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A study of religiosity and juvenile delinquency in Malaysia

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Science (Forensic Science)

NOR AZMI BIN FAHMI

School of Health Sciences
Universiti Sains Malaysia
Health Campus
16150 Kubang Kerian, Kelantan
Malaysia

April 2006

A STUDY OF RELIGIOSITY AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY IN MALAYSIA

By

NOR AZMI BIN FAHMI

**Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment for the
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

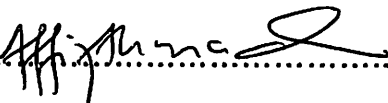
“A STUDY OF RELIGIOSITY AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY IN MALAYSIA”

is the bonafide record of research work done by

Mr. Nor Azmi Bin Fahmi

during the period from December 2005 to April 2006

under our supervision

Signature of supervisor:.....

Name and address of supervisor: Dr. Affizal Ahmad

Lecturer

School of Health Sciences

Universiti Sains Malaysia

Health Campus

16150 Kubang Kerian, Kelantan

Date: 23 April 2006

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ABSTRACT

Juvenile offending has been a nationally recognized persistent social problem. Current interventions are still distant from comprehensive and holistic resolutions in preventing and decreasing delinquent behaviors. One critical limitation of the existing intervention strategies for decreasing juvenile delinquency is the exclusion of religious factors. For the present study, religion is defined as an integration of four aspects: (1) a belief in a transcendent being that provides principles of behavior, purposes of existence, and the meaning of death, (2) a moral system providing principles and ideals of behavior, (3) religious practices based on the belief, and (4) an involvement in and attachment to conventional religious institutions. Some researchers believe that religion is unrelated to delinquency (Hirschi and Stark, 1969; Sutherland and Cressey, 1978). In particular, Hirschi and Stark's finding of the "hellfire and delinquency" hypothesis, which suggests that religion has no effects on delinquency, has been regarded as an incontrovertible fact for a long time. However, a number of scholars remain confident about the potential beneficial effect that religion has on reducing various types of delinquent behavior (Johnson, 2001; Sloan and Potvin, 1986). Even though there is increasing agreement that religion is an inhibitor of delinquency rather than a contributor, the strength of a religious effect is unclear related to different offense types and religious contexts. According to Bynum and Thompson (1992), in its simplified definition juvenile delinquency is defined as illegal behavior committed by a minor, whilst delinquent behavior is a relative concept, it has meaning only in relation to the laws that apply to a given population at a specific point in time. The present research was

designed to investigate the relationship between religiosity and juvenile delinquency. In addition, this study was implemented to analyze the research and literature pertaining to relationship between religiosity and juvenile delinquency. A sample of 150 juveniles were randomly selected by the Prison Officer from Henry Gurney School, Malacca. The juveniles were in range of 15 years to 18 years old. All the respondents were males. The "Religiosity Questionnaires" and the "Self-reported Questionnaires" were used in this study. The hypothesis was tested by the Pearson product moment correlation and t-test analysis using the SPSS/PC + package for statistical analysis. The result of this study indicated a non-significant correlation between religiosity and delinquency. Based on the results, there is no correlation between religious behavior and delinquency, and religious belief and delinquency. The t-test analysis indicated that there is a significant mean difference between 'age group' and religious belief. In addition, there is a significant mean difference between 'number of time enter Youth Rehabilitation Centre' and religious behavior. The result also shows a significant mean difference between 'involvement in gang' and delinquency.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is important to pay attention to our community's welfare as well. Moving towards industrialization and globalization will also mean that social problems are more likely to become more complicated. This is seen from the media regularly reporting the involvement of adolescents in criminal activities and which are becoming not only common but the violence is also severe. What is even more of concern is not only the rising rate of juvenile delinquency, but the initial age of involvement has become younger (Bynum and Thompson, 1992).

According to Bynum and Thompson (1992), with the increased reports of gang activities in school and the involvement of juveniles in deviant activities in the schools as reported in the local media, it has altered this perception. This trend evokes pertinent questions on the possible causes of rising rates of juvenile delinquency. Other question focuses on why some young children get involved in these activities while others do not. In addition, we also question if there are any factors that determine or cause the individuals to become involved in criminal or deviant activities.

According to Bynum et. al (1992), it is not easy to define the concept of juvenile delinquent, as it is a complicated social issue. Many definitions exist according to different writer's approach and within the local context. In its simplified definition juvenile delinquency is defined as illegal behavior committed by a minor, whilst delinquent behavior is a relative concept. It has meaning only in relation to the

laws that apply to a given population at a specific point in time. Generally, three categories are being used to define this concept. There are legal definitions, role definitions and societal response definitions.

The legal definition emphasizes on the individual's actions or behaviors, which violate norms and such individuals are legally classified as juvenile delinquents. Role definition focuses on the individual whose role performance identifies the individual as delinquent. The societal response definition concentrates on the members of the social group or society who react to the individual's behavior and who then determines whether an act of juvenile delinquency has actually been committed (Bynum et. al, 1992).

Juvenile delinquency in the legal definition implies for any act which would be a crime if committed by an adult, or any act which the juvenile court may deem inappropriate and for which a juvenile can be adjudicated delinquent (Bynum et. al, 1992). Each state legislature has designated a specific age as the dividing line between juvenile and adult crime offenders. These have been based on the assumption that individuals below the age of adulthood are presumed to lack the maturity necessary for full legal responsibility. Thus, the penalties of the cases processed through the juvenile court is usually less severe. The common complaint about this definition is the vague guidelines that permit a subjective way of interpretation by local authorities when compared to adult criminal case. Another common problem is the practice of some young and professional criminals who use the juvenile court age limitation as a protection to avoid criminal prosecution.

Role definition basically does not agree with the legal definition which assumes that the causal or occasional experimenter with such behaviors as truancy, vandalism, fighting, and running away from home is a true juvenile delinquent. According to the role definition, only individuals who sustain a pattern of delinquency over a long period of time, and whose life and identity are organized around a pattern of deviant behaviors can be called juvenile delinquent (Hirschi, 1969 in Bynum et al, 1992).

Bynum et. al, (1992) stated that when attempting to merge this definition with the legal definition, there are some problems. First, there are no clear guidelines on how often can someone sustain a pattern, or habit of delinquency. The second problem occurs when we know that an adolescent can have more than one role depending on when and with whom these adolescents are related to.

In the societal response definition, deviant or delinquent behavior depends on how the social group or society of the adolescent perceives and judges the behavior in question. In this case, the manner that the significant societal members such as parents, teachers, neighbors and police officers who witnesses the acts and who then make the initial societal response will determine the adolescent behavior as delinquent. This definition is problematic as it depends on the audience's judgments or perception of the behavior. Every individual has different values, beliefs and backgrounds and may perceive things in different ways, and thus it is not easy for the various witnesses to agree collectively on what they have seen or heard. Church attendance and religiosity ceased to be relevant to status offenses and remained irrelevant to crime (Bynum et. al, 1992).

In a widely cited article entitled "Hellfire and Delinquency," Hirschi and Stark (1969), found that adolescents who, along with their parents, frequently attended church, and "students who believe in the Devil and in life after death are as likely to commit delinquency as are students who do not believe in a supernatural world". For many, this became the accepted conclusion to a long debate in the literature concerning the influence of religion on adolescent delinquent behavior.

Some researchers believe that religion is unrelated to delinquency (Hirschi and Stark, 1969). In particular, Hirschi and Stark's finding of the "hellfire and delinquency" hypothesis, which suggests that religion has no effects on delinquency, has been regarded as an incontrovertible fact for a long time. However, a number of scholars remain confident about the potential beneficial effect that religion has on reducing various types of delinquent behavior (Johnson, 2001; Sloan and Potvin, 1986). Even though there is increasing agreement that religion is an inhibitor of delinquency rather than a contributor, the strength of a religious effect is unclear related to different offense types, religious contexts, and social contexts.

Moreover, recent research offers at least qualified support for the relevance of religiosity to various forms of adolescent delinquent behavior. According to Burkett (1993) and Evans (1995), the precise effects of religion on delinquency, however, seemingly are complicated and may be present only under certain conditions. Albeit current studies offer empirical support for an apparent emerging consensus in the literature that there is a low-to-moderate inverse relationship between religiosity and certain delinquent behavior, especially youthful ascetic offences, there are still

questions about the relative efficacy of religiosity with different forms of delinquency when it is examined along with other prominent theoretical elements.

Albrecht (1997), Benda (1994) and Elifson et. al, (1983) mentioned that there is considerable evidence that religiosity has differential effects across various forms of delinquency, especially when controlling for the influences of important theoretical factors, and that it is more consistently related to alcohol use and to status offenses among adolescents.

Nettler (1984) clarified that instead of assuming that delinquency is positively motivated by social learning processes of peer association, modeling, differential reinforcement, and normative definitions, control theory rests on the Hobbesian (1994), assumption that persons who are weakly bonded to their family and to society are likely to succumb to natural or innate deviant desires. Teleological, adolescents are free to engage in delinquency, but are neither encouraged nor compelled to be delinquent. Akers (1994) explained that evidence from recent studies also indicates that weak bonding allows, but does not foster, delinquent acts. These studies of integrated theoretical models reveal that motivation, in addition to lack of restraint over natural urges, is needed to stimulate delinquent acts.

Akers (1994) said that because the logic of control theory disallows for positive motivations for delinquency such as sub-cultural normative definitions, the theory is often regarded as a better explanation of less serious, natural impulsive acts such as status offenses than of serious violations of the law. Agnew (1995) stated that criminal behavior is thought to be more a product of positive motivations such as those identified in social learning theory. This argument, combined with

empirical evidence, suggests that religiosity is more likely to be related to status offenses, and even to alcohol use, among adolescents than to crimes, since religiosity is an element of social control theory. According to Sorenson (1991), indeed, the restraining and supportive roles of religion and of the family are classic themes interlaced throughout social control theory.

There are eight Approved Schools (Sekolah Tunas Bakti) and eleven Probation Hostels (Rumah Tahansentara/ Asrama Akhlak) all over Malaysia. These two types of institutions are for juveniles who are involved in delinquent acts or are reported as having out of control behavior. The only way an individual juvenile can be placed in this type of institution is by a court order. The main objective of admission into such institutions is to educate the juveniles to develop a positive attitude towards life, develop a stable self and to prepare them to live independently in the community in a more socially acceptable way. Structured activities are designed in order for the juveniles to achieve these objectives whilst living in these institutions. These activities include academic education, moral/religious education, vocational training, sports, and counseling services.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Religiosity

Before defining religious belief for the present study, it is important to consider carefully a statement made by Frederick Mosher: “any definition of the field would be either so encompassing as to call forth the wrath or ridicule of others, or so limiting as to stultify its own disciplines” (Mosher, 1980).

In recognition of these problems, this study will differentiate religiosity and spirituality to avoid defining religiosity too broadly. Religiosity has been used interchangeably with a whole host of other terms such as spirituality. For example, some people consider religiosity and spirituality as synonymous. In this paper, religiosity is distinguished from spirituality as a structured religious practice that typically has a group following whereas spirituality is an individual experience with or without a structured belief system (Dwain and Anderson, 1999). In other words, religiosity is defined as an involvement and attachment to conventional religious institutions. As Durkheim (1973) notes, “even when religious belief seems to be entirely within the individual conscience, it is still in society that it finds the living source from which it is nourished”. Religiosity is “first and foremost a collective experience”; it is the “individualized form of collective forces” (Poloma, 1995).

Furthermore, to avoid defining religion too narrowly, religion needs to be distinguished from morality and faith. Some people consider religion as the equivalent of faith or morality. Even though traditional religion and structured religion include faith and a moral system, religion is more than morality and/or faith. Religion falls consistently in the juncture where these categories overlap (Hamilton, 1995).

Many different perspectives of religious belief have been offered by scholars. Some scholars (e.g., Hume and Marx, 1996) defined religiosity as an uninformed, irrational, and wishful thinking process (Stark, 1996). They believe that humans participate in religion because it provides a certain level of comfort. God exists as “hopes in the human consciousness” (Stark and Bainbridge, 1987). However, this approach fails to explain how such wishful thinking could become “plausible enough to satisfy people” and how this can “happen without seriously undermining a more realistic orientation” (Guthrie, 1996). It fails to explain some features of religion, such as hell, which would seem to represent fears rather than wishes (Guthrie, 1996).

In recognition of the problematic approach to religious belief as wishful thinking, many scholars emphasize the rationalization and cognition aspects of religion. In particular, the rational choice approach defines religion as a cost-benefit calculation: People “approach all actions in the same way, evaluating costs and benefits and acting so as to maximize their net benefits” (Chaves, 1995). However, this approach is problematic, too. For example, without having information on both the content of the individual’s preferences and the context in which people are making choices, religious belief cannot be used as a predictive tool. Furthermore, religious belief involves not only the “unknown” but also the “unknowable” for

scientific studies (Montgomery, 1996). In context, people cannot objectively evaluate the probabilities and specify their expected-utility-maximization in all situations. As a result, the rational choice approach cannot be used to predict their behavior because rational choices are based on probabilities that are knowable (Montgomery, 1996).

Finally, the most dominant perspective emphasizes the normative and supportive aspects of religion. Many scholars have defined religiosity as a belief about a supernatural power's direction and legitimate support of conventional social activities (Turner, 1991). This sociological approach views religiosity as an important dimension of social convention. Durkheim (1915) is one of the major supporters on this viewpoint of religious belief. He defines religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one simple moral community, called a church, all those who adhere to them". In addition, according to Heaton (1986), religiosity is not only for "indoctrination into a particular theology," but also for "socialization regarding normative expectations". Furthermore, Thorton and Camburn (1989) also emphasize religiosity as "the source of moral proscriptions for many individuals, the teachings of churches play a critical role in the formation of individual attitudes, values and decisions".

Based on this third perspective that views religion as a main source to sustain the conventionality of society, the present study combines important factors from previous studies of religiosity in order to avoid neglecting the important aspects. According to *Webster's Dictionary* (1990), religion is defined as the service and worship of God or the supernatural, commitment or devotion to religious faith or

observance, and a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices. Chard- Wierschem (1998) defined religiosity as “a state of being reflecting an adherence to a comprehensive system of beliefs anchored in a belief in the supernatural and potentially expressed overtly, in the practices of the individual and/or covertly, in the individual’s desire to align themselves with this transcendental being”. Johnson (2001) defined an adolescents’ religiosity as the extent to which an adolescent is committed to a given religion and to its teachings.

For the present study, religion is defined as an integration of four aspects:

(1) a belief in a transcendent being that provides principles of behavior, purposes of existence, and the meaning of death, (2) a moral system providing principles and ideals of behavior, (3) religious practices based on the belief, and (4) an involvement in and attachment to conventional religious institutions.

2.2 Juvenile Delinquency

Bartol (1991) view juvenile delinquency as an imprecise, nebulous legal and social label for a wide variety of law- and norm-violating behavior. Legally, a juvenile delinquent is one who commits an act defined by law as illegal and who is adjudicated delinquent by an appropriate court. According to Mahiran (1994), the legal definition is usually restricted to persons under 18, as is the case in Malaysia.

The concept of crime is elusive, and is captured by different measures in markedly different ways. Recorded crime is a count of incidents that have been referred to the authorities, and classified by them as breaking the legal code. Victim surveys report incidents that people know about and remember, and that the

surveyors regard as being against the law. This includes many that were not referred to the authorities, although people are still influenced in deciding what to mention in the survey by their conception of what it might be worth reporting to the police. Studies of self-reported offending also cover a wider field than recorded crime. Both victim surveys and self-report studies of offending are subject to biases caused by forgetting and distortion, by mistaking when an event occurred, and by reluctance to mention certain incidents (Gibbons and Krohn, 1991).

The nature and extent of delinquent behavior– both what is reported and unreported to law enforcement agencies– is essentially an unknown area, even more so than adult crime (Krisberg and Schwartz, 1983, as cited in Bartol, 1991). Many people today believe that serious juvenile offences are increasing at a steady and alarming rate. However, according to Bartol (1991) official juvenile statistics do not support the public perception of an overall rising juvenile offending rate. In a more recent study, Jenson and Howard (1998) in their analysis had found that overall crime rates have remained relatively stable over the past three decades and are independent of prevailing juvenile justice policies. They did note however, that an increase in violent youth crime during the past decade had renewed interest in punishing delinquent youths, rather than using rehabilitative methods.

Johnson et. al (2000) conducted a systematic review of the religiosity and delinquency literature. Religious measures were generally inversely related to juvenile delinquency in the 13 studies that used reliability testing of religious measures. These findings also show that religiosity had a negative effect on deviance in the most methodologically rigorous studies. While many of the studies

did not use random sampling, multiple indicators to control measurement errors, or reliability testing of their measures, the higher-quality studies generally found a negative relationship between religiosity and delinquency .

Johnson (1999) examined the degree to which individual religious involvement mediates and buffers the effects of neighborhood disorder on youth crime. Utilizing data from the National Youth Survey, the study focuses on black respondents given the historical and contemporary significance of the African-American church for black Americans. Results from estimating a series of regression models show that: (1) the effects of neighborhood disorder on crime among black youth are partly mediated by individual religious involvement (measured by frequency of attending religious services) and (2) involvement of African-American youth in religious institutions such as the church significantly buffers or interacts with the effects of neighborhood disorder on crime, and in particular, serious crime. The authors recommend that religiosity measures be included in future studies of the effect of protective factors in disordered communities. Other recommendations include better measures of religiosity, multilevel modeling, and a life-course/developmental approach.

2.3 Religious Belief

The issue of religious influence on delinquency has long been a debate in the study of criminology. Rohrbaugh and Jessor (1975) defines religiousness as the extent to which one is religious, pious, or devout. This definition can serve many purposes, ranging from providing meaning to one's life to yielding a sense of

personal fulfillment, securing access to social resources, interpersonal relationships, and standards to judge and guide one's action.

Studies by Junger (1993) looked at issues of religiousness with regards to praying and attendance at the place of worship. Cochran (1994) studies which limited their dimension of religiousness on religious participation and salience.

Benda and Whiteside (1995) and Junger and Polder (1993) suggest that being religious inhibits adolescent delinquent behavior in their recent investigations. This view holds that religion plays an active role in shaping society and controlling human behavior, which promotes conformity and inhibits deviance by encouraging the internalization of moral values and the acceptance of social norms.

Jensen (1981) suggests that this reflect today's popular belief that a lack of religious commitment is a major element in the etiology of deviant behavior. Some researchers indicate that religion either has no effect or has only limited effect on delinquent behavior. Hirschi et al. (1969), Stark, Kent, and Doyle (1982), Ellis (1910), Lombroso (1911), Bongor (1961), Steiner (1924), and Barnes (1951) have done some studies to show that church attendance and belief in supernatural sanctions are unrelated to self-reported delinquency.

Burkett (1974) and Cochran (1994) argue that religious effect on deviant behavior only exists with regard to certain ant ascetic behaviors. Cochran et. al (1988) also reported that the effect of religion on delinquency is only among some denominational subgroups or some social contexts but not in others. The view of Junger et. al (1993) is further supported by another group of researchers who found that this relationship only occur in some social contexts but not in others.

Evans et. al (1995) state that the findings on the discrepancy between recent research and earlier studies is attributable largely to limitations in the study method, and in the use of theory and contingency contexts in early investigations.

Furthermore, Junger et. al (1993) suggested that more information about the nature of the social networks and institutions in a community are necessary in order to arrive at an explanation of the relation between being religious and delinquency that is applicable to different cultures. The importance of religious beliefs and implication of the religious values on specific subgroups or culture need to be taken into consideration, especially amongst the delinquent group.

According to Hirschi (1969), people who live in the same social setting often share common moral beliefs. They may adhere to such values as sharing, sensitivity to the rights of others, and admiration for the legal code. If these beliefs are absent or weakened, individuals are more likely to participate in antisocial or illegal acts. Hirschi (1969) further suggests that the interrelationships of social bond elements controls subsequent behavior. People who are highly committed to conventional acts and beliefs are more likely to be involved in conventional activities.

Associations between indicators of attachment, belief, commitment, and involvement with measures of delinquency have tended to be positive and significant. Often research efforts have shown that holding positive beliefs are inversely related to criminality. Children who are involved in religious activities and hold conventional religious beliefs are less likely to become involved in substance abuse (Hirschi,1969).

2.4 Religiousness in reducing juvenile delinquency

Larson (1998) mentioned that religiousness in juvenile delinquency has not been perceived as a strong or relevant factor in reducing juvenile behavior. Therefore, to the detriment of our communities, religiousness has not been tested with a consistent or reliable research methodology. However, as noted, the review findings give a different picture. They show that religion is a strong factor in negating juvenile delinquency and the better it is tested and measured, the better it holds up. The report reveals that the more stringently the religiosity variables are used, the more conclusive the findings. In other words, the greater the number of categories of religiousness that were measured (four or more), the more consistently juvenile delinquency was shown to be reduced. Conversely, the effect was mixed or inconclusive when fewer (two or less) measures of religious dimensions were included. The review also showed that if the measure of religion was a reliable one, the more consistently it showed religion to be a preventive factor in delinquency. The less reliable, the less likely it would consistently provide any findings demonstrating the benefits of religiosity on behavior.

Larson (1998) also stated that the dimensions, or categories, of religiousness measures were defined and examined as follows: (i) Attendance at religious services; (ii) Salience, or importance of one's religion or God in one's life; (iii) Religious denomination; (iv) Prayer; (v) Religious activities that the individual participates in religious activities both inside and outside of typical church/synagogue settings; (vi) Bible study. Salience and attendance were the two most frequently used variables to measure religiosity.