

## PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLORS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF MULTICULTURAL COUNSELLING IN MALAYSIA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

**Background and Purpose:** The contemporary status of multicultural counselling field in Malaysia is ambiguous as there is limited research in this field. Even though Malaysia is deemed as a multicultural nation, there are still some issues and concerns with regards to the understanding and practice of multicultural counselling. Hence, the present research aims to: (a) explore the definitions of the term 'multicultural counselling' as perceived by professional counsellors; (b) identify the dimensions of multicultural competence as perceived by counsellors' community sample; (c) identify the characteristics of a multiculturally competent counsellor; and (d) explore the most challenging cases or anecdotes experienced by professional counsellors when counselling culturally different clients in the local context.

**Methodology:** Semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed to gather 22 professional counsellors' reflections on lived counselling experiences and their perceptions of multicultural counselling concepts. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data, but with some adaptation to suit the functions of NVivo 9.

**Findings:** Several themes and categories emerged based on four probing topics (understanding of multicultural counselling, definition of multicultural competence, characteristics of a multiculturally competent counsellor, and challenging multicultural cases).

**Contributions:** The results seem to suggest that Malaysian counsellors need to continuously engage in professional development training and to actively seek practice opportunities with culturally diverse clients. The education sector and local professional bodies for counsellors also need to better train and educate pre- and in-service counsellors in order to become multiculturally competent practitioners.

**Keywords:** Counsellor education and training, Malaysian counselling profession, multicultural counselling, multicultural counselling competency, professional counsellors.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The contemporary status of multicultural counselling in Malaysia is unclear as there is a lack of studies in this field. Even though Malaysia is deemed as a multicultural nation, in particular in terms of race, ethnicity, religion and socio-economic status, there are still some issues and concerns with regards to the understanding and practice of multicultural counselling among counsellors when counselling diverse clients in a Malaysian context (Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2017). This research comprises a qualitative interview analysis of Malaysian professional counsellors' experiences and perceptions to determine their understanding and practice of multicultural counselling. First, this study introduces Malaysia and the Malaysian counselling profession as its research context. Then, it discusses the controversies and debates in multicultural literature concerning the conceptualisation of multiculturalism and multicultural counselling (Bassey & Melliush, 2013). It is argued that the prevalence of terminological and context-specific issues in Malaysian counselling is the barrier to an improved understanding of multicultural counselling (Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2013).

Malaysian population includes four major ethnic groups and more than 50 ethnic minorities. Malaysia has a total population of about 32.4 million, consisting of 69.1% Malays and indigenous groups (i.e., Bumiputera group), 23% Chinese, 6.9 % Indians, with the rest of the population made up of other ethnic indigenous groups (Malaysian Department of Statistics, 2018). As Malaysia is a secular state that grants freedom of religion to all, the nation is a multi-confessional state with the most professed religion being Islam (61.3%), followed by Buddhism (19.8%) and Christianity (19.8%). Other diverse religions practised in Malaysia are Hinduism (6.3%), Confucianism, Taoism and other traditional Chinese religions (1.3%) and other

indigenous religions (0.4%). The Malays are the majority population who exercise political dominance and monopolize the public sector. The Chinese is the second largest ethnicity that collectively monopolizes the private or corporate business sector, hence exercising economic power (Joseph, 2006). Additionally, there are Malay and some Indian moguls that are extremely prominent in the nation's business sector. Unfortunately, the Indians as an ethnic are seen collectively lagging behind the Malays and Chinese and are more likely to face discrimination in terms of economic, education and social situations (Joseph, 2006; Yeoh & Yeoh, 2013). Therefore, it is essential to note that understanding culture within counselling is context-based and it lies within the historical and socio-political dynamics of the population served.

Multicultural counselling, as a field of study, has undergone rapid growth in both theory development and research in most Western countries, especially in the U.S. and U.K. Some of the major accomplishments can be observed in the conceptualisation of multicultural counselling theories and models (e.g., Constantine & Ladany, 2000; Sadowsky, Taffe, Gutkin, & Wise, 1994; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992; Sue et al., 1982) and the assessment of multicultural competency (e.g., D'Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991; Kim, Cartwright, Asay, & D'Andrea, 2003; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Hernandez, 1991; Sadowsky et al., 1994). However, in most Asian countries, multicultural counselling, or even general counselling, is viewed as an emerging field (e.g., Yu, Fu, Zhao, & Davey, 2010). Thus, there are context-specific issues in the local counselling profession which have neglected the significance of acknowledging cultural diversity in counselling and psychotherapy. For example, in the Malaysian counselling profession, there are critical issues and concerns regarding (a) the cultural relevance of counselling theories and models used by Malaysian counsellors, (b) the extent of cultural modification used by Western-trained counsellors in Malaysia, and (c) the status of multicultural counselling practice among professional counsellors. These context-specific issues highlight the need for this study.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Counsellors' Multicultural Competence**

Multicultural counselling literature asserts that multicultural counselling competencies (MCCs) need to be developed in order for counsellors to effectively work with various cultures (Sue et al., 1992; Sue & Torino, 2005; Whaley, 2008). In addition, Sue et al. (1992) developed a 3 (characteristics) x 3 (dimensions) model of MCC which consists of three core dimensions of MCC that are (i) beliefs and attitudes about ethnic minority groups, to check for possible

stereotypes or biases and developing a positive orientation towards multicultural counselling; (ii) knowledge of cultural backgrounds of clients, the socio-political effects on these groups and knowledge of one's own worldview; and (iii) skills and intervention strategies required to work with various cultural groups (Sue et al., 1982). This model asserts that a multicultural counsellor is one (i) who is actively aware of his/her own assumptions, biases, values, preconceived notions, individual limitations, etc.; (ii) who understands and actively seeks to comprehend the worldviews of one's culturally different client without bias or negative judgements; and (iii) who is actively developing and practising suitable and sensitive strategies and skills when working with culturally different clients. This particular model has 31 detailed standards for evaluating the quality of multicultural competence. Consequently, these standards have been officially endorsed by the American Psychological Association (APA) and the American Counselling Association (ACA). Various MCC concepts have also been incorporated into the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics to emphasize the significance of becoming a multiculturally competent counsellor in today's globalized world.

Malaysian counsellors need to be multiculturally competent as they have an ethical and legal responsibility in their practice with diverse clients in Malaysia. They must abide by the ethical standards stated in the Code of Ethics published by Malaysian Board of Counsellors (Lembaga Kaunselor Malaysia, 2011). At the same time, those professionals who provide counselling services to the general public must also abide by the rules and regulations stated in the Counsellors' Act 580 (Lembaga Penyelidikan Undang-Undang Malaysia, 1998). Although there is empirical evidence of Malaysian counsellors' perception of themselves as multiculturally competent (Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2011, 2017), findings from a dyad survey did not support this notion (Voon & Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2013). These contradicting findings highlight the need to further explore the perceived MCCs of Malaysian counsellors. Perhaps, using a different approach may be able to capture a detailed description of Malaysian counsellors' unique experiences with multicultural counselling cases.

A local qualitative research was conducted with 12 professional counsellors, which emphasized the main challenges faced by Malaysian counsellors when working with various cultural groups (Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2013). The research found five emerging themes that summarize the main challenges faced by the study participants. These were challenges related to characteristics of counsellors, clients, and third-parties, challenges related to the presenting problem(s) in counselling, and the counselling settings or contexts. Of particular significance to this study, is the theme on counsellor characteristics which has the emerging category of perceived multiculturally incompetence in multicultural counselling practice (Aga Mohd

Jaladin, 2013). This finding highlights the need to further investigate Malaysian counsellors' understanding, perceptions, and real experiences with regards to their practice of multicultural counselling in the socio-political context of Malaysia.

The need to be multiculturally competent has been highlighted by numerous studies in multicultural literature. However, in the specific cultural context of Malaysia, such competencies have not been thoroughly examined among professional counsellors. Perhaps, multicultural counselling is considered fairly new and it is still in its emerging stage in the training and practice of Malaysian counsellors. Although multicultural counselling subjects were offered and incorporated in counselling education programmes in local universities and colleges since the 1990s, there is no specific information recorded about their efficiency to improve the practice of multicultural counselling among local professional counsellors.

Furthermore, most relevant studies found in the body of literature available are mostly Western-based. Most of these studies also investigated multicultural counselling topics, especially MCCs, using quantitative designs on various samples (Guth, McAuliffe, & Michalak, 2014; Worthington, Soth-McNett, & Moreno, 2007). Minimal attention was given to exploring MCCs using a purely qualitative design. However, Constantine, Melincoff, Barakett, Torino, and Waren (2010) provided vital insight into the experiences of 22 multicultural counselling experts with regards to the multicultural counselling field in an American context. Using a qualitative study, the findings showed that majority of the respondents posited that the characteristics of being a multiculturally competent counsellor comprised flexibility, active listening, open mindedness, self-awareness, exposure to diverse life experiences, knowledge of cultural issues, skills in making cultural intervention strategies and dedication to social justice issues. Majority of the respondents also believed that the main barriers linked to being a multicultural counsellor were co-workers', organizations', and other third parties' resistance towards and limited support for multicultural counselling issues. These results are significant to the present research as it is predicted that some of the themes on multicultural competency and characteristics of being a multicultural counsellor can be further explained in the current research, especially in the Malaysian context.

Additionally, previous local studies that used other approaches such as mixed-methods or qualitative designs provided mixed findings regarding Malaysian counsellors' perceived MCCs and this invites further investigations. Therefore, it is timely to pursue the present research. This study uses a qualitative approach to explore professional counsellors' MCCs and obtain a clearer insight into their understanding and current practices of multicultural counselling in the specific socio-political context of Malaysia. The completion of this research

could add to the multicultural counselling literature by producing knowledge about the conceptual understanding (knowing what) and practice experience (knowing how) of multicultural counselling in Malaysia.

The ultimate goal of this study was to address the scarcity in the MCC research regarding the use of qualitative approaches in investigating MCC in a specific cultural context other than the U.S. The objectives of the present research are to:

1. Explore the definitions of the term ‘multicultural counselling’ as perceived by professional counsellors.
2. Identify the dimensions of multicultural competence as perceived by counsellors’ community sample.
3. Identify the characteristics of a multiculturally competent counsellor.
4. Explore the most challenging cases or anecdotes experienced by professional counsellors when counselling culturally different clients in the local context.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This research adopted a general qualitative research design. According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), qualitative research pays attention to meaning and focuses on how individuals make sense of their experiences. The study used semi-structured in-depth interviews to gather counsellors’ reflections on lived counselling experiences and their perceptions of multicultural counselling concepts. The use of these interviews also yielded a thick description of counsellors’ challenging case stories/anecdotes and invited open discussions of their individualized approaches when engaging with culture and diversity.

#### **3.2 Research Site**

The 22 interviews were conducted at various work settings in different locations. The various settings involved schools, universities, government agencies, and a private company. The geographical locations of the interviews were primarily located in the Klang Valley. However, one participant was situated in Kuching, Sarawak.

#### **3.3 Participants**

The interview participants consisted of 10 male and 12 female counsellors (n=22), who are registered with Malaysian Board of Counsellors (*Lembaga Kaunselor Malaysia*) and holders

of a practicing license. Participants were mostly Malays (54.55%), Chinese (27.27%), and Indians (18.18%). Majority of the participants are in the 50 to 59 age group (36.36%), possess postgraduate education (63.63%) and are Muslims (59.09%). The work settings of the participants are diverse; six of them are from government departments, four from schools, six from universities, two from hospitals, two from the police force, one from a non-governmental organization (NGO) and one from a private manufacturing organization. Inclusion criteria for the samples were (i) registered-practicing counsellor, (ii) possess a counselling experience of five years or more, and (iii) work experience which includes counselling culturally diversified clients. Table 1 presents detailed description of participants' demographics.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis as summarised by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse the interview data, but with some adaptation to suit the functions of NVivo 9 (Bazeley, 2007; Richards, 2009). The process involved (1) transcribing (verbatim) data using Microsoft Word 2007, (2) reading and re-reading the transcripts, (3) initial categorizing of data with the use of headings on the transcripts, (4) pre-coding, that is, noting down initial ideas or concepts, (5) assigning codes using the free nodes function in NVivo 9, and (6) re-coding to merge redundant codes, delete unwanted/unsuitable codes, or rename some codes to better capture the meaning of the data.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of interview sample (n=22)

| Characteristic              | Sample   |       |
|-----------------------------|----------|-------|
|                             | <i>n</i> | %     |
| Gender                      |          |       |
| Male                        | 10       | 45.45 |
| Female                      | 12       | 54.55 |
| Ethnicity                   |          |       |
| Malay                       | 12       | 54.55 |
| Chinese                     | 6        | 27.27 |
| Indian                      | 4        | 18.18 |
| Religion                    |          |       |
| Islam                       | 13       | 59.09 |
| Christian                   | 4        | 18.18 |
| Buddhism                    | 3        | 13.64 |
| Hindu                       | 2        | 9.09  |
| Age group (years)           |          |       |
| 20 - 29                     | 2        | 9.09  |
| 30 – 39                     | 7        | 31.82 |
| 40 – 49                     | 5        | 22.73 |
| 50 – 59                     | 8        | 36.36 |
| Highest education           |          |       |
| Bachelor                    | 8        | 36.36 |
| Master                      | 8        | 36.36 |
| PhD                         | 6        | 27.27 |
| Workplace                   |          |       |
| University                  | 6        | 27.27 |
| School                      | 4        | 18.18 |
| Government department       | 6        | 27.27 |
| Police force                | 2        | 9.09  |
| Hospital                    | 2        | 9.09  |
| Private sector              | 1        | 4.55  |
| NGO                         | 1        | 4.55  |
| Practice experience (years) |          |       |



|          |   |       |
|----------|---|-------|
| 5        | 8 | 36.36 |
| 6 to 10  | 8 | 36.36 |
| 11 to 15 | 2 | 9.09  |
| 16 to 20 | 4 | 18.18 |

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## 4.0 FINDINGS

From 22 verbatim transcripts, thematic analysis using NVivo 9 revealed some emerging themes based on the participant' responses on four thematic clusters (i.e., understanding of multicultural counselling concept, definitions of multicultural competence, characteristics of a multiculturally competent counsellor, and challenging anecdotes).

### 4.1 Understanding Multicultural Counselling as a Concept

The meaning of multicultural counselling as communicated by the counsellors in this research can be analysed and understood from three perspectives that emerged from the data:

1. The way they defined multicultural counselling;
2. Their views on the practice of multicultural counselling; and
3. Their perceived importance of multicultural counselling.

Of particular importance to this paper is the first perspective, the perceived definitions of multicultural counselling. Results revealed six categories of definitions: counselling culturally different clients (which includes within-group and between-group differences), counselling culturally diverse clients, culture-match counselling, counselling is multicultural, culture is the focus of counselling, and counselling across cultures. Among these, 'counselling culturally different clients' emerged as the most common definition of multicultural counselling reported by 16 participants. For example, Rogayah, a female Malay-Muslim counsellor educator, who is a PhD holder, said, "I accept the definition that multicultural counselling is a process of helping between two individuals from different cultural backgrounds. So, all of us, each of us, are culturally different".

Abu, a male Chinese-Muslim counsellor educator, who also has a PhD in counselling, responded in a more comprehensive manner where he differentiated between the terms 'cross-cultural' and 'multicultural' counselling according to his understanding:

“When I say cross-cultural, that means when the clients and the counsellors’ culture have macro differences or at a macro level. Macro cultures means these are the cultures that have gone through civilizations. So, that has been inherited. So, let’s say the Malay culture and the Indian culture, to me, that’s cross-cultural. But within the macro culture, if the differences are at the micro level, then to me it is multicultural. To me, that is how I perceive and understand what cross-cultural and multicultural is all about”.

This excerpt highlights the need to understand cultural differences at both macro (across cultural groups) and micro (within each cultural group) levels. Results revealed that Abu’s understanding of multicultural counselling clearly includes the between-group differences (such as ethnicity) and within-group differences between individuals such as gender, age, education, and so forth. This is consistent with the conceptualisation of multiculturalism from a universal perspective. In addition, other within-group differences such as differences in worldviews, values, upbringing, life experiences, and age-groups also emerged as sub-categories to reflect interview participants’ understanding of the multicultural counselling concepts.

Overall, it seems that these professional counsellors’ comprehension of multicultural counselling as a concept is somewhat adequate as revealed by the way they defined multicultural counselling, viewed the practice of multicultural counselling, and perceived the importance of such practice with Malaysian clients. The following discusses results of these counsellors’ understanding of the MCC concept, an imperative construct in multicultural counselling research.

#### **4.2 Understanding the MCC Concept**

Participants’ responses to the topic of MCC revealed one predominant theme (dimensions of MCC) with six categories: (a) multicultural skills, (b) multicultural personal or practice experiences, (c) understanding of culture and diversity, (d) knowledge of culture and diversity, (e) language competency, and (f) multicultural awareness (with two sub-categories, i.e., multicultural attitudes and multicultural beliefs). These categories with its most illuminating excerpts are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Emerging categories and excerpts on the perceived dimensions of MCC

| No. | Categories                                    | Illuminating Excerpts   |
|-----|---|---|
| 1   | Multicultural skills                          | “we don’t preach, but we may want to skilfully ask them to think and analyse and examine their situations according to their religious values” (Abu, Chinese-Muslim, Interview 1).  |
| 2   | Multicultural personal or practice experience | [English-translated] “OK, what I’ve seen so far is that what we learnt at the universities are supporting materials only. Indeed, they will help us. However, we must also seek our own experiences through socialisation, through external contacts. Sometimes, a non-counselling background person may perform better than us because their experiences are abundant. And, this explains why older counsellors are more acceptable than those who just graduated from [universities], who are in their 20s. And then, maybe when these [young] counsellors want to counsel older clients, they may be less successful” (Jasmi, Malay-Muslim, Interview 10). |
| 3   | Understanding of culture and diversity        | “their culture, their religion, their belief, their likes and their dislikes, the do’s and the don’ts, [and] their way of life” (Dharma, Indian-Hindu, Interview 4).  |
| 4   | Knowledge of culture and diversity            | “In Peninsular Malaysia, you must have good knowledge about our Malaysian cultures – Culture of the different ethnic groups of Malay, Indian, and Chinese, their cultures, their beliefs, their myths, their religions. It’s very important because these are all very sensitive issues” (Dharma, Indian-Hindu, Interview 4).   |
| 5   | Language competency                           | “Because I can speak Chinese, I can speak Malay, and I can speak English as well. So, language is not an issue at all for me to have clients from various backgrounds. So, that is something...an advantage that I have, I suppose” (Abu, Chinese-Muslim, Interview 1).   |
| 6   | Multicultural awareness                       | “For me, cross-cultural awareness is always telling yourself, ‘Look at the person and don’t ever assume that the person is like you’. That’s cross-cultural awareness” (Fred, Indian-Christian, Interview 6).   |

#### ***4.2.1 Multicultural skills***

Eighteen participants discussed MCC in terms of various skills needed when counselling culturally different clients. Abu discussed the basic skills of counselling as a set of pre-requisite skills to be acquired among counsellors before practising multicultural counselling. He explained that these skills need to be culturally adapted to a client's presenting problem with the use of client's culture as the background and reference. This means that, besides mastering the basic counselling skills (such as listening, reflecting, paraphrasing, seeking clarification, questioning, and encouraging), a multiculturally competent counsellor should have a focus on the client's culture to develop culturally relevant skills.

#### ***4.2.2 Multicultural personal or practice experiences***

Under the category of multicultural personal and practice experience, responses from 18 participants revealed the advantages of having personal and practice experience with culturally diverse clients. For example, Jasmi, a male Malay-Muslim school counsellor, who worked with more than 90% non-Malay clients, acknowledged the role of his practice experience with culturally diverse clients in enhancing his counselling practice in the school setting. He then advised all counsellors, especially fresh graduates, to gain more multicultural experience through personal socialization and contacts with outsiders (i.e., those outside the school community) to improve multicultural counselling practice in schools.

#### ***4.2.3 Understanding of culture and diversity***

Participants reported their understanding of culture and diversity as another dimension to understand the concept of MCC. Some participants discussed the types of cultures and diversity factors which matter most among Malaysian clients. In order to better understand these factors, counsellors' personal background and knowledge emerged as the pre-requisites. For example, Kasmah, a mixed-ethnic counsellor, has an added advantage because her cultural identity and life experiences during her upbringing enhanced her understanding of culture and diversity. Hence, it is easier for her to appreciate, respect, and accept diversity in the counselling practice.

#### ***4.2.4 Knowledge of culture and diversity***

Participants also discussed the need and advantage of having knowledge of culture and diversity. For example, Dharma discussed the importance of having knowledge of culture and diversity to better understand diverse Malaysian clients by drawing examples of the major ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia.

#### **4.2.5 Language competency**

As Malaysia is also a multilingual nation, it is not surprising that language competency emerged as another dimension of MCC. Twenty-two participants who responded under this category discussed the advantages of having multi-language competency to successfully (a) practise counselling with culturally different clients and (b) socialise with people from other cultures. Cheng and Fred shared Abu's view because both could speak and write in three languages well (English, Malay and their own mother tongue).

#### **4.2.6 Multicultural awareness**

Under the final category of multicultural awareness, there are two emergent sub-categories (i.e., multicultural beliefs and multicultural attitudes). Fred, a male Indian-Christian counsellor, who has worked with diverse people for more than 20 years in various government agencies, claimed "multicultural awareness as the main ingredient in multicultural counselling". He further discussed his understanding of multicultural awareness in greater detail such as explaining the meaning of cross-cultural awareness, linking it to empathy, sharing his beliefs and faiths as a culturally aware counsellor and highlighting issues on spirituality and supernatural phenomena as another important element in Malaysians' culture ("So, as a counsellor, you must be aware of this. This is culture: the belief in spirit, the belief in supernatural forces. It's part of culture").

### **4.3 Perceived Characteristics of a Multiculturally Competent Counsellor**

As counsellor characteristics is one of the two pillars of MCC from Sue et al. (1992) model, the following discusses the characteristics of a multiculturally competent counsellor as perceived by the 22 interview participants to enhance the understanding of MCC concept.

Participants were asked whether they consider themselves as a multiculturally competent counsellor and to give the reasons for their answers. Out of 29 preliminary findings, thematic analysis revealed six themes: (1) basic qualities of a counsellor (including Rogerian concepts), (2) basic counselling principles and skills, (3) multicultural skills (i.e., specialized skills when working with culturally different or diverse clients), (4) cultural knowledge and understanding, (5) multicultural awareness ('culturally sensitive' or culturally aware), and (6) multicultural experiences.

Three participants (Dharma, Fred, and Hidayah) emphasized possessing the basic qualities of a counsellor as one of the preconditions of becoming a multiculturally competent counsellor. Among the basic qualities of a counsellor reported by the participants in this study

were the Rogerian concepts (i.e., unconditional positive regard, non-judgmental, empathy, and genuineness), warm, willingness to help others, honest and sincere. Other emerging qualities discussed by interview participants were: (a) ‘professionalism’, which has three sub-categories: ‘counsellor qualification’, ‘ethical practice’, and ‘objectivity’; (b) ‘outward appearance acceptable to all’, (c) ‘patriotism’, and (d) ‘patience and perseverance’.

Another pre-requisite is having basic counselling principles and skills as suggested by Cheng and Abu. This means that a multiculturally competent counsellor must possess all the qualities of a good counsellor and also master the basic knowledge and skills of counselling such as the general counselling competency.

Besides having the basics of counselling, a multiculturally competent counsellor is perceived as someone who has multicultural skills. Most participants understood multicultural skills as a specialized set of counselling skills required to engage ethically and efficiently with clients who come from diverse cultures. For example, Kasmah, who studied child counselling, said:

“I believe in multicultural counselling; you do have different skills. Like, for instance, I’m more to child counselling. I know there are steps, there are ways on how to engage with my child client in a session. How to make my child client talk to me? So, I believe in multicultural counselling, you do have this kind of interventions or ways to make them talk”.

Kasmah’s excerpt implies that the practice of multicultural counselling, especially involving a child client, must incorporate culturally suitable skills and interventions that are consistent with the culture, needs, and preferences of the client.

Another important characteristic of a multiculturally competent counsellor as revealed by the interview data analysis is having deeper cultural knowledge and understanding. Results showed that having cultural knowledge not only refers to wanting to learn about diverse cultures but includes enjoying learning about them. Having deep cultural knowledge and understanding means that a counsellor does not only need to know the differences between cultures (e.g., having ‘good understanding of religions’ or ethnicity) or the differences that exist within each culture (e.g., gender and age), but he or she should also be able to explain why such differences exist (Example: “We know that they are celebrating these festivals but sometimes, we don’t know why they are celebrating them. We have so many. We only know the basic things”).

In contrast, Cheng's definition of a multiculturally competent counsellor put more emphasis on counsellors' self-awareness than counsellors' awareness of their clients. She said, "No matter how you understand your clients, but if you don't understand yourself [how] you bring your culture, then you tend to influence your clients". This leads to the theme of having multicultural awareness or being culturally sensitive or culturally aware as another important characteristic of a multiculturally competent counsellor. Participants indicated that a multiculturally competent counsellor should be mindful of their clients' cultural upbringing and presenting issues in addition to being mindful of their own personal values, beliefs, cultural background, perceived weaknesses and strengths.

The final theme revealed by the interview analysis is having multicultural experiences and this includes two categories: 'socialization with culturally diverse people' and 'being comfortable with diversity'. Hidayah explained her meaning of the socialization process. According to her, the socialization process includes factors such as upbringing, parental styles, and schooling. It is a continuous process which can affect an individual's way of life. Seven other counsellors, such as Ika, Elaine, and Jasmi, discussed the benefits of socialisation with culturally diverse people and these include having friends from all races, becoming familiar with multi-languages, understanding diverse clients better, broadening professional network and resources for referral purposes, and enhancing counsellors' confidence in dealing with multicultural issues. Their multicultural experiences demonstrate that by mixing and socialising with culturally diverse people, it can help them become comfortable with culture and diversity, and hence, enhance their MCCs.

Overall, this section has presented and discussed participants' understandings of multicultural counselling and MCC as concepts. The most frequently reported definition for multicultural counselling was "counselling culturally different clients", while the concept of multicultural competence was understood based on multiple factors such as counsellors' characteristics, multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills, experience with culture and diversity, among many other dimensions. The following section discusses the challenging anecdotes based on participants' counselling experiences.

#### **4.4 Challenging Counselling Anecdotes in Malaysia**

There were two main themes emerged in the participants' responses which were dealing with (a) culturally challenging clients and (b) culturally sensitive and complex issues. Under the theme of 'culturally challenging clients', participants' responses involved dealing with a culturally different client. According to these participants, the cultural differences between

them and their clients can exist on the basis of race, religion, gender, age, life experiences, education, and/or sexuality, which are consistent with their earlier definitions of multicultural counselling and counselling culturally different clients.

There were certain counselling issues presented during counselling sessions that held different values and norms than those typically held by majority of Malaysians. For instance, issues such as practising homosexuals, extramarital or premarital sex are typically viewed as culturally sensitive as these issues violate preconceived cultural values and norms of most Malaysians. Therefore, counselling clients with these issues usually pose some difficulties to local counsellors. Under the theme of ‘culturally complex and sensitive issues’, participants’ responses were categorised as follows:

1. Extramarital sex
2. Suicidal
3. Child abuse
4. Domestic violence
5. Child trauma/distress
6. Depression among women (e.g., menopause, loss of loved ones)
7. Drug addiction
8. Inter-racial marriage
9. Supernatural phenomenon
10. Premarital sex and pregnancy among teenagers
11. Social/Juvenile problems in schools

For instance, Abu recalled his past experience when counselling a male Muslim client with several problems (extramarital affair with a male colleague, marital issues, low self-esteem and familial problems) and he stated that this case was very complex because:

“...it involves of course religious values, it involves sexuality issue, and it also involves family issues whereby he’s got problems with his siblings as well. He’s the youngest child. The only child, in fact the only person in his family who did not go to the university. So, self-esteem issues also came in. So, it’s quite complicated in that sense.”

Hence, when the presenting issues involves an intersection of culturally sensitive issues linked to religion, sexuality and relationship with family members, the case was perceived as most



difficult by these selected counsellors, particularly when it violates the typical cultural values and norms of most Malaysian citizens.

## **5.0 DISCUSSION**

Results from 22 interviews on how selected Malaysian counsellors defined, viewed, and perceived the practice of multicultural counselling showed that even though most professional counsellors in this research are Malay-Muslim government employees (who mostly studied multicultural counselling courses), they typically exhibited good comprehension of multicultural counselling concepts. For instance, they defined multicultural counselling as a counselling process which involves culturally diverse clients (distinct in terms of gender, race, religion, socioeconomic background, education level, worldviews, etc.). Furthermore, these local counsellors' comprehension of multicultural counselling as a concept is in line with the contemporary notion of multicultural counselling literature, which is adopting the inclusive outlook of multiculturalism (to incorporate other cultural features, i.e., age group, social background, education status, gender, etc.) (Lam, Tracz, & Lucey, 2013).

Indirectly, this finding provides empirical evidence that the multicultural counselling courses taught at diverse universities in Malaysia are able to provide good foundational knowledge regarding the concept and basic practice of multicultural counselling to these selected counsellors. Perhaps the curriculum standards and guidelines for multicultural courses which are related to the understanding of culture and diversity in Malaysian counselling contribute to these counsellors' understandings of multicultural counselling concepts.

Counsellors must be multiculturally competent in order to successfully practise multicultural counselling. Findings from this study showed that participants' understanding of the term multicultural competence is consistent with their definitions of MCC and their perceived characteristics of a multiculturally competent counsellor. Among the shared dimensions of MCC found in the study are multicultural skills, multicultural understanding, multicultural knowledge, multicultural awareness, cross-cultural skills, other sub-categories (e.g. language competency, counsellor characteristics) and multicultural experiences. The overall results suggest a (re)conceptualisation of the MCC construct to include more than the anticipated three as proposed in the literature (multicultural awareness, knowledge and skills).

### **5.1 Research Implications**

The overall findings from this research show that MCC is a multidimensional concept and is a vital foundation in the practice of multicultural counselling. These findings have direct

implications for MCC theoretical development, multicultural counselling practice, counsellor preparation in the counselling field, and future multicultural counselling research. Results from the current research have provided evidence that the construct of MCC is complex and can be holistically understood from two complementary perspectives: what are the characteristics or core qualities of a multiculturally competent counsellor (theory-based components focusing on defining constituents of MCC) and how does a multiculturally competent counsellor work with a culturally different client (practice-based components focusing on reflections from multicultural counselling experiences). This is an essential contribution from this study, which extends previous body of literature.

The findings from this research have several significant implications for registered-practising counsellors in Malaysia. The most notable and significant results are pertaining to counsellors' perceptions of a multiculturally competent counsellor's characteristics which seem to suggest that Malaysian counsellors need to continuously engage in professional development training and to actively seek practice opportunities with culturally diverse clients, particularly, those who come from specialised client groups such as gays, lesbians, elderly people, and disabled persons. Lastly, the education sector and professional bodies for counsellors need to better train and educate counselling students (pre-service counsellors) and in-service counsellors in order to become multiculturally competent practitioners. Besides that, the findings of the present research assert that counselling education and training programmes must focus on both the theoretical and practical mechanisms of counselling in its curriculum. Perhaps the teaching and learning of counselling courses can focus more on infusing and emphasizing multicultural components across the other core components of counsellor education curriculum.

## **5.2 Suggestions for Future Research**

Future research is needed to further explore the process of multicultural counselling in the specific cultural context of Malaysia. For example, observing counselling sessions involving a Malay counsellor with an ethnically different client would generate deep understanding regarding how a Malay counsellor engages in a multicultural counselling process. As a result, the MCC of Malay professional counsellors, who make up the majority of the counsellor population in Malaysia, could be further examined when counselling clients of specific ethnic or cultural groups. In addition, a qualitative study which could directly examine the actual competency of counsellors or trainees is also greatly needed.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

Overall, the results underline that multicultural counselling has gained considerable attention among professional counsellors in Malaysia. Therefore, MCCs should be infused into all counselling courses offered in all counsellor education programmes in Malaysia. At the same time, continuing support from registered-practising counsellors, counsellor educators, trainers, government and non-governmental organizations are needed to encourage and improve the current understanding and practice of multicultural counselling. It is hoped that many Malaysian counsellors can become multiculturally competent practitioners so that the diversified populations of Malaysia are able to benefit from the counselling services provided.

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