

Counseling Practitioners in Malaysia: Socio-Demographic Profile and Theoretical Approaches in Counseling Process

Zakaria Mohamad

Universiti Malaysia Terengganu
Malaysia

Asyraf Hj. Ab. Rahman

Universiti Malaysia Terengganu
Malaysia

Abstract

This study aims to look at socio-demographic profile of registered counselors in Malaysia and theoretical approaches employed in the counseling process. A total of 241 counselors who are involved in this study consist of randomly selected counselors registered with the Department of Social Welfare and Extensions Association of Malaysia (PERKAMA). Analysis of data using mean and percent indicates that majority of the counselors are practicing female counsellors. They serve in the education sector and aged 39 and below with at least having a bachelor degree. In regards to the theoretical approaches, Person-centered is most widely used by those counsellors, followed by Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) and an eclectic approach. Factors identified for selecting these approaches are their religious influence, family upbringing, personality, and influence from former supervisor and founder of the theory.

Keywords: *Malaysian Counselors, Counseling theory, theory Choice*

1. Introduction

According to the Malaysian Board of Counsellors, counseling practitioners refers to those who receive formal training from recognized local and foreign universities and have accredited certificate of practice by the Board of Counsellors under the Act of 1998. They practice counseling at the institution where they are working whether in government or private sectors. In Malaysia, it is difficult to identify the total number of counselling practitioners because some of them are not registered and some even though registered, cannot be traced. However there are several agencies considered having a list of relatively complete and reliable on the number of registered counselors in their institutions. Among these institutions are the Department of Social Welfare and Counselling Association of Malaysia (PERKAMA). In the Social Welfare Department for instance, a number of registered counselors is over 169 people by 2005. List of counsellors registered with PERKAMA is available on the PERKAMA website (www.perkama.org) with a total number of 372 counselors in 2005. Of these two agencies, the number of counselors become over 541 people. The population of this study are therefore taken into account counsellors registered at both agencies.

In the Ministry of Education, for example, although it has a large number of counsellors working in schools or other various education sectors, most of them are found not registered and do not have a practicing certificate. They practice counseling only in schools, and sometimes do not using proper theories during counseling sessions. This situation indirectly affects the credibility of the counselors in an effort to help clients and the effectiveness of counseling in general. Since the emergence of counseling knowledge, there are various approaches that have been used to provide counseling to individuals in need. Counselors of vast experience will choose the theories that can suit to the problems faced by clients (Asmah Bee 1999).

In the context of helping, if the use of theory is not based on the original theory, it allows the occurrence of counselor's inculcation or personal opinion and personal philosophy to the client. Many trained counselors initially adhere to the original theory while starting their career as counsellor. However, even those who are fanatically tied down to one theory appear to change over time. This is because the client is a human being and he is the link between the theory and practice of the counsellor. Rigid theories repel the human psyche. When the client problem does not fit into the theory, the counselor is compelled to change his theory. This is one of the most demanding challenges of counselling. Thus, counselors should keep their minds more receptive and flexible.

The psychological concept of individual difference must be understood thoroughly. Individual clients differing in their personalities come with dissimilar problems, goals and aspirations. To believe that all those clients would benefit from one kind of theory is unrealistic. It is useful to know that all the well-known theories have emerged from the practice of individual counselor's personal experience with counselees. This is why we have different theories and practices. Trying to know these theories as old and new broadens our perspective. But what would be ultimately useful is the one that is carved out from the counselor's experience with the client. Despite counselor's experience with client that reflect their theory choice or approaches, there are some other factors such as religious background, family upbringing, personality, and some influence from their former supervisor or founder of the theory.

In the Malaysian context, the selection of the above theories are also basically influenced by a number of factors, including counselor's socio-demographic and surrounding. These findings are parallel with research conducted by Murdock, Banta, Srtomseth, Viene and Brown (2009) who discover that counselor's philosophy and interpersonal style contribute to the factors of counselor's selection of theory. Similarly, the findings Beutler and McNabb's (1981) found that counseling trainees tend to accept the theoretical orientation of their supervisors. No matter what the theoretical approach adopted by the counselor, it is intended to assist them in the process of helping clients systematically and expect positive outcomes for the client. Helping process in counseling should employ the use of theories. However, there are counselors who are not using any theory. This may be attributable to the lack of effectiveness of counseling sessions conducted because they do not have treatment plans and appropriate techniques to help clients. Therefore, this discussion able to achieve the following two objectives:

1. Discuss the socio demographic profile of counseling practitioners in Malaysia
2. Explore the theoretical approaches adopted in the counseling process

2. Methodology

241 randomly selected counseling practitioners are involved in this study. They are registered counselors with the Board of Counsellors Malaysia and counselors who were members of PERKAMA (Counselling Association of Malaysia). Questionnaires were sent to respondents by post. They were selected because researcher regarded them as active counselors and counseling practitioners who can demonstrate the true nature of the use of counseling theories. Research instrument consists of a questionnaire about the theories applied among counselors which have been built by researcher based on Counselor Theoretical Position Scale (CPTS) questionnaires, Therapist Orientation Questionnaire (TOQ) by Sundland and Barker (1962) and Coan's (1979) Theoretical Orientation Survey (TOS) and Instructor's Resource Manual (Corey 2001). Cronbach Alpha coefficient of the entire questionnaire after factor analysis was 0.75. Descriptive data analysis was used to obtain socio-demographic profile of registered counselor and theoretical approaches used in counseling sessions. SPSS software version 11.5 was used to do analysis of data using percentage and mean to settle the matter.

3. Research Findings and Discussion

Socio-Demographic Profiles of Counsellors in Malaysia

Table 1 shows the composition of the counselors involved in this preliminary study. It consists of 241 counselors who worked in various places. A total of 138 counselors (57.3%) worked in schools. While 68 persons (28.2%) working in government departments. The rest, each 5 persons (2.1%) worked in private offices and private practice. A total of 24 people (10%) worked in other places. However, one respondent (0.4%) did not disclose the workplace. A total of 120 respondents aged less than 38 years (49.8%). Those aged over 38 years are 119 people (49.3%). While 2 respondents (0.9%) did not state their age. In terms of gender, of the 241 respondents, 118 (49%) of them were men, while 123 (51%) were women. In terms of the educational qualification, 150 of them graduated with a bachelor's degree (62.2%), Masters 67 (27.8%), diploma of 6 (2.5%), other 9 people (3.7%). The remaining 9 respondents did not state their qualification.

Based on the above information, most of the counseling practitioners in Malaysia are working in schools. This indicates that the task of counselors is still concentrated in the field of education even though it begins to spread in the private sectors and other government departments. This development may be associated with the growing acceptance of Malaysian society towards the counselor, in line with the awareness of the importance of mental health in this country (Zakaria, 2007). The majority of counseling practitioners in Malaysia are women under the age of forty years old. This is because women are more interested in venturing into this profession than men.

In terms of the qualification, it shows that most counseling practitioners have at least a Bachelor's Degree and some had Master's Degree. This scenario indicate that they tend to gain knowledge in the field of counseling because they feel that new knowledge in this field will assist them to function more effectively as counselors.

Table 1 Respondents' Demographic Data: Workplace, Age, Gender and Qualification (N=241)

Demographic Profiles	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Workplace	Schools	138	57.3
	Government departments	68	28.2
	Private	5	2.1
	Others	24	10.0
Age	No declaration	1	0.4
	Less than 38 years old	120	49.8
	38 years and above	119	49.3
Gender	No declaration	02	0.9
	Male	118	49.0
Qualification	Female	123	51.0
	Diploma	6	2.5
	First Degree	150	62.2
	Master Degree	67	27.8
	Others	9	3.7
	No declaration	9	3.7

Table 2 below shows the profile of respondents in terms of experience, status and supervised experience. 137 respondents (56.8%) had experience as counselors for less than 5 years. 80 respondents (33.1%) had an experience of more than 5 years as counsellors whilst the remaining 24 respondents (10.1%) did not state their experiences. In terms of services status, 48 respondents (19.9%) are registered with Board of Counselors Malaysia. In the meantime, there are 185 respondents (76.8%) did not register their professional status. 8 respondents (3.3%) did not declare their registration status. Those with supervised experience, the study shows that 62 respondents (25.7%) were supervised less than 292 hours. 35 respondents (14.5%) were supervised over 292 hours. The remaining 144 respondents (59.8%) did not state their supervisory status.

Thus, the data below indicates that the counseling practitioners in Malaysia are lack of experience as counselors. Their involvements in the field are due to the shortage of counseling services in the government sectors. This situation also occurs in private companies whereas their counselors coming from those fresh graduates whose experiences are still questionable as their internal counseling services do not require them to obtain certificate of practice particularly when they are operating in-house such as in the school environment. In terms of supervised experience, the study showed that a counselor in Malaysia in many instance, is not monitored while being a counseling practitioner. Supervision process only happen at the university level when they are students involving in the counseling practicum and internship. During this period, students have developed skills in counseling and related work in graduate classes and in supervised counseling situations. To be eligible to begin a practicum or internship, students must have already completed all of their coursework. The practicum and internship are an opportunity for the student to continue with the process of putting their skills into practice in a real situation with available supervision. This practice unfortunately is not obliged for those existing counseling practitioner as their certificate or degree considered sufficient to practice. There is no supervision from the Board of Counselors in determining the quality of services provided those counseling practitioners to their clients.

Table 2 Respondents' Demographic Data : Experience and Status (N=241)

Experience	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Experience	Less than 5 years	137	56.8
	More than 5 years	80	33.1
	Didn't state experience	24	10.1
Status	Registered	48	19.9
	Unregistered	185	76.8
	Didn't state status	8	3.3
Supervised experience	Less than 292 hours	62	25.7
	More than 292 hours	35	14.5
	Didn't state supervised experience	144	59.8

Table 3 shows the profile of the respondents in terms of usage and theoretical approaches. In terms of use, it is found that counselors who combine the theories are 181 (75.1%). A total of 33 respondents (13.7%) used one theory (single theory). A total of 4 respondents (1.7%) were found not using any theory whilst 23 respondents (9.5%) did not specify the use of their theory. In terms of theoretical approaches, 33 respondents (13.7%) used Person Centered. This was followed by a combination of theories by 28 respondents (11.6%). In the meantime, there are 16 respondents (6.6%) were using REBT. The remaining 7 respondents (2.9%) used the Gestalt, 4 respondents (1.7%) used Behavioral and 3 respondents (1.2%) used Adler's theory. A total of 8 respondents (3.3%) applied other theories. Meanwhile, 142 respondents (58.9%) did not state their theoretical approach. Most counseling practitioners used an eclectic approach (combining theories) in the course of counseling sessions. This finding supports a study by Rosnah (2001). The merger involves at least two theoretical approaches in a single session. The consolidation of the theoretical approach allows practitioners to diversify methods of counselors in helping clients. This is also seen as a counseling practitioner may be less in depth in certain theories. This situation is better than a counseling practitioner who does not use any theory at all in their work.

In terms of theoretical approaches, counseling practitioners in Malaysia tend to select the Person-centered and REBT theories as their practice. These theories selected because they in many ways, suit to personality and family upbringing of the practitioners themselves. To some other extents, influence of the former lecturers and the theory proponents has an impact towards their theory choice (Zakaria 2007). Other theories seem to be less employed as they are not practical on clients in the Malaysian context and some may contradict to religious principles. Theories combination however is well accepted when 11.6 % of the respondents acknowledge the combination of the theory. Theories commonly chosen to be combined were Person Centered and other theories, such as Behavior, Adler, Gestalt or REBT.

Table 3 Respondents' Demographic Data : Theoretical Usage and Approaches (N=241)

Usage	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Theoretical Usage	Did not use theory	4	1.7
	Using one theory	33	13.7
	Combining a few theories	181	75.1
	No declaration	23	9.5
Theoretical approach	Adler	3	1.2
	Person Centered	33	13.7
	Gestalt	7	2.9
	REBT	16	6.6
	Behavioral	4	1.7
	Others	8	3.3
	Combine Theory	28	11.6
	No declaration	142	58.9

5. Conclusion

It seems that counseling service in Malaysia is quite new. Most counseling practitioners in Malaysia are in the educational settings. The service however, gradually spread to the public and private sectors in line with the awareness of mental health care amongst the Malaysian society. From the total counsellors surveyed, women are dominating this career. However, majority of them are still young and have less experience. They graduated from local universities with bachelor degree and beginning to practice without having to have formal experience. In terms of theoretical approaches, many counseling practitioners in Malaysia are familiar to the use of theories in their work. They recognize the importance of theories in order to help the clients. Their tendency in using theories is more towards humanistic stream like Person-Centered in particular. They also use Cognitive-behavioral approach such as REBT. This situation shows that the use of theories among counseling practitioners Malaysia is influenced by the lecturers at the institutions where they were trained. In the Malaysian context, the early stages of counseling services are greatly influenced by American style where most of the lecturers obtained their training from institutions of that country.

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