been carried out on the issue of how prison library services can help in process of rehabilitate and giving education to young prisoners. According to Inderbitzin (2006) cited by Singer (1996); by opening the doors of juvenile justice, we can learn more about its real purpose in preventing and controlling serious delinquent behavior. In order to help the juvenile delinquents, there is a need to know their information seeking behavior. Therefore, the objectives of this study are:

- a) To understand male juvenile delinquents information needs.
- b) To know how information needs of juvenile delinquents emerge.
- c) To identify whether their information needs are met or not met.
- d) To understand how male juvenile delinquents share information with others.
- e) To understand how the prison's information environment support their needs.

4. Ethnographic methodology

The word ‘ethnography’ comes from two words, ‘ethno’ means people or folk and ‘graphy’ means writing about or describing something. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), ethnography usually involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artifacts, and gathering whatever data is available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry. In other words, ethnography is a description of a people and/or their culture (Neuman, 2011).

Ethnographies in prison

Prisons are the most difficult place to conduct research in any field. This is due to the safety and security factor for both researchers and prison institutions. The public may also have negative perceptions of the research that has been carried out, due to the use of inmates as respondents. According to Waldram (2009), “anthropologists informed him that inmates are all liars”, when he intended to study the treatment programs conducted in federal penitentiaries. Nevertheless, ethnography will help researchers to naturally understand a people’s culture in selected areas. Fetterman (2010), “ethnography involves telling credible, rigorous and authentic stories from the perspective of local people and interpreting these stories in the context of people’s daily lives and cultures. For Waldram (2009), he believes that researchers use ethnographic methods for conducting research in prison because of three strong reason:

- I. Prison inmates are not embraceable research participants in a discipline strongly focused on the innocent, disempowered and disenfranchised.
- II. It is often assumed that the inmates will be uncooperative and too difficult to work with
- III. Prisons are highly regulated environments that constrain more than they enable research.

Research population and sample

This research study involved only a few participants from a population of 753 male juvenile delinquents at the Integrity Schools, Malaysian Prison Department. The number of male juveniles listed here excludes the amount of male juvenile delinquents in private juvenile rehabilitation centers. The selection was based on the criteria set by the researchers to the Malaysian Prison Department. The respondents were selected based on:

- i) Male juvenile delinquents who have outstanding academic achievements based on PMR, SPM and STPM results.
- ii) Male juvenile delinquents who are still studying at the diploma or degree level.
- iii) Male juvenile delinquents who are not interested in the academic field but are very interested in technical skills /vocational skills.
- iv) The youngest male juvenile delinquents.

In line with the UNESCO slogan “Education for All”, the Ministry of Education established the Integrity Schools in 2008 for juvenile delinquents with the aim

to provide education and skills to juvenile offenders, regardless of the crimes they had committed. The eight schools sampled in this study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 : Integrity schools in Malaysia

No	Zone	Location
1	Northern zone	Integrity School Sungai Petani, Kedah
2	Central zone	Integrity School Kajang, Selangor
3	Eastern zone	Integrity School Marang, Terengganu
4	Southern zone	Integrity School Kluang, Johor
5		Henry Gurney School, Telok Mas, Melaka
6	Sabah zone	Integrity School Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.
7		Henry Gurney School, Keningau, Sabah
8	Sarawak zone	Integrity School Kuching, Sarawak

Male juvenile delinquents as respondent

Male juvenile delinquents are sampled in this study because women inmates refuse to listen to information about life outside (Chatman, 1999). Female delinquents have learned that this information does not lead to decreased stress because knowing that something is going on does not mean that they can effect any changes outside the prison. Chatman also added that a number of women inmates avoid knowledge of the outside entirely. Women, who come into prison with a drug or alcohol problem, initially try to sustain their habits even in prison. This will caused problems as ways of controlling women inmates differ from that for male inmates. This statement was supported through an informal interview with a female prison staff from the Malaysian Prison Department, Mrs. A.

"It is difficult to undertake research with female offenders if the researchers are also a female. They typically avoid answering questions or talking about themselves, what they do and their life history. There are also cases female offenders being aggressive and irritable with outsiders. For them, an outsider (the researcher) will disturb their lives."

Mrs. A added that;

"This is different compared to male offenders. Male offenders are more inclined to share their experiences and the stories of their lives. If the researchers are female, they will feel valued and they will be more respectful towards the researchers."

Data collection method

The study uses an ethnographic research methods approach in which the researcher relies on up-close, personal experience and possible participation and not just by observation methods (Genzuk, 2003). According to Genzuk (2003),

ethnography enhances and widens top down views and enriches the inquiry process, taps both bottom-up insights and perspectives of powerful policy makers at the top and generates new analytic insights by engaging in interactive, team exploration of often subtle arenas of human difference and similarity. The ethnography study is divided into 3 phases (Figure 2). It employs three kinds of data collection: interviews, participation and observation and documentation. Obtaining information or feedback from the respondents (juvenile) using the questionnaire method may be met with resistance, as such it is expected that it will be easier to conduct an ethnographic study.

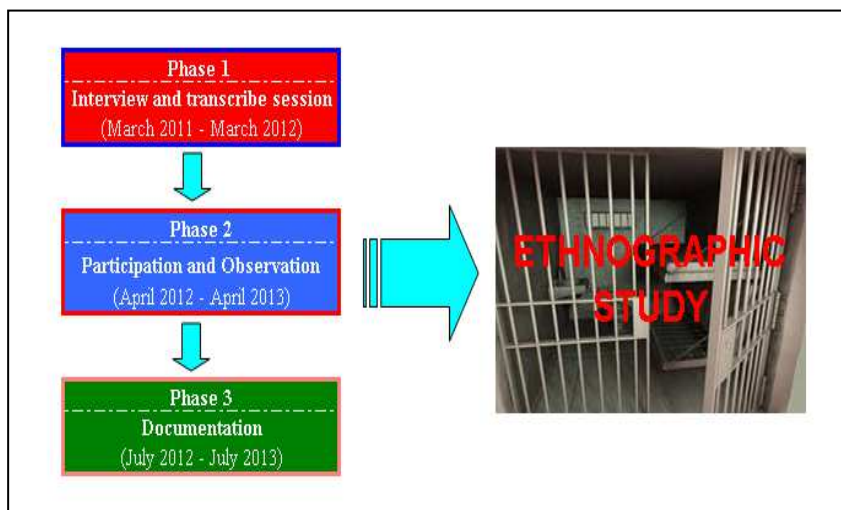


Figure 2: The three phases involved in the ethnographic study

i) Phase 1 : Interview sessions with respondent

The first phase is important in order to obtain feedback from the sample about their opinions, feelings, knowledge, sensory data, and background information (Genzuk, 2003). A good ethnographer will take any opportunity to listen and to ask questions of individuals and groups while participating and observing (O'Reilly, 2011). The interview session will be conducted in a unique situation whereby researchers use simple and appropriate language to communicate with the sample in an emotionally supportive and comfortable environment. The researchers will ask truly open-ended questions, clear questions and make observation while interviewing the sample. The researchers must be aware of and sensitive to the sample's responses. More importantly, an ethnographic interview does not only involve entering the field, collecting the data, then immediately leaving. It is engaged, committed, involved and time-consuming (O'Reilly, 2011).

In a prison environment and in facing male juvenile delinquents; the researchers must remember not to use 'standard language' in the interview sessions. The best ways a researcher to engage with these delinquents are learning their language, communicating in their language and trying to share the interests such as English Football Teams like; Chelsea, Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool. Although the Malay language will be used as communication medium between the researcher and the respondents; there are a few words and dialects that the researcher will be unable to understand. According to O' Reilly (2011), the ethnographers have to be aware that their level of understanding of a group or culture may be affected by their language skills. We can perhaps accept that imperfect language skills do not mean we have completely misunderstood. The researchers obtained official written consent from Malaysian Prison Department to use audio recording during the interviews. This simplifies the researchers' task of transcribing the interview session.

Phase 2 : Participation and observation sessions

The researchers are committed to getting close to the sample being observed in its natural setting and also look at the book collection prepared for young prisoners which will help them in their rehabilitation and education process. This method is useful in looking and finding out the needs and interests of the existing collections in their prison libraries. According to O'Rielly (2011), an ethnographer not only talks and asks questions, but he or she also learn about the sample by observing them, participating in their lives and asking questions that are related to their daily life experiences. Observation sessions will be held in the Integrity School prison libraries. Respondents that are involved in interview sessions will also be observed during this session. Any male juvenile delinquents that use the prison library with special characteristics that can be observed will also be asked to become new respondents in this research; for example, individuals who use or request for reading materials that are not popular or are rarely requested for other juvenile offenders. If necessary, the researchers will take the opportunity to interview the individual for research purposes.

ii) Phase 3: Documentation session.

Possible documents include work descriptions, posters, memos, teaching materials and other kinds of written items. With regards to issues of privacy and copyright, the researchers will cite all the materials given.

5. Conclusion

Everyone is at risk of going to jail as everyone makes mistakes. We must realize that inmates need us to understand them and their rights as humans. Juvenile offenders are the youngest prisoners and they still have opportunities to improve their life to be better persons. By using ethnographic methodology, the researchers will move into the area of juvenile delinquents' daily lives. The method will allow the researchers to understand information behaviors among juvenile delinquents, and can directly assist the relevant authorities in providing better services, improve the weaknesses in the administration, and facilitate the

preparation of a collection of reading materials and library services in prison libraries in Integrity Schools. The prison library plays an important role in rebuilding the spirit, and providing education, knowledge, and spiritual guidance to juvenile offenders in order for them to start a new life when they are released later.

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