COUNSELLING PROCESS AND ITS APPLICATION AMONGST MALAYSIAN COUNSELLING PRACTICIONERS

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Abstract

The counseling process could be divided into two, which are the theoretical process and the public process. Through the theoretical process, the counseling process is carried out based on particular theories. As for counseling figures like Ivey, Patterson, Carkhuff, Brammer and Egan, they perceived counseling as a process that happens outside the theoretical frame. This article aims to analyze the counseling process and its application amongst Malaysian counseling practitioners. To achieve this objective, five practicing counselors were chosen using purposive sampling 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 indicated that most counselors understood the counseling process based on the theories that they were using. Most of the participants used Person Centered theory as their guide. Besides, they followed several stages and levels in the counselling process with the awareness of the vital elements which need to be considered in each process.

Key Words: Counselling process, counseling practitioners, therapeutic elements, person centered theory

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Many novice counsellors become confused about which counselling process to practice, as they are still not fully skilled on the theories. This situation could give a negative outlook of counselling, especially to first-time clients. The process of counselling develops in definable stages with recognizable transition. The first stage involves building a relationship and focuses on engaging clients to explore issues that directly affect them. Two struggles take place at this time (Napier & Whitaker, 1978). One is the battle of structure, which involves issues of administrative control (e.g. scheduling, fees, participation in sessions). The other is the battle for initiative, which concerns the motivation for change and client responsibility if there are failures at this point, the counselling effort will be prematurely terminated, and the counsellor and client may feel worse for the experience.

Others factors that influence the progress and direction of counselling are the physical setting, the client's background, the counselor's skill, and the quality of the relationship established. They will be examined here as well as the nature of the first interview and the exploration of caunseling. Carkhuff (1969, 2000) and Daniel and Ivey (2007) have demonstrated that some counselling responds cut across theoretical and cultural line in helping build a client-counselor relationship. These responses are some-times known as microskills and include theoretical and social-learning behaviours such as attending, encouraging, reflecting, and listening. When mastered, these abilities allow counsellors to be with their client more fully, 'act in aculturally appropriate manner, and find positives in life experience'. (Weinrach, 1987, p. 533)

A number of factors affect the counselling process for better or worse. Among those factors are the seriousness of the concern presented, structure, initiative, physical setting, client qualities and counsellor qualities. In additions to those factors, the process also involves steps, levels, techniques, skills, time and client personal changes. 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. Despite various form of theories focusing on the importance of counseling session, each theory has their own view and perspective in regards to view of human nature, role of the counsellors, goals, techniques, strengths, contribution and limitations. Without a systematic basic theory, the counsellor will lose strength, consistency and unity needed during counselling session (Zakaria, 2011).

In Malaysian context, the most popular theories are Person Centered and Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT). This is due to the fact that both theories can accommodate with the existing Asian culture and their socio-religious belief (M. Sumari et al., 2008). These phenomenona 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. Egan (2007) divides the process unto four phases, which involve relationship-building, problem situation, expected scenarios and the action itself.

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 come 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.

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 possess adequate experiences and knowledge on counselling practice, the ability to reflect and explain clearly (Rubin & Rubin 1995; Stake, 1994) about examined aspects.

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;

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.

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)

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)

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. Rogers (1961) describe empathy as the counsellor's ability to enter the client's phenomenal world, to experience the client's world as if it were your own without ever losing the 'as if' quality. 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 creat 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).

Making Explorations on Current Issues

Egan (2007) observes that exploring and ultimately identifying goals often occur when a client is given the opportunity to talk about situations, or to tell personal stories. 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)

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).

On the whole, practising counsellors in Malaysia have practised the counselling process as advocated by the employed theories. As most interviewed counsellors apply the Person Centred theory, the application of their counselling process resembles Person Centred theory's suggestions. Even though the theory seems to focus on undirected methods in the counselling process, the structures done by counsellors prior to the session have resulted in clear levels in the counselling process. Carl Rogers (1951 & 1961) has outlined this process through Rogers' seven stages of psychological development. This is characterised by:

1.   Movement from internal rigidity (fixity) towards increased internal fluidity (flowingness);

2.   A deepening sense of self and one's internal life, and internal fluency;

3.   A progressive awareness of, acknowledgement of, and acceptance of one's own feelings;

4.   A widening realisation that far from being simple and clear cut, the world, other people, and oneself involve complexity and ambiguity.

The results of this research indicate that the practising counsellors in Malaysia have shown the application of these levels in their counselling process.

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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