Perception and Understanding of Counselor Trainees on Multicultural Counseling in Malaysia

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Abstract

Counselor trainees deal with clients of various cultures while providing counseling services. This study aims to identify the perceptions and understanding of counselor trainees to Multicultural Counseling in Malaysia. Qualitative methods through semi-structured interviews were conducted on twelve counselor trainees from two higher institution of learning in Malaysia for their views on the issues of Multicultural Counseling. Interview results revealed that in general, the twelve counselor trainees have good perception and understanding of Multicultural Counseling. All of them have sufficient attitudes, beliefs and knowledge of Multicultural Counseling. But all counselor trainees agreed that there are deficiencies in the skills that made them not fully prepared to deal with clients of various cultures. This deficiency may be caused by the difference in experience between them. The implications of this study are expected to broaden the understanding and awareness of issues of Multicultural Counseling and counselor trainee/counselor educators in general.

Keywords: multicultural counseling, counselor, competency, perception and understanding.

1. Introduction

In order to treat clients effectively, counselors must have a level of multicultural competency (Arredondo, Toporek, Brown, Jones, Locke, Sanchez & Stadler (1996). Cultural competence is the ability to use skills, behaviors or interventions to respectfully provide services to individuals through the appropriate systems, agencies and organizations. Cultural competence demands clinicians to develop flexibility in thinking and behavior, because they must learn to adapt professional tasks and work styles to values, expectations and preferences of specific clients. Various useful strategies have to be chosen for the differences that exist among clients (Shwarzbaum & Thomas, 2008).

Basic multicultural competence requires awareness of the importance of culture, self-awareness, knowledge of cultural groups and skills for working with diverse clients (Sue & Sue, 2003). Pedersen (1991) indicated that therapists must have an awareness of cultural differences and similarities of behaviors, attitudes and values. In addition, they must have knowledge of cultural groups, including facts and information on values, beliefs, behaviors, communication styles and social preferences. Counselors also need to develop culturally sensitive skills and strategies that suit the diverse clients.

In Malaysia, a counselor should have a clear understanding of multicultural counseling where they must understand, respect and appreciate differences in values and socio-cultural background of a client (PERKAMA.
By having clear understanding, counselors are able to avoid multicultural issues such as ethnocentrism, stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. In addition, with this understanding a more empathetic, sensitive and openness will be expressed towards the client. This is because of the cultural diversity in Malaysia, especially in terms of ethnicity and religion. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2009), Malays comprised of 14.4 million or 51% of the Malaysian population, 6.5 million or 23% Chinese, 1.9 million or 6.7% Indian, and other ethnicities consists of 5.5 million 19.3% of the population.

To produce Malaysian own mold of counseling approach is quite difficult because clients tend to choose counselors with similar ethnicity or religion for their own comfort. A study conducted by See & Ng (2010) found that counseling agencies in Malaysia tend to be categorized according to specific language and religion. Government agencies typically offer services in the Malay language and most of the clients are from the Malay ethnicity. Most agencies developed by the Chinese community have embarked on programs and services in Chinese and most of the clients are Chinese. While the agencies that provide services in English are commonly attracting English-speaking clients. According to See and Ng (2010), this scenario does not cause cross-cultural exchanges or collaboration among the agencies. See and Ng (2010) also concluded that the counseling services in Malaysia are seen as having a low level of cultural and social integration even though Malaysia comprises of various community groups.

In addition, many counselors believed that the counselors trained outside the country must be able to apply knowledge, skills and techniques they have learned on their own culture and society (Rafidah 2008, Abdul Halim, Othman, Md Shuaib Che Din & Saporahb Sipon, 2000). Creativity in the adaptation of skills, knowledge and techniques learnt is vital to contribute to the sensitivity, efficiency and effectiveness of services provided by a counselor. And in line with the concept of 1Malaysia, research on the perception and understanding of multicultural counseling in Malaysia is essential as to provide an understanding and awareness of issues related to multiculturalism to counselors in general.

Thus, the aim of this study is to identify the perceptions and understanding of counselor trainees on multicultural counseling in Malaysia as well as to identify their attitudes and beliefs, knowledge and skills on multicultural counseling.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The sample for the current study was a convenience sample of twelve counselor trainees from two higher institution of learning in Malaysia. All of them are graduate students pursuing a Masters degree at the time the study was conducted. The participants were between the ages of 26 and 43 years. All of them have at least three years of experience in handling counseling cases.

2.2 Data collection and analysis

In this study, the researcher interviewed and tried to explore in greater depth in understanding the counselor trainees' perception and understanding of multicultural counseling in Malaysia. In addition, researcher also tries to explore and identify aspects of the counselor trainees' multicultural counseling competencies which include attitudes and beliefs, knowledge and skills in conducting multicultural counseling sessions.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews (accompanied by a demographic questionnaire) was built on the conceptual framework of the research, literature reviews and research purposes so that the researcher can be more focused on the research questions during the interview sessions with participants of the study (Yin, 2009). In addition, follow-up question are also presented to obtain the information needed to answer the research questions (Merriam 2009, Yin 2009).

Each interview was transcribed verbatim by the researcher. In order to ensure trustworthiness (reliability and validity) transcribed interviews were cross-checked by the participants (Creswell, 2007). Content analysis was used to analyze the data. Codes under each themes were reported in frequencies and exemplary quotes were presented in the reporting of the findings.
3. Results

3.1 Counselor trainees’ perceptions of multicultural counseling

Ten sub-themes were identified under the heading of trainees’ perception, which are: (1) varied ways of life, (2) language, (3) background, (4) religion, (5) race, (6) ethnicity, (7) age, (8) economic status and (9) diversity within groups and (10) diversity between groups. Examples can be found from statements such as: “We conduct sessions with clients from different cultures, religions, races and much more....” In the same way, another participant said: “In Malaysia, the society is pluralistic. Multicultural counseling is very important. This is because multiculturalism can be divided into two, the first is within the groups themselves and the second is the cultural diversity of a group of people with other groups, including aspects of religion, culture, language, economic status, race, etc....”

3.2 Counselor trainees’ understanding of multicultural counseling

Five sub-themes were identified under the heading of trainees’ understanding. The sub-themes include: (1) understanding the diversity of cultural identity, (2) not biased, (3) more receptive, (4) having sensitivity and (5) acceptance. For example, the participants reported that: “I have no problem in dealing with clients of diverse cultures, because before this I have dealt with a mixture of different ethnicities such as Chinese, Iban, Bugis, Bajau, Orang Sangai, Bisayak, Javanese, Orang Melaka...”, “We have to accept the clients as they are, they came from different backgrounds and it is important to understand that although they might came from the same ethnicity, they may not be the same as me....”, “It is important to try our best... we have to do some homework in getting to know the client’s heritage, get more information so that we could be of help to the client when we understand where they came from....”

3.3 Counselor trainees’ attitudes and beliefs of multicultural counseling

Six sub-themes were found under the heading trainees’ attitudes and beliefs. These include: (1) awareness, (2) unconditional positive regard, (2) genuineness, (3) empathy, and (4) openness. The participants also revealed that they are aware of how their own cultural background and experiences have influenced attitudes, values, and biases about psychological processes, they also shared that awareness of their emotional reactions toward other groups that may prove detrimental to the counseling relationship is also important. As such, they are willing to contrast their own beliefs and attitudes with those of their culturally different clients in a non-judgmental fashion and they are aware of their stereotypes and preconceived notions that they may hold toward other groups. They also try to recognize their sources of discomfort with differences that exist between themselves and clients in terms of race, ethnicity and culture. One participant reported, “A good counselor needs to be open and flexible and has to be genuine to understand the culture of a certain society....” Another mentioned that,”Counselors should be more open, to understand and accept the client's differences as is... and try to be in their shoes...” Others articulated their concern: “... I am a little worried when dealing with clients of different religions from me. I worry I may force upon client the values of my religion... In fact, sometimes I felt biased....”

3.4 Counselor trainees’ knowledge on multicultural counseling

Four sub-themes were discovered under the heading trainees’ knowledge which are: (1) language, (2) background, (3) the differences between groups and (4) differences within the group itself. Among statements that shows these are: “When conducting sessions with Malays from different states, the language sometimes differ... even though I am Malay and they are also Malay, dialects can be different....”, “I am easily bothered when the topic of Islamic religion came up, especially when I conduct sessions with Malays ... I have to ask a lot about Islamic concepts to the client and that causes the counseling process to go haywire.... If I have more preparation and have deeper understanding, I’m sure it might be more effective....”

3.5 Counselor trainees’ skills on multicultural counseling

Seven sub-themes have been identified under the heading trainees’ skills which are: (1) skills in providing care and service, (2) minimum encouragement, (3) paraphrasing, (4) reflecting, (5) questioning, (6) asking for clarification and checking perceptions and (7) summarizing. Examples can be found from statements such as: “Most of the time, there is need to ask for clarification, paraphrase and summarizing... this helps in understanding where the client came from....”, “When dealing with client that I feel unsure about, I usually use a lot of reflecting and sometimes questioning, I think it is best because client would be able to share... and I would be better able to know the client’s worldview....”, “As a counselor, early exposure to the diversity of the society is significant... how I want to face them, what I want to address ... from this I can apply the knowledge that I have learned and at the same time I gain more experiences....”
4. Discussion

Corey (2001) explains that one of the processes to be an effective, efficient and responsive counselor is that they must be aware, learn and understand their own cultural values and biases as well as the client’s worldview. Therefore, a counselor needs to understand his own culture, the client’s culture and the current sociopolitical system. In addition, Arredondo et al. (1996) and Corey (2001) asserts that a counselor who has competence in handling multicultural counseling sessions has to be very familiar with three aspects: (1) beliefs and attitudes, (2) knowledge and (3) skills. Arredondo et al. (1996) and Corey (2001) explains that the deeper and broader the knowledge of a counselor in various aspects of culture, the more effective the counseling services provided.

The results suggest that in general, the twelve counselor trainees have good perception and understanding of multicultural counseling. All of them have sufficient attitudes, beliefs and knowledge of multicultural counseling. On the other hand, the trainees agreed that there are deficiencies in the skills that made them not fully prepared to deal with clients of various cultures. This deficiency may be caused by the difference in experience between them. Low level of cultural and social integration may also contribute to this lack of skill in multicultural counseling.

This study supports previous studies on competencies of counselor trainees (See & Ng, 2010; Smith and Ng, 2009; Shwarzbaum & Thomas, 2008; Fuertes, Bartolomeo & Nicols, 2001). Counselor trainees’ perception and understanding of multicultural counseling in Malaysia can be improved through enhancing their competencies in relation to their attitudes and beliefs, knowledge and skills for the multicultural counseling sessions to be more effective and helpful (Abdul Halim et al., 2000; Amla Salleh, Zuria Mahmud & Salleh Amat, 2009).

This study has important implications to counselor educators and supervisors in understanding the issues of multicultural counseling that are faced by counselor trainees. Future research using quantitative methods would be useful in providing more information regarding the trainees’ level of competencies and how it may affect their sessions.

References


