

# Understanding of Counseling Process: Cases of Malaysian Counseling Practitioners

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## ABSTRACT

Counselling should undergo a certain process to ensure that a counselling session would achieve its targeted goal. This article intends to analyze the understanding of Malaysian counsellors in light of the counselling process that they choose to conduct. To achieve this objective, six practising counsellors were chosen as participants for this research. Data collected through the methods of structured interviews using interview protocol which is thematically analysed by the NVivo 2 software. Results of the analysis showed that these counsellors understood the counselling process based on the theories that they were using. Besides, they followed several stages and levels in the counselling process with the awareness on the vital elements need to be considered in each process.

**Keywords:** *Counselling process, Malaysian counsellor, Therapeutic Elements*

## INTRODUCTION

The counselling process is a complex and yet systematic process which follows a series of events. It involves steps, levels, techniques, skills, time and changes for each process and usually happens through certain processes. The counselling process could be divided into two, which are the theoretical process and the public process. Through the theoretical process, the counselling process is carried out based on particular theories. The theories, such as Object Relation, Person Centered, Existential, Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), Gestalt, Adlerian, Transactional Analysis are distinctive from each other. Without a systematic basic theory, the counsellor will lose strength, consistency and unity needed during counselling session (Zakaria, 2011). In Malaysian context for instance, many Malays who are mostly

Muslims are suspicious towards imitating anything originated and proposed by the Western scholars including their counselling theory (M. Sumari et al., 2008). These phenomenons to some extents lead to the use of theory which is foreign from the counselling practice in the real sense. Therefore, some stages in counselling process should be observed by counselling practitioner. As for counselling figures like Ivey, Patterson, Carkhuff, Brammer and Egan, they perceived counselling as a process that happens outside the theoretical frame. Brammer (1979), for example, divides phases of the counselling process into two, which are the relationship-building process and encouraging positive actions. Egar (2007) divides the process unto four phases, which involve relationship-building, problem situation, expected scenarios and the action itself. For Carkhuff (1979), he breaks the process into four levels; to build the relationship between a counsellor and the client, the exploration phase, the client's self-acceptance phase, and the action phase.

Generally, the counselling process involves phases or stages such as involvement of counsellor and client, client's exploration, client's self-understanding, and finally the action itself. The self-involvement between counsellor-client begins when the clients comes to see the counsellor and is ready to share his/her personal issues with the counsellor. Next, the role of the counsellor is to explore the client's issues so that it could be understood by both the counsellor and the client in regards to their experiences, thoughts, emotions and behaviours. As for the clients, they have to understand their own personal problems, emotions and the goals that they wish to achieve in the counselling process that they go through. The final objective for a counselling process is based on actions, in which clients have to evaluate their own goals, and take the right actions to achieve while in counselling process. According to Patterson (2000), the basic conditions for a successful counselling relationship include six elements, which are counsellor's understanding of human behaviour, clients' changes, the quality of the relationship between a counsellor and a client, self-exposure, experiences with clients and observe the ethics. These conditions have to be carried out in the counselling process. This paper attempts to examine the counselling process from the perspective of the counselling practitioners and to see how deep their understanding of the process is.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research, which was done in Kuala Lumpur area, uses the multi-case multi-site design research outline. Data collected through in-depth interviews, using interview protocol to investigate the appropriate themes in analyzing the phenomenon under research participants. The research participants are chosen using the purposive sampling, involving five counsellors registered with the Malaysian Board of Counsellors. The participants are named as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6. They possess the ability to reflect and are able to offer explicit explanations related to the topics under research as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (1995) and Stake (1994). The data are analyzed using Nvivo 2 software and go through the process of verbatim, data reduction, theme building and the presentation of results.

Structured interviews were used in the research, using questions which were appropriate to examine the phenomenon under research. According to Patton (1990:169), qualitative surveys have to put deeper focus on a small number of samples and chosen purposively to gain deeply informative cases in order to yield in depth results. The chosen participants possesses adequate experiences and knowledge on counselling practice, the ability to reflect and explain clearly (Rubin & Rubin 1995; Stake 1994) about examined aspects.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The discussion of this research focuses on few aspects regarding participants' profiles, unconditional acceptance of clients, therapeutic elements in counselling, rapport building, objectives of discussion and informed consent. The followings are results of the study;

#### ***Profiles of participants***

The subjects of this research consisted of six full-time counsellors who run their own private practice in Kuala Lumpur area. Five of them are qualified with a Master's degree while one participant owns a doctorate in counselling. All of them are registered with the Board of Counsellors and possess *Sijil Perakuan Amalan* (Certified Practicing Certificate). There are four men and two women in the group. Most of them are over 35 years of age and they have worked as counsellors for more than ten years.

#### ***Unconditional Acceptance of Clients, Empathy and Purity***

The success of a counselling process largely depends on the counsellor's wisdom, one who is able to accept his or her clients unconditionally. PK6 explained that a counselling process requires an unconditional acceptance of clients, showing empathy and does not exhibit any values to any issues advocated by clients. This type of a counselling process is based on theoretical approach, which is the Person Centred Theory. His statement is as follows:

"..So what I use in building the relationship is something that is suggested by the theory. For example, accepting clients as they are. Secondly, to show empathy in all their problems. And at the same time my sincerity in the acceptance is reflected by not taking any advantages from clients' issues. So I think that this is where the theoretical practice can be applied to build a relationship with clients..(PK6:144)

This statement by a participant agrees with Rogers' opinion in Corey (2009). Three therapist attributes create a growth-promoting climate in which individuals can move forward and become what they are capable of becoming: congruence (genuineness or realness), unconditional positive regard (acceptance and caring), and accurate empathic understanding (an ability to deeply grasp the subjective world of another person).

#### ***Therapeutic Elements***

Most participants mentioned that the counselling process involved few certain elements. The elements found in the process are counsellor's role, therapeutic relationship, objectives of the session and the sequence of the process. Therapeutic elements are a vital aspect in the counselling process. The participants also explained in details how they were involved in the process. This involvement began from the start of the session, using the skill to entertain the clients and analyze their issues. Following that, by using the theoretical approach, they were able to understand those issues and consequently resolve them. Each step was done in a therapeutic atmosphere, and followed the sequence of steps according to the chosen theory. PK5, for example, in regards to this matter noted that:

....."It is true that Rogers emphasized on the listening part. The way he listened was through therapeutic listening. And also understanding others. When he went deeper into a problem he could really be with that person. No matter how pained is a person, or how big is the problem, he could understand because he could listen, empathize, and help. That is what I go through...."  
(PK5:50)

### ***Building Rapport, Making Exploration, Examining Problems and Discussing Alternatives***

According to PK4, before starting on a counselling process, a counsellor has to establish a comfortable environment for his or her clients. In counselling, the process of creating a comfortable ambience is called 'rapport-building'. Rapport-building can be initiated by engaging clients in light and comfortable conversations. Once rapport is established, a counsellor then can proceed with clients' self-exploration. This process is followed by evaluation of problems and finally discusses any possible alternatives.

" I'm a kind of person who always believe that at the beginning of a session, it is hard for clients to open up, no matter whether they are referred or voluntary. Usually for those who are voluntary, it is relatively easier to build rapport, but I'd still apply Client Centred theory in both situations. That means, I will put more focus into building a therapeutic relationship, minimum support, and encouraging clients to speak more. I want them to speak, speak, speak. That's the only way for me to know them. That's why minimum help is important. So when it comes to the next phase, especially the exploration phase, I'll see their actual issues. From there I'll apply theories from discussions, and discuss about alternatives..." (PK4: 184)

### ***Making Explorations on Current Issues***

Making a deep exploration on the current issues is vital in a counselling process. Through this method, a counsellor could get a true insight of a particular problem before proceeding with helping strategies. This situation can be explained by an interview conducted with PK2.

"...Clients in Model Satire prefers experiential aspect, which means, we can't focus on the cognitive aspect only during a counselling session. They want to feel at various levels. What I mean by that is, say, take a client who's stressed about work and refuses to go to work. I'll see that as a symptom for behavioural problem. But I still have to explore from various other aspects, say, what emotions are involved when he's stressed. I have to know about what is his perspective towards himself, what is others' perspective of him, what is his expectations upon himself and others. What is his yearning and how is his self-esteem? So I have to explore these issues and when I do that, I have to be the one in charge. I will promote changes at every level, and these changes need to be experiential. Also, all these changes will influence each other. For example, his emotions will affect and change his perspectives. In return, his perspectives will change the way he feels. Like I said, they influence each other and this is how I help my clients.." (PK2: 164)

### ***Objectives of Discussions and Informed Consent***

A successful counselling session must have clear objectives of discussions. This can be achieved through a counsellor's ability to plan with his/her clients. However, when PK3 was asked to comment on this matter, he stated that he did it the way it is suggested in books. Nonetheless, in other statements, he commented that objectives and the context of discussion in a counselling session are often determined by clients. This is due to the fact that the Client-centred approach in a counselling session is less structured and does not appear to be too bossy. As for informed consent, it is a legal procedure to ensure that a client knows all of the risks and costs involved in a treatment. The elements of informed consents include informing the client of the nature of the treatment, possible alternative treatments, and the potential risks and benefits of the treatment. Although informed consent is necessary in a counselling session, a participant thought that informed consent was not needed in a particular matter as he applied unstructured client-centred theory.

..”In the client-centred approach, it is either very loosely structured or not structured at all. So there is no need for informed consent here, because the clients determined the direction by themselves. We don’t have to give any orders at all. They choose the direction, and the agenda. So, that basically means-no informed consent. It totally depends on clients’ own context. It’s not necessary to decide any discussion agenda or direction. We don’t try to change them. So we don’t need informed consent. Everything is loosely structured, and I think it’s not even structured at all. Not structured..” (PK3:220)

## **CONCLUSION**

In general, research participants understood the counselling process and administered the process with theoretical approach. They agreed that the counselling process involves a sequence of steps by counsellors to help their clients, in which this sequence has to be carried out in a way that will benefit clients to the maximum. It is also noticed that the counselling process divides different focus whether on cognitive, affective or behaviour, depending on the type of theory in use.

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