DEVELOPMENT OF COUNSELLOR TRAINEES'S SELF-EFFICACY WHILST PERFORMING COUNSELLING PRACTICUM: MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Counsellor trainee self-efficacy explains the capability of performing the role of counsellor. Being able to practice their role as well as to apply counselling skills whilst performing counselling practicum promotes trainee perceived self-efficacy. The counselling practicum provides opportunities for trainees to practice their knowledge and skills with the real clients as well as to gain experience for future work. Despite this, the counselling practicum involves fulfilling the required tasks. Being able to fulfil the required task may contribute to their self-efficacy and promote their development as a counsellor. The aim of this article is to explore self-efficacy experienced by counsellor trainees, and in what ways those experiences promote development. Qualitative methods involving a series of semi-structured interviews, journal writing, observation and review of related documents were employed with ten participants during the counselling practicum. The findings of the study reveal that self-efficacy among counsellor trainees develops during their counselling practicum. The stories of the trainees indicate that development of efficacy among counsellor trainees involves acceptance of the tasks and roles, openness to new experiences as well as realistic perceptions of the situation. Whilst development of the counsellor trainees during the counselling practicum is not a smooth process, their perceived self-efficacy is increased continuously. Performing the role of counsellor and engaging in the counselling practicum creates opportunities to test and be tested in their ability as a counsellor, which promotes their perceived self-efficacy and impacts their development as a counsellor.

Keywords: Counsellor trainees, self-efficacy, counsellor development, counselling practicum

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1. Introduction

The development of counsellor trainees is the main concern in counselling training. Several writers (Stoltenberg, 1981; Stoltenberg and McNeill, 1997; Stoltenberg, et al., 1998) developed a comprehensive developmental model of clinical supervision, the Integrated Developmental Model (IDM). The IDM explicates the general professional development of the trainees. It outlines a continuous process of trainee growth and development across three developmental stages, Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3, which represent a gradual progression from the beginning of the involvement of trainees in counselling training. In relation to this, based on an idea proposed by Orlinsky and Ronnestad (2005), and by Ronnestad and Ladany (2006), Grafanaki (2010) suggests that the development of counsellor trainees is also important for clients and society at large. Being able to develop contributes to the performance as a counsellor.

Previously, Pitts (1992) argues that the nature of the counselling practicum creates a challenging learning experience for the counsellor trainees. The author identifies two types of problems related to the counselling practicum. Type 1 problems are related to individual failures to perform as reasonably expected, due to such factors as lack of information, lack of resources or lack of resolution of personal issues; while type 2 problems result from a failure of some aspect of the system. The two sources of problems are on a continuum, and many problems stem from some combination of the two sources. In addition, Baird (1996) points out that the counselling practicum provides an opportunity for the trainees to bring together information, knowledge, and skills learned during the training at the university, as well as to review what has been learned. The trainees have opportunities to try new skills, and to develop these skills, as well as to learn from both successes and mistakes while trying to apply these skills. Recently, Folkes-Skinner et al. (2010) indicates that training to be a counsellor is stressful and that it inevitably involves significant shifts in identity, self-knowledge and confidence. Most of these changes related to starting work with clients. Despite the significant shifts, counsellor trainees develop their self-confidence about becoming effective helpers and the anxiety level decreases as they go through their supervised training (Al-Darmaki, 2004).

The ability to fulfil needs creates a feeling of satisfaction in one's own ability. The perception of one's own ability explains the individual's efficacy. Self-efficacy is a set of beliefs about the self, which results from a variety of sources, over a period of time. The concept of self-efficacy has been applied to the counselling process since the 1980s (Larson et al., 1992). The sense of personal efficacy of the individual mediates the relationship between what the person knows how to do and what he really does. The authors (Larson et al., 1992)

suggest four sources of information that will influence the perception of self-efficacy: (a) performance enactment, which is performing a specific behaviour successfully; (b) vicarious learning, which is observing a model successfully performing a specific behaviour; (c) verbal persuasion, which is listening to someone explaining how to perform the specific behaviour; and (d) emotional arousal, which is anxiety that discourages one's self-efficacy. Earlier research (Larson et al., 1992) indicates that a stronger perception of counselling self-efficacy relates to more self-esteem, less anxiety, stronger self-perceived problem solving effectiveness, and more satisfaction with pre-practicum class performance among counsellor trainees. Leach et al. (1997) found that previous counselling experience had an impact on the self-efficacy of trainees. According to the authors, experience with various types of clients may contribute towards a greater understanding of the counselling process and individual differences. Corey (1996) discusses personal characteristics of the counsellor during counselling sessions, and argues that these characteristics may foster client growth. As the writer noted, 'Effective counsellors have an identity. They know who they are, what they are capable of becoming, what they want out of life, and what is essential' (p. 16). Despite this, Folkes-Skinner et al. (2010) found in their research that easier clients provide counsellors with positive initial experiences of seeing clients, thus giving time for counsellor trainees to develop confidence and a positive professional identity, which can help them later when clients become more challenging. However, as Turner et al. (2008) found in their research that although it might be difficult and painful for trainees to work with clients, it can also be rewarding and worthwhile.

Thorne (2003) discusses the idea of the subjective reality put forward by Rogers. Thorne notes that 'because of the primary given to the subjective, each individual, according to Rogers, lives in a private world of experience which he or she alone has the capacity to understand, and then probably not fully' (p.86). Working on this premise, it could be argued that development and self-efficacy experienced by counsellor trainees would be different from one trainee to another.

Several writers (Holloway, 1995; Stoltenberg, 1981; Stoltenberg et al., 1998) illustrate the development of the trainees during the counselling practicum. Being in the real environment is an opportunity for the trainees to gain learning experience (Baird, 1996). Despite this, the nature of the counselling practicum creates a challenging experience (Pitts, 1992). However, counsellor trainees are individuals who have their own subjective reality (Thorne, 2003). The aim of this study is to address such issues in a qualitative perspective.

The study is also designed to understand self-efficacy and in what ways this contributes to development among counsellor trainees?

2. Methodology

This study was carried out using qualitative methodology. The main focus of this research is not to search for objective facts and objective truth about the development, but the subjective experience captured in the individual stories of trainees during their counselling practicum. As Grafanaki (2010) comments that many studies on the experiences of counsellor trainees rely heavily on quantitative data, as well as often excluding the perspective of trainees in favour of external perspectives, the stories of counsellor trainees regarding their experiences while engaging with clients are the focus in this research. Ten counsellor trainees participated voluntarily in this research. This study involves four types of data. Their stories were gathered through interviews, with each of the participants taking part in three interviews – at the beginning, the middle and the end of their practicum – with each interview building upon the previous ones. The interviewing process allows the researcher to enter into the experience of the person and uncover their thoughts and feelings (Patton, 2002). The interviews were conducted during the period that the participants performed their counselling practicum. Since this research consisted of the narrative account of the trainees, there was no specific question about their experiences. However, this research was guided by the question: What kind of experience do the trainees have during the counselling practicum? Stefano et al. (2010) also employed this kind of question, with no specific question about their experiences, when researching the experience of clients who worked with trainees. The consent form was reviewed at the beginning of each interview. The trainees understood that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The interview took place in a room at the practicum placement, and at the suggested time by the counsellor trainees. Each interview took between one to one and half hours, which included time for warming up, the interviewing phase and time for cooling down at the end of the interview.

The participants also undertook journal writing. They needed to write this journal on a weekly basis for 12 weeks. Their weekly story was to be based on: (i) the most significant experience, (ii) the worst experience, and (iii) what they had learned from the experience. Also, the participants were encouraged to provide a narration prior to their practicum, in particular, a narration about their personal expectations of what they hoped to gain from their practicum experience. The participants were to keep this journal until the end of their practicum, then hand it in to the researcher, during week twelve of their practicum. This journal writing would

help the trainees to think critically and develop insights into their assumptions and beliefs (Griffith & Frieden, 2000).

Observation is another part of the data in this study. All these interviews were conducted in the places where they performed their counselling practicum. Being in the actual places was an opportunity for the researcher to observe the physical layout of the particular places, facilities provided for counselling activities, and the atmosphere in the counselling unit. Patton (2002) argues that observation is essential in gaining a holistic perspective of the individual because it captures the context in which people interact. Adler and Alder (1994) assert that the importance of observation is that it is the most powerful source of validation.

Analysing the stories of the participants started immediately after completing the first interview. It is important to listen to the interview and read the transcript before engaging in the next interview. During this phase, it is necessary to try to make sense of the experiences of the trainees and note down any themes emerging in their stories. The researcher drew on these six steps (McLeod, 2001) as a guideline in conducting analysis on the stories of the counsellor trainees. According to the author, all these six steps were based on work from previous writers (Colaizzi, 1978; Bullington & Karlsson, 1984; Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989; Wertz, 1984).

3. Findings and Discussion

Performing the counselling practicum in the actual places is an opportunity for the trainees to experience efficacy as counsellors. The stories of the trainees indicated that they gained a better picture about how to perform the role of the counsellor after being in the actual places for some time. They were more confident in conducting counselling sessions with the clients after some time.

Through practical experience with the real clients, the counsellor trainees had an opportunity to perform the role of counsellors, and to test and be tested concerning their ability as counsellors. They also gained a better picture of understanding about themselves through continuous learning about the role of counsellor, other people and the actual environment. Besides that, the trainees had opportunities to learn more about their own selves, as well as the development of the understanding of their needs, goals, values, emotions, actions and thoughts, while learning to apply what they had learned at the university.

Three stories, Zana's, Nadia's and Chan's are presented in this section, which can provide a description of their efficacy during the counselling practicum.

Zana illustrates how her acceptance of her tasks, and new role in the actual environment contributed to her development.

Story of Zana

Zana started the counselling practicum with a feeling of surprise. As she noted, *'We have been included in counselling activity since the first day in the school. I felt quite shocked because I did not expect this. I felt stressed in this situation because I felt that I know nothing, and what to do'.* Zana's feelings of shock and stress were related to her limited experience in counselling activity. However, Zana viewed this situation differently when she was included in discussion about that activity. She wanted to take this situation as an opportunity to learn more about counselling. Awareness about her imperfections, especially about the actual counselling session and counselling service provided an opportunity for her to explore her learning experience during the counselling practicum.

Zana was aware that she needed to fulfil the required number of counselling sessions and other tasks during the counselling practicum. Her acceptance of her tasks and role during this period became another key aspect in Zana's experience. As a result of this, she noted, *'They wanted me to replace another teacher when I first entered the school. I took that opportunity to introduce myself to the pupils'.* Despite her main task as a counsellor, Zana accepted the task that she was assigned. As a result of this, she said, *'The pupils were willing to engage in counselling sessions with me'.* In addition, her acceptance of her role can also be observed through her willingness to engage in the tasks that she performed. She said, *'I would do my own reflection immediately after finishing my first session with a client. I would think about my counselling skills and responses during that session'.* Zana noted that this process was very important because, as she said, *'I became more cautious in the next session. I planned my session properly, and had a clear counselling goal and became aware of the skills that I was going to implement'.* Zana's acceptance of her role and the tasks that need to be completed provided an opportunity for her to plan the following action. By planning her action, her efficacy as a counsellor started to develop.

Zana was aware of her unfamiliarity with the needs of the pupils and the actual environment. Her awareness contributed to her approach. As she noted, *'We would ask the teachers' opinions about our programme, get their assistance in implementing it'.* Her willingness to appreciate the teachers' knowledge and experience created many opportunities

for her learning experience. Her approach with the teachers manifested her values about the process of learning. This also created feelings of respect towards teachers.

Zana showed a great willingness to help the pupils. At the same time, she was aware that she could not see the pupils because she was involved in two roles during this period, which were counsellor and teacher. As a result of this, she noted, *'I had to conduct counselling sessions after the school session finished'*. Although she had to spend extra time in the school, she said, *'I felt satisfied after conducting sessions with these pupils'.* Her willingness to spend her time and to help the pupils after school hours was related to her focus. The pupils were her focus during this period. At the beginning of the counselling practicum, she wanted to conduct counselling sessions in order to fulfil the university requirements. However, the opportunity to understand the reality of the pupils' lives gave Zana another perspective. She devoted herself to her role. By doing so, Zana experienced many opportunities to conduct counselling sessions with the pupils, which contributed to her efficacy as a counsellor.

Zana indicated that her efficacy as a counsellor developed over a period of time. It also showed that her efficacy related to the process of exploitation of her potential. Her story also demonstrates that the process of exploitation of her potential required acceptance of herself, her tasks, her role, others and the real environment. With this acceptance, she enjoyed performing her role as a counsellor. Acceptance also provides an opportunity for pleasurable experiences that are intrinsically satisfying and provide a sense of accomplishment.

Thorne (2003) discusses the concept of acceptance that has been forwarded by Rogers. Acceptance is one of the three core conditions in the therapeutic relationship (Rogers, 1961). In Thorne's view, 'Rogers' concept of acceptance of which the term unconditional positive regard is an elaboration, implies a caring by the therapist which is uncontaminated by judgements or evaluations of the thoughts, feelings or behaviour of the client' (p.37). The counsellor's acceptance is very important, as Rogers (1961) notes, 'As a client moves toward being able to accept his own experience' (p.174). Acceptance can promote development of the clients through counselling sessions. Does this situation apply to the counsellor trainees? In relation to the trainees, acceptance also means development. By accepting their role during the counselling and tasks that needed to be completed, they are moving forward, which is how to perform the role and to complete the required tasks.

One characteristic that significantly appears in the story of Zana is openness to experience. Her openness provided self-direction, she regulated and directed herself in daily activities and in pursuit of her goals, which was to fulfil the required tasks and to gain practical experience. Stefono et al. (2010) reported that the personal qualities of trainees, which include attentiveness and openness, contributed to the clients' engagement and participation in

counselling process. In this regard, way back in 1961, Rogers describes the importance of an openness to experience in the life of individual. According to Rogers, 'the individual is becoming more able to listen to himself, to experience what is going on within himself…. He is free to live his feelings subjectively, as they exist in him, and also free to be aware of these feelings' (p.188).

This idea indicates the importance of awareness of our presence at the particular environment and our relationship to the whole experience. In relation to Zana, when she showed her openness to experience during the counselling practicum, she also demonstrated acceptance of her own self, roles and tasks during this period. Her story indicated that acceptance of her own self also related to the awareness of her strengths and limitations, particularly about her skills, experience and knowledge, during her learning to become a counsellor. This means that acceptance of their own selves, their tasks, and other people must be achieved by the trainees before they are willing to open themselves to any experience during their learning journey. Being able to experience this acceptance contributes to her development as a counsellor.

Openness to experience is also about being realistic. In this regard, Rogers (1961) states that, 'ability to be open to experience makes him far more realistic in dealing with new people, new situations, new problems' (p.115). Being able to have a realistic perspective about the actual environment is important, and it contributed to Zana's ability to fulfil the university requirements.

Another trainee, Nadia, looked forward to performing the role of the counsellor; however, she experienced that the pupils could not attend counselling sessions during the school hours. After she realised the reality of the school, Nadia became aware that she needed to change her strategy. Below is an example of her realism in the learning journey, and how it contributed to her efficacy as a counsellor.

Story of Nadia

Nadia looked forward to the counselling practicum because her aim was to work in the school and help the pupils. However, she realised that her reality in the actual situation was totally different. As she noted, *'I have difficulties in getting pupils to counselling sessions. They are not willing to engage in counselling sessions. I need to look for them, and ask them to be my clients'.* Nadia also experienced another uncomfortable situation, as she said, *'I felt very upset because the head teacher did not introduce us during school assembly'.* Nadia believed the behaviour of the head teacher would add to her difficulties in getting volunteer

clients. In her view, the pupils and the teachers had no idea about her presence and purpose in the school.

Despite her experience in the school, Nadia still believed that she could fulfil the required tasks and gain experience as much as possible during this period. In this regard, she developed strategies for getting to know the pupils. As she noted, *'We discussed our approach, and we thought that posters would not have a big impact on the pupils. Then, we decided to implement a new style. We went from class to class, and also during class relief, to give information about counselling service and activities'.* Nadia created new strategies in getting the pupils to counselling sessions after realising the reality of the school environment. She became realistic in the process of achieving her goals during this period. As a result of this, she noted, *'I managed to get volunteer clients, I was able to conduct counselling sessions. I know that these tasks are the same tasks that I needed to perform from the beginning but now I have different feelings about these tasks. I felt satisfied performing these tasks'.* By being realistic in her approach with the pupils, Nadia experienced plenty of opportunities to conduct counselling sessions, which contributed to her efficacy as a counsellor.

Nadia was committed to her role, and related to this, she tried to search for extra funds to help with counselling activities. However, her ability to perform certain tasks became a threat to some senior teachers. In consequence of this, she had to be willing to let other teachers use the opportunities that were given to her. Although she felt dissatisfied with this situation, she was very realistic while making the decision to let other teachers to use her initiative.

Nadia had a realistic view about the process of fulfilling the university requirements in the actual environment. As a result of her decision, she experienced a meaningful learning journey, as she noted, *'I learned how to prepare the paperwork, to coordinate those activities. We managed to conduct all the counselling activities that we planned. I learned to give motivational talks to the pupils. I felt satisfied with myself'.* By being realistic in her strategies while participating in the actual environment, Nadia experienced plenty of opportunities during learning journey, which contributed to her efficacy as a counsellor.

Nadia illustrates how she experienced efficacy during her learning journey. Her efficacy was related to her realistic perceptions of the actual environment. She created her own strategies for fulfilling the required tasks after she realised the reality of the actual environment. Her strategies were based on her realistic perceptions of her goal and the limitations that she experienced in the actual environment. As a result of this, Nadia experienced many opportunities that allowed her to develop her counselling skills and her performance in other activities. Being able to perform tasks that were required and preferred

contributed to the belief in her ability. Being satisfied with her ability contributes to her efficacy as a counsellor.

Story of Chan

Chan has a different experience compared to Zana and Nadia. He began his learning journey with happy feelings, because he had his own reasons. He noted, *'I'm very happy because I have got this school, I aimed to do my practicum in this school from the first semester.'* He also shared what he wanted to do during the three months in the school. According to him, it was *'to motivate the pupils, and expose them about the purpose of being in school, which is to study and gain knowledge.'* He continued, *'It is a challenge because I have to cooperate with staff from a different ethnic group, and also to handle Chinese and Malay clients.'* In addition, Chan shared his interest in counselling, as he noted, *'I chose counselling because of my interest. I would like to have a better understanding of myself.'* According to him, *'Counselling needs experience, and those experiences will contribute to a better performance. While in training, I am waiting for a time that I can practise my skills with real clients.'* He continued, *'We need to know how to apply skills, techniques and theories at the right time with the right client, especially in the process of helping him to gain better understanding of himself and his problems.'*

In contrast to his motives and interest, Chan realised that he faced a challenging experience after reporting to the school. As he noted, *'Counselling sessions can only be conducted after the school session.'* However, he said, *'Pupils are not willing to stay back after the school session is finished.'* In addition to this, the pupils were unclear about the purpose of counselling sessions, as he noted, *'Clients say that, "why am I here if I need to think about all the solutions". This is their interpretation of counselling sessions, because they don't have clear ideas about the nature of that session.'* In relation to this, he noted, *'Pupils did not make any change after their sessions, I have noticed that some pupils come to counselling sessions because they want to runaway from their classes.'*

Chan concluded his experience during the counselling practicum by saying, *'After going through all sort of things, I feel I am not ready to be a school counsellor in the coming July.'* He continued, *'I feel that adjustment is very important, if I cannot make my adjustment into that culture, I will face a big challenge, and sometimes these challenges are unexpected. …I have been challenged with this experience, and it is a very unpleasant experience for me.'* He added, *'I know this is my irrational beliefs, but I need some time to deal with these beliefs because I have also learned something from this practicum. … I can assess my performance, and find out my readiness for this profession. … I think it is better for me to work as a teacher,*

and I will use my counselling skills while working as a teacher…. I need time in gaining some experience in that school, and later on, I would be willing to work as a school counsellor in that school. …I have appreciated this experience because it exposed me to the real life in school before I commit myself as a school counsellor.'

The counselling practicum is a complex process, which involves a variety of subjectively perceived dimensions. This means that learning through practical experience during this period is not an easy process. In this regard, Rogers (1961) stated,

'…this process of living in the good life involves a wider range, a great richness, …. To be a part of this process means that one is involved in the frequently frightening and frequently satisfying experience of a more sensitive living, with greater range, greater variety, greater richness' (p.195).

Struggles, challenging experiences, and unhappy feelings are part of the experience during learning towards becoming a counsellor. Folkes-Skinner et al. (2010) suggest that it is essential for counsellor trainees at the beginning of practice to be able to depend upon experienced professionals who can help them during those challenging moments. Furthermore, being able to engage in discussion with experienced professionals helps the trainees, Nadia and Zana in this case, to feel confidence and belief in their performance. On the other hand, Chan's efficacy about his role changed as a result of this experience.

4. Conclusion

Efficacy explains the capability to perform the role of the counsellor. Through practice, the trainee becomes more capable to perform his or her role. Performing the counselling practicum in the actual places is an opportunity for the trainees to experience efficacy as counsellors. Concisely, Zana, Nadia and Chan demonstrated that their ultimate goals were to fulfil the university requirements and gain practical experience related to the role of counsellor. The process of fulfilling the required tasks was very important to them, because they wanted to complete the training programme, which would also mean they were qualified counsellors. Being in the actual environment was an opportunity for the counsellor trainees to work towards their goals. Being able to practise what they wanted to do had a significant impact on their efficacy as counsellors. While the trainees were learning to become counsellors, their awareness, openness, acceptance, realism, feelings, thoughts, and actions were tested by their experiences. Despite this, they had created a meaningful learning journey during the three

months in the actual environment. Both Zana and Nadia showed that they were able to move towards developing themselves as counsellors and as individuals. However, counselling practicum provides an opportunity for Chan to test his efficacy. At the end of this experience he felt not ready to perform the role of school counsellor. Their experience also indicated that a supportive environment is very significant, which promotes their development. However, becoming a counsellor is not a smooth process. They encountered challenging experiences, and they struggled to put their theoretical knowledge into practice. These processes, learning experiences, unhappy situations, make sense of the experiences and meaningful journey that are parts of the belief in one's own ability.

Acknowledgements

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