EXPLORING COUNSELLORS' UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE OF MULTICULTURAL COUNSELLING IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: In order to make counselling meaningful and culturally relevant, it is essential for counsellors to have a practical counselling model that is context-specific and matches the needs and values of the population of that specific culture. Hence, the present research aims to explore professional counsellors' understanding and practice of multicultural counselling in Malaysia.

Methodology: This study adopted a complementarity mixed-method research design using both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gauge the different features of multicultural counselling competency.

Findings: Malaysian professional counsellors, as a group, perceived themselves to be multiculturally competent. The most challenging cases encountered by Malaysian counsellors were (a) counselling culturally challenging clients (i.e., culturally different clients), (b) counselling culturally challenging issues/problems (culturally sensitive and complicated issues/problems in Malaysia), and (c) managing personal challenges (dealing with personal cultural and social issues in counselling). Thematic analysis also revealed three emergent themes to describe how Malaysian counsellors engage with culture and

diversity in counselling and these themes broadly resembled the three stages of the general counselling process: pre-counselling, during counselling and post-counselling.

Contributions: This research adds to the multicultural counselling literature by generating knowledge regarding the understanding and practice of multicultural counselling in the local socio-political context. Education and training organizations should recognize the critical importance of infusing multicultural counselling education into all subjects and training programs in counsellor education programs and training of novice counsellors in order for it to be seamlessly incorporated into counselling practice.

Keywords: Culture and diversity, Malaysian counselling, multicultural counselling competency, multicultural counselling practice, multicultural counselling understanding.

Cite as: Mohd Jaladin, R. A., Simmonds, J. G., Greenway, P., & Barkatsas, T. (2021). Exploring counsellors' understanding and practice of multicultural counselling in Malaysia. *Journal of Nusantara Studies, 6*(1), 323-350. http://dx.doi.org/10.24200/jonus.vol6iss1pp323-350

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In order to be a well-rounded counsellor in today's diverse world, it is pivotal to understand multiculturalism in the practice of counselling. Consequently, there is mounting interest nowadays among practitioners, scholars and researchers in the field of counselling on how to better address and incorporate multicultural issues in their delivery of service (Fong, Catagnus, Brodhead, Quigley, & Field, 2016). At the same time, a plethora of studies have placed importance on the need to better educate and train mental health practitioners in becoming multiculturally competent throughout the world (Conner & Walker, 2017). These interests have contributed to a proliferation of literature on multicultural counselling, especially in the area of multicultural counselling competency (MCC). The present research is a mixed-method study exploring counsellors' MCCs as reflected in how they understand and engage with culture and diversity in a multicultural counselling process in Malaysia, a country with a multi-ethnic society consisting of 69.6% *Bumiputra* (i.e. Malays and indigenous groups), 22.6% Chinese, and 6.8% Indians, with the rest of the population being made up of other ethnic indigenous groups (Malaysian Department of Statistics, 2020).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Concept of Multicultural Counselling and Multicultural Counselling Competency

The study on multiculturalism became prominent in the 1960s in line with the civil movement in the U.S. Since then, there have been constant debates surrounding the term multiculturalism. Some scholars claim that the term multiculturalism refers to a broad and inclusive definition which includes (but not limited to) gender, race, religion, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation and other social identities that distinguishes individuals (Levrau & Loobuyck, 2018; Pedersen, Lonner, Draguns, Trimble, & Scharron-del Rio, 2016). Some other scholars contend that multiculturalism includes a narrow approach which emphasizes exclusively on race or ethnicity, primarily because the broad definition of multiculturalism overlooks the difficult issues of race or ethnicity (Cokley, 2007; Helms, 2007; Levrau & Loobuyck, 2018). Following the contemporary belief in multicultural counselling literature, the present research contends that multiculturalism needs to be viewed from an inclusive outlook because of the assumption that counsellors need to be ready and confident with their abilities to satisfactorily serve the culturally diverse community. This is due to the fact that many clients possess multiple cultural identities which result from the intersection of race, ethnicity, and other social traits in specific cultural contexts (Constantine, 2002).

As a concept, the term MCC has been variously defined. Some researchers defined it as a multidimensional construct involving a counsellor's (i) beliefs and attitudes (concerning ethnic and racial minorities, keep personal biases or general stereotypes in check, and to have a positive outlook towards multiculturalism); (ii) knowledge (on one's own worldview, clients' cultural groups, and socio-political effects on these groups); and (iii) skills (are aware of intervention strategies required to work with different cultural groups) (Sue et al., 1982). This viewpoint resulted in numerous models of MCC proposed in past literature to conceptualize MCCs (D'Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991; Kim, Cartwright, Asay, & D'Andrea, 2003; Sodowsky, Taffe, Gutkin, & Wise, 1994).

Another viewpoint to conceptualize MCC involves viewing it "as a process, orientation, /or approach, and not a technique" (Sue, 2003, p. 968). In other words, it is the process in which counsellors effectively engage with cultural diversity when counselling culturally distinct clients. This viewpoint addresses questions such as whether the counsellor is multiculturally competent or whether the practice can be considered as multiculturally competent.

2.2 The Practice of Multicultural Counselling

Past literature has ascertained that professional counsellors need to possess working knowledge and comprehension of the experiences, challenges, concerns and needs that bring minority clients better treatment in order to effectively engage with these clients (Allen-Meares & Burman, 1999; Matthews, Barden, & Sherrell, 2018). This debate informs researchers and practitioners regarding the pre-requisites and the need to develop good multicultural therapeutic relationships between mental health professionals and clients. In addition, Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992) posited that there are three features of a multiculturally competent counsellor which are (i) being aware of one's own biases, assumptions and values; (ii) understand the worldview of one's culturally diverse client; and (iii) developing suitable techniques and strategies. In other words, this model asserts that possessing awareness and understanding about culturally diverse clients assist counsellors to be multiculturally competent when working with these clients in various multicultural contexts in the West and East.

Besides that, previous studies have given considerable attention in assessing MCC of professional counsellors, trainees, international students and community samples from various ethnic groups using self-report scales or other measures (Atkins, Fitzpatrick, Poolokasingham, Lebeau, & Spanierman, 2017; Dodson, 2013; Greene, 2018; Hladik & Jadama, 2016; Larson & Bradshaw, 2017; Quinn, 2013; Swan, Schottelkorb, & Lancaster, 2015). For instance, a quantitative study by Dodson (2013) examined multicultural competence among 510 school counsellors in the U.S. The instrument used was Multicultural Counselling Knowledge and Awareness Scale (MCKAS). The results revealed that Caucasian participants perceived themselves as more multiculturally competent than African American participants. Nevertheless, this research used convenient sampling and the collection of data were based on self-reports (by participants) which raises concerns on social desirability bias. For instance, the Caucasian participants could have overestimated their competencies, thus, more mixed method studies (combining qualitative and quantitative approach) need to be conducted to increase internal validity.

A qualitative study by Atkins et al. (2017) explored the development of multicultural awareness among 12 Canadian Caucasian counsellors. Results revealed that early individual experience with diversity was the most vital factor in the development of empathy and understanding for minority groups. At the same time, counsellors also tried their best to maximize learning from working with culturally diverse groups (clients), work settings, coursework, internship, mentoring and supervision opportunities. However, four of the

participants identified themselves as Jewish and five of the participants identified their sexual orientation as either gay or lesbian. This indicates that they themselves were from minority groups, thus can easily grasp multiculturalism and express cultural empathy (due to their personal backgrounds). This reiterates the need to conduct more mixed method research in order to include a rigorous methodology and provide a deeper understanding on the study of the current phenomenon. Besides that, mixed methods research allows researchers to examine diverse perspectives and uncover relationships between intricate layers of the existing multifaceted research questions.

Another study by Hladik and Jadama (2016) focused on the multicultural competence among 516 European and African helping profession students. The results revealed that African students had a lower average value of multicultural competence than European students. Nonetheless, Gambian students (representing Africa) had higher average scores in multicultural awareness. Whereas, Czech students (representing Europe) had higher average scores on multicultural knowledge and understanding. These findings are probably due to the absence of multicultural education in their curriculum. Moreover, the instrument used in this research, that is, Multicultural Competence Scale in the Helping Profession Students (MCSHPS), is a newly developed instrument created in a Czech cultural environment, thus, may not be suitable to be used among Gambian students.

The abovementioned studies are relevant to the current research but the findings may not be entirely generalizable to the specific cultural context of Malaysia. Research studies in Malaysia are primarily focused on self-efficacy and competency among Malaysian counsellors. For instance, Ooi, Jaafar, and Baba's (2018) research revealed that mastery experience had the strongest relationship with counselling self-efficacy among 541 school counsellors. Whereas, another study by Mohd Jaladin (2017), showed that there were significant differences in perceived multicultural competence due to the level of education, ethnicity and participation in multicultural training among 508 professional counsellors. It further revealed that being Indian (minority group), having a postgraduate education and participating in recent multicultural training had a positive influence on perceived multicultural competence. Nonetheless, the former study had a high number of questions (71 questions) in their questionnaire which may cause survey fatigue. While, the majority of the participants (74.4%) in the latter study were Malays, thus raising concerns on generalization issues.

In order to make counselling meaningful and culturally relevant, it is essential for counsellors to have a practical counselling model that is context-specific and matches the needs and values of the population of that specific culture. Although there is some literature related

to cultural diversity and multicultural awareness in Malaysian counselling (e.g., See & Ng, 2010; Sumari & Jalal, 2008), much is theoretical in nature and in fact argues for the need for empirical investigation of cultural and diversity issues in Malaysian counselling. Thus, in the research reported here, a mixed method approach was used which focused on participants' self-reported MCCs and their own stories or cases (based on their practice experiences).

By examining the understanding and practice of multicultural counselling among Malaysian registered-practicing counsellors using both surveys and interviews, this research adds to the multicultural counselling literature by generating knowledge regarding the understanding and practice of multicultural counselling in the local socio-political context. Besides that, as Malaysia is a culturally complex nation with numerous macro-cultures and micro-cultures, the finding of the present study is a way to address power differences and hegemony (if any). These findings can be used as a foundation to enhance multicultural understanding and practice while improving mental health in various counselling settings. The present study has three specific research questions: (i) What is the current state of multicultural counselling understanding and practice among professional counsellors in Malaysia? (ii) What are the most challenging cases encountered by Malaysian counsellors? (iii) How do Malaysian counsellors engage with culture and diversity in multicultural counselling?

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study adopted a "complementarity mixed-method" research design using both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gauge the different features of MCC to produce an enriched and elaborated understanding of MCC in counselling practice (Clark & Creswell, 2008, p. 128). The use of surveys (both mailed and online) incorporating both a pre-determined item on MCC and a multicultural case vignette elicited counsellors' perceptions and reflections on lived counselling experiences enabled an overview of multicultural counselling practice in Malaysia. The use of semi-structured in-depth interviews stimulated participant reflections on the practice experience. This yielded a thick description of counsellors' challenging case stories/anecdotes and invited open discussion of their individualized approaches when engaging with culture and diversity.

3.2 Participants

The survey participants were 508 registered-practicing counsellors (response rate of 34%): 369 participants responded via the mailed survey and 139 participants responded via the online

survey. There were 259 males (51%) and 249 females (49%). The majority of them were Malays (378; 74.4%) by ethnicity, Muslims (403; 79.3%) by religion, and aged 40 and above (55.4%). Table 1 presents the percentages of the survey participants in terms of gender and ethnic background which showed similar patterns to those of the studied population. This provides some evidence that the sample is representative of the overall population.

Table 1: Demographic features of survey sample compared to the Malaysian counsellor population

Characteristic	Sample		Malaysian Counsellor Population	
	n	%	*N*	%
Gender				
Male	259	51.0	933	50.9
Female	249	49.0	900	49.1
Ethnicity				
Malays	378	74.4	1376	75.1
Chinese	74	14.6	285	15.5
Indians	21	4.1	69	3.8
Others	35	6.9	103	5.6
Religion				
Islam	403	79.3	NA	NA
Christian	36	7.1		
Buddhism	48	9.4		
Hindu	14	2.8		
Other	7	1.4		
Age group (years)			NA	NA
20 - 29	66	13.0		
30 – 39	160	31.6		
40 – 49	166	32.7		
50 – 59	104	20.5		
60 and more	11	2.2		
Highest education			NA	NA
Diploma	34	6.7		
Bachelor	242	47.6		
Master	205	40.4		
PhD	27	5.3		
Family income (monthly)			NA	NA
RM10K and more	39	7.7		
RM8K – RM9999	52	10.2		
RM6K – RM7999	103	20.3		
RM4K – RM5999	141	27.8		
RM2K – RM3999	166	32.7		
Less than RM2K	6	1.2		

Note: 'NA' stands for information not available and 'RM' stands for Malaysian Ringgit.

The interviewed participants were five male and seven female counsellors, who were registered with the *Lembaga Kaunselor Malaysia* (Malaysian Board of Counsellors) and holders of a practicing license. Participants were predominantly Malay (50%), Chinese (25%), and Indian (25%). The majority were in the age group of 50-to-59 (50%), had postgraduate education (66.7%), were married (66.7%), and were Muslim (58.3%). In terms of the work settings, two participants were from a school setting, two from the police force, three from universities, three from government institutions, one participant from a non-governmental organization (NGO) and one from a private manufacturing organization. The inclusion criteria for both samples were (i) registered-practicing counsellor, (ii) diverse ethnicity, religion, age group, and work setting, (iii) counselling experience of more than one year, and (iv) counselling experience with a culturally diverse client population.

3.3 Measures

The instrument used was Multicultural Counselling Survey: Malaysian Counsellor Edition (MCS-MCE). This 55-item survey was developed based firmly on the findings of previous research and drawing on two existing scales (i.e. the MAKSS-CE-R: Kim et al., 2003; and the MCKAS: Ponterotto, Gretchen, Utsey, Rieger, & Austin, 2002), with some item-modifications and item-additions. After the development of the items, the feedback on the content and format were gathered from 12 Malaysian counsellors noted for their expertise in practicing multicultural counselling, which revealed sufficient content validity ratio (CVR = 0.56). Moreover, the Cronbach alpha coefficients calculated for the multicultural micro skills (minority clients), multicultural knowledge, multicultural understanding, multicultural awareness (beliefs and attitudes) and multicultural macro skills (majority clients) were .85, .82, 82, .85, and .81, respectively, and it was calculated to be .84 for the entire scale. The alpha value of .65 to .95 is considered as acceptable in determining the reliability of a questionnaire based on Cronbach's alpha reliability schema (Chua, 2013). As such, this scale showed high internal consistency values. The final questionnaire was divided into three main parts: Demographic questionnaire, Multicultural Counselling Competency Scale (MCCS-MCE), and Survey Case Vignette.

The demographic questionnaire consists of 15 items on individual background, education and training, and work-related items. The MCCS-MCE was considered as the crucial part of the survey questionnaire. This section was carefully designed to identify the participants' MCCs based on Sue et al.'s (1992) model. Majority of the items were modified from the MAKSS-CE-R, eleven items were modified from the MCKAS, and some items were

developed to capture the complexity of the socio-political context of Malaysia and the socio-political power imbalances that were assumed to influence the counsellors' perceived MCCs when working with Malaysian clients. In theory, items 1 to 8 were specifically developed to measure counsellors' multicultural awareness, items 9 to 22 were used to gauge their multicultural knowledge and items 23 to 32 were purposely constructed to evaluate their perceived skills when counselling clients from different cultural backgrounds. All items in Section B used a variety of five-point Likert scale response format such as '1: Strongly Disagree – 5: Strongly Agree' (items 1 to 8), '1: Very Limited – 5: Very Good' (items 9 to 15 and items 23 to 32), and '1: Totally Not True – 5: Totally True' (items 16 to 22). The scoring of these items followed the indicated numerical choices. A high mean rating score gives an indication of a high level of multicultural competency among the participants.

The survey case vignette questionnaire comprised four questions based on a hypothetical case scenario and used a multiple-choice response format. The vignette reads as follows:

> Mr. X is a 64-year old pensioner who has intense anger towards his government regarding social justice. He blames the government because of his past challenges in life especially during his schooling and employment years. He was a victim of racism and oppression. He feels very frustrated with the amount of pension he receives from the government as it does not support him and his family in the current economic recession. Blaming the government makes him feel good and this has reinforced his anger and made him an abusive individual towards his family. At times, when he sees an individual of a different cultural background, he verbally abuses them without any particular reason. His behaviour has caused many problems for his wife and children; thus, they have decided to bring him to you for counselling.

This vignette was important because it required the generation of appropriate responses which gave a better indication of counsellors' understanding of how to actually deal with the multicultural issues when counselling a culturally different client. The generation of this vignette was inspired by selected literature on culture and multicultural counselling (i.e. Constantine, 2002; Neufeldt et al., 2006; Sue et al., 1992; Sumari & Jalal, 2008). It was purposely developed to (a) illustrate the existence of client's multiple identities in counselling; (b) capture one of the current situations regarding the socio-political dynamics among

Malaysians in the Malaysian context; and (c) operate from a broad view of multicultural counselling concepts (i.e., not limited to race/ethnic issues only).

3.4 Interview Protocol

The major topics included in the interview concerned participants':

1. Personal cultural and professional background;
2. General opinions regarding multicultural counselling concepts (i.e., 'multicultural counselling' and 'multicultural competence');
3. Practice experience in multicultural counselling, particularly relating to the process of engaging with diversity and the way counsellors respond to power differential issues when counselling culturally different clients in the socio-political context of Malaysia;
4. Practice self-evaluation strategies; and
5. Recommendations for improving the education and training of counsellors in Malaysia.

The topics were developed based on relevant literature in multicultural counselling (e.g., Constantine, 2002; Neufeldt et al., 2006; Sumari & Jalal, 2008). Based on these topics, specific interview questions were generated and then systematically organized and listed in the form of an Interview Protocol sheet.

3.5 Procedure

First, the approval from the Monash University Standing Committee on Ethics in Research involving Humans (SCERH) and *Lembaga Kaunselor Malaysia* (LKM) were obtained. Then, the researchers mailed the survey package to the 1,500 prospective respondents along with a self-addressed reply paid envelope, a pen, a mini notebook, a cover letter containing information on the purpose of research, the Explanatory Statement (which contained information regarding ethical approval from the SCERH and LKM), researchers' contact information, and a reminder note to inform them to return the completed survey within two weeks of receipt. These steps were formed in accordance with the strategies to encourage a high response rate from past studies (Heppner, Wampold, Owen, Thompson, & Wang, 2016). A total of 508 surveys were descriptively analysed (response rate of 34%) using the SPSS statistical package.

For interviews, 20 potential participants from survey respondents who were interested to participate in a follow-up study were recruited according to the following inclusion criteria: (a) state address (i.e., in 'Selangor and Kuala Lumpur'); (b) gender, (c) ethnicity, (d) religion, and (e) employment setting, in order to recruit participants from diverse cultural backgrounds. These potential participants were then contacted to arrange a suitable date, time, and venue to conduct the face-to-face interviews. A total of 12 face-to-face interviews were conducted and all the interviews were transcribed (verbatim) using Microsoft Word 2016 and later analysed using NVivo 8. Thematic analysis as delineated by Braun and Clarke (2006) was the framework used to analyse the 12 verbatim transcripts.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Malaysian Counsellors' Understanding and Perceived MCCs

Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations of each item in the MCCS-MCE scale. Overall, on a five-point scale using several rating scales (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; 1 = very limited to 5 = very good; 1 = totally not true to 5 = totally true), the means ranged from 2.10 (Item 8: Potential racial tension/conflicts exist between my clients and myself in terms of ethnic privileges and oppression) to 4.29 (Item 5: Counsellors should treat clients equally regardless of their cultural backgrounds). Results showed that Malaysian counsellors rated very high (M = 4.00 and above) on three statements: counsellors should treat clients equally, *Bumiputra* have privileges and advantages, and Malaysian culture is unique, to indicate their strong agreement towards these statements. Theoretically, these items (among many others) were intended to measure counsellors' multicultural awareness. However, they rated very low (M = less than 3.00) on five statements: Potential racial tension/conflicts exist in counselling, ethnic minority have problems in accessing counselling, and Malaysian counselling has neglected ethnic minorities' needs, to indicate their disagreement on these statements; and on items associated with counselling gay and lesbian clients, to indicate their limited multicultural skills in counselling specialized or minority groups of clients. Overall, most of the respondents believed that they were multiculturally competent (M = 3.55, *SD* = .34).

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation of items in the MCCS-MCE Scale

Item Summary	N	Mean	SD
1. Bumiputras have privileges and advantages	506	4.09	.90
2. Non-Bumiputras have unique challenges	498	3.29	1.17
3. Ethnic minority have problems in accessing counselling	506	2.55	1.09
4. Stigmas and taboos exist in counselling	506	3.23	1.16
5. Counsellors should treat clients equally	507	4.29	1.09
6. Malaysian culture is unique	506	4.05	.75
7. Malaysian counselling has neglected ethnic minorities' needs	503	2.93	1.11
8. Potential racial tension/conflicts exist in counselling	508	2.10	.96
9. Understanding Malaysian culture	507	3.95	.68
10. Understanding ethnic differences	502	3.75	.73
11. Understanding differences in religion and spirituality	504	3.76	.78
12. Understanding gender differences	506	3.95	.76
13. Understanding racism issues in Malaysia	503	3.69	.82
14. Understanding cultural influence on thinking and acting	502	3.95	.74
15. Understanding the impact of your culture on culturally different clients	505	3.91	.78
16. Ethnic differences exist in counselling	508	3.25	1.18
17. Individual differences in values, beliefs, and practices exist within groups	507	3.85	.96
18. Conflicting values exist between mainstream and Malaysian counselling	504	3.38	1.00
19. Barriers and challenges exist in cross-cultural counselling relationship	507	3.67	.92
20. Culture and racism influence identity development	507	3.83	.88
21. Culture-specific strategies exist in counselling	505	3.41	1.10
22. Personal biases, language dominance, or rigidity in ethnic identity require referral	507	3.74	.91
23. Counselling ethnically different client	508	3.72	.75
24. Counselling non-Bumiputra client	508	3.84	.69
25. Counselling religiously different client	508	3.68	.73
26. Counselling women	508	3.97	.68
27. Counselling men	506	3.89	.69
28. Counselling the elderly	507	3.50	.85
29. Counselling gay men	502	2.84	1.00
30. Counselling lesbian clients	504	2.87	1.01
31. Counselling disabled persons	506	3.20	.98

32. Counselling very poor clients	508	3.86	.74

Note: Items 1 to 8 assess counsellors perceived multicultural awareness, items 9 to 22 measure counsellors perceived multicultural knowledge, and items 23 to 32 assess counsellors perceived multicultural skills.

4.2 Malaysian Counsellors' Reflections on Current State of Multicultural Counselling Practice

When survey participants were asked if they had encountered a similar multicultural case (as prompted by a description of an abusive-and-angry elderly male client who came from a poor socioeconomic background), the majority reported 'No' (80.2%), while 16.6% participants reported 'Yes', and 3.2% reported 'Not sure'. This reflects the current state of multicultural counselling practice among professional counsellors in Malaysia when it comes to counselling specialized groups of clients. However, in terms of participants' preparedness and confidence to deal with a similar multicultural case, the majority reported 'Yes' (68.9%), while only 10.2% reported 'No' and 20.9% reported 'Not sure'. This reflects counsellors perceived multicultural competence in dealing with multicultural cases. Further investigations on how these participants would respond to a similar multicultural case revealed the following results: 58.1% would provide appropriate counselling, 25.6% would make appropriate referrals, 24.2% would seek appropriate consultations, and the remaining 3.7% would choose other actions. Some other actions reported by 51 participants in the comment box revealed one theme with three sub-themes: To gain more knowledge, skills and techniques, and awareness regarding multicultural counselling via (1) continuous reading and learning, (2) training and participation in professional development seminars or workshops, and (3) brainstorming activity on social justice issues.

4.3 Malaysian Counsellors' Most Challenging Counselling Cases

When interview participants were asked to recall their most challenging cases dealing with culture and diversity in their counselling practice, three themes emerged. These are (a) counselling culturally challenging clients (i.e., culturally different clients), (b) counselling culturally challenging issues/problems (culturally sensitive and complicated issues/problems in Malaysia), and (c) managing personal challenges (dealing with personal cultural and social issues in counselling). This means that the 12 Malaysian counsellors in this study perceived that the practice of multicultural counselling becomes very challenging to them when it involves culturally different clients, culture-specific issues in their multicultural context, and a

lack of multicultural awareness (including self-awareness). Table 3 presents a summary of participants' responses which describes their culturally challenging cases.

Table 3: A summary of participants' challenging anecdotes in multicultural counselling

No	Challenging Cases	Sources
1	Counselling school students with socio-cultural problems such as pornography, *casual sex, pre-marital sex, *incest, hardcore drug addiction, and problematic effects of parents' divorce on children.	Jasmi, Interview 10
2	Counselling school students with culturally complex issues such as verbal abuse, mental torture, attempted murder (Malay-Muslim), attempted suicide, and mentally ill.	Bee, Interview 2
3	Counselling pre-school client with culturally sensitive and complex issues (e.g., traumatized due to exposure to *parents' lesbian lifestyle in the Malaysian context).	Kasmah, Interview 11
4	Counselling a Malay-Muslim man with culturally complex and sensitive issues (e.g., conflicting values between religion and sexuality) such as marital problems, *problems in gay lifestyle and relationship, loneliness, depression, self-esteem, and problems in family relationship.	Ali, Interview 1
5	Counselling a reluctant client (a culturally different man with chronic alcoholic problem).	Tharma, Interview 4
6	Counselling a depressed elderly lady dealing with death/loss of a loved one.	Ali, Interview 1
7	Counselling a lonely but furious elderly man dealing with dissatisfactions in life	Cheng, Interview 3
8	Counselling a culturally different university student who was suicidal in dealing with her family matters (forced into an arranged marriage) and death of a loved one and, at the same time, the counsellor had to deal with a personal challenge of countertransference.	Cheng, Interview 3
9	Counselling a housewife with issues related to supernatural phenomena which led into depression and attempted suicide.	Cheng, Interview 3
10	Counselling housewives with issues on marital problems (such as *polygamy) and depression	Tharma, Interview 4

11	*Counselling culturally different abused victims (mothers and children with physical abuse or mental torture) of domestic violence and at the same time the counsellors faced some personal issues of:
	    i. Frustrations and helplessness
	    ii. Unfinished business
		i: Cheng, Interview 3; Elaine, Interview 5; ii: Fred, Interview 6

12	Counselling culturally different abused victims of human trafficking who had been forced into prostitution	Fred, Interview 6
13	Counselling teenagers with socio-cultural problems such as (i) *pre-marital sex, *pre-marital motherhood, deviant behaviours without parental support; and (ii) uncontrollable behaviour, *free/casual sex, and *pre-marital motherhood	i: Elaine, Interview 5; and ii: Ika, Interview 9

14	Counselling culturally different inter-racial married couples (i.e., a couple who each come from different ethnic and religious groups) in dealing with marital issues pertaining to their cultural differences.	Elaine, Interview 5; Hidayah, Interview 8
15	Counselling single mums (Micro cultures)	Ali, Interview 1

Note: Those with asterisks (*) denote very sensitive issues in counselling because they violate the cultural values and social norms of general Malaysians.

Table 3 clearly shows that these challenging cases mostly involve some violations of Malaysian laws, values and norms. For example, when the practice of multicultural counselling involved counselling a female teenage mother who came from a different cultural background, Elaine, a female Indian-Christian counsellor, reported:

> Cases like I want to counsel teenage mothers. That teenager is [a] Malay teenage[r]. After delivering her baby, the *pantang* [confinement] will be around 40 days. What becomes most challenging [sic.] is the different culture and religion that I must encounter - The different worldview. I don't know how to help that person. (Interview 5).

4.4 Process of Multicultural Counselling: A Malaysian Perspective

Thematic analysis also revealed three emergent themes to describe how Malaysian counsellors engage with culture and diversity in counselling and these themes broadly resembled the three stages of the general counselling process: pre-counselling, during counselling and post-counselling.

4.4.1 Pre-counselling: Making culturally appropriate preparations for counselling

Three themes emerged from this stage and these are: counsellors' awareness and background knowledge about their potential clients (including clients' cultural backgrounds), counsellors' self-awareness about their own cultural background, self-perceived attributes and competence, and counsellors' awareness, knowledge, and understanding regarding culturally difficult cases and exactly how to handle these issues using multicultural skills and practice experience in Malaysia. These were considered to be the necessary conditions to ensure the success of multicultural counselling. For instance, Tharma, a male Indian Hindu counsellor, who had counselled a Malay Muslim housewife suffering from depression and marital issues (her spouse is abusive towards her and intends to commit polygamy), stated:

I have to prepare myself for this situation actually. Before coming, what do I do, I usually talk to my friends who are Muslims, you know. Talk to my friends who are Muslims to find out whether I can use certain strategies. Is it OK? Is it something that is going to offend her or her family? … if I come to a stage where I can't handle the case because of some constraints, religious matters, I can always refer to them.

Thus, counsellors must develop MCCs as required characteristics before they can effectively become involved with issues on diversity or culture in the counselling context.

4.4.2 During counselling: Engaging with culture and diversity

This stage is characterized by three basic stages, which broadly follows the general counselling process: therapeutic multicultural relationship, case conceptualization and culturally-appropriate interventions or strategies. The associated themes which describe these three stages were (1) negotiating cultural differences in multicultural counselling in becoming engaged, (2) assessing clients' concerns or problems using a culturally appropriate and sensitive approach, (3) setting culturally relevant counselling goals/, and (4) developing culturally appropriate and sensitive interventions strategies. Majority of the participants felt that this was the most important stage in multicultural counselling in which they should be multiculturally competent. They had to address cultural differences between them and their clients' before they can further proceed in assisting their clients. Due to this, some participants took more time for this phase (*You see, the process, the most important thing is the bonding... That's why I take a long time to build that trust, long time to build that bonding*), became somewhat hospitable and flexible when handling culturally different clients with individual constraints (*And I was accommodative because she was a [Malay Muslim] housewife and sometimes she can only attend the counselling sessions during certain periods*), and had to use humour when engaging with reluctant teenage clients with socio-cultural problems (e.g., pre-marital casual sex or/and pre-marital motherhood), who came from different ethnic-religious groups in Malaysia. For instance, one participant said,

At the beginning, it is very challenging because I have some discomforts because I have to make the client be comfortable with me. So, I add humour. Most of my clients, my sessions, I like it when I have a bit of humour. So, when the girl comes in, 'Why are you here?' She said: '*Saya lari rumah*' [I ran away from home]. So, I'll ask her 'Why did you run away? You did not walk?' [laughs]. They like that kind of humour. Later, after the first session, the second session, they like to come to me. They will pick me as their counsellor. They like to come to me. (Elaine, Interview 5)

This means that counsellors must possess background knowledge and practice experience (skills), creativity and be quick-witted in addition to being multiculturally competent (multicultural knowledge, skills and awareness), to effectively engage with culturally challenging clients or issues in multicultural counselling.

Among the identified mechanisms that helped these counsellors conceptualize the multicultural case better were multicultural counselling skills to collect relevant information regarding the clients' problem which then contributed to counsellors' understanding; especially in terms of understanding the role of culture in clients' presenting problems. For example, the following analysis illustrates how Cheng incorporated the relevant information on culture and diversity elements when trying to understand her culturally different client's issue:

1. Building a therapeutic multicultural relationship:

"…first I look at my client as who she is and what influenced her in her life. Then, I look at her culture, I ask her about her background and I notice all these before I go into the real problem."

2. Exploring culturally different clients' issues or concerns:

"I have to somehow stand by my clients. Not just stand by but really wear their shoes. Really have to understand. So, when I look at my clients, I don't look at their language, their gender; don't look at that at all. I'm only looking at their problems at that time. So, when I look at their problems, I hear their problems, we look at their problems from different aspects…"

3. Conceptualizing the multicultural case:

"…then I used this – their language, their upbringing, their gender – to understand the clients' views because all these genders, language, their upbringing will have some factors or influence in how my clients look and face their issues… So, I would like to see all these factors – multicultural factors – how these factors have affected my clients to resolve their own issues. Then, from there, I have a better understanding of my client and of their presenting problems."

When describing their culturally-appropriate interventions, three themes emerged from the data analysis: providing culturally-appropriate counselling, making culturally-appropriate consultations before or during counselling and providing culturally-appropriate referrals. Some participants claimed that they used both the culturally universal and culture-specific approaches and strategies in their multicultural counselling process. Some examples of participants' intervention strategies were play therapy, Islamic approach, eclectic, behavioural, religious or spiritual approach, group counselling, non-directive, aromatherapy, and meditation.

Although some of these were based on existing theories of counselling, their application seemed to have been culturally adapted to the Malaysian context and focus on multicultural perspective. For example, Ali claimed that he had to use an eclectic approach (with a multicultural focus) when counselling a male Malay-Muslim client with culturally sensitive and complicated issues that intertwined with the client's religion, culture, sexuality, marriage and family relationship. However, when he counselled a female Malay-Muslim elderly client who suffered from depression and loss of a loved one, he used a context-specific Islamic approach that he felt culturally-appropriate for counselling. He explained,

So, in that session, it was a very Islamic approach. I brought her to ponder on the basic teachings in Islam which were '*redha*' [acceptance], '*maaf*' [forgiveness], '*syukur'* [thankfulness] - RMS. '*Redha ke tidak*?' [*Redha* or not]'*Redha'* is like you accept the things that are already prescribed, not really prescribed, what is the word? That everything is already scripted for us and you cannot challenge what has happened. If you keep on questioning, that thing will keep on hounding you. But, if you accepted it, you may be at peace. You are like you know…That is '*redha*'. And then, '*maaf*' – forgive. If you are not a forgiving person, if you don't forgive yourself, if you don't forgive others, you will have a lot of baggage. That is going to harm you. That is going to intoxicate you. One more thing, the third is '*syukur*'. Sometimes, we always look at the negatives; we always focus on what we don't have; we forget what we already have. Whatever we have, we must be thankful and grateful. So, it was these three approaches which are very Islamically inclined she started her road to recovery.

These examples confirmed Ali's earlier assertion that in multicultural counselling approaches, "there is this universal approach and also culture-specific approach". Although he claimed that he strongly believed in the universal approach to multicultural counselling, he sometimes used the culture-specific approach to help his culturally different clients when necessary. This finding provides support for the broad (inclusive) perspective of multiculturalism to include both the etic and emic perspectives when counselling culturally diverse clients (Pedersen et al., 2016).

4.4.3 Post-counselling: Evaluating the counselling outcomes
Three themes emerged from data analysis based on participants' description of their post-counselling experiences. These were: perceived changes in former clients, counsellors' satisfaction with the engagement process, and lessons learnt from the engagement experience. Participants expected that if some changes happened to their former clients, then it means that the engagement process was successful (e.g., "Of course, most of the time, the change doesn't come in front of me lah. It may start later on"). Among the perceived changes that these counsellors attributed to clients' overall satisfaction were their 'willingness of wanting to change', self-acceptance, self-understanding and their efforts to continue keeping in touch with their counsellors. Participants also assessed their quality of counselling by referring to their satisfaction level. What they felt and how they perceived their competency scores would be after the engagement process contributes to their satisfaction level. For example, some felt

good or 'feel satisfied' because they were 'able to handle clients from almost all different cultural backgrounds' and felt the process was 'a very enriching experience' and fulfilling for them; while some felt bad such as feeling 'some anger', 'very disappointed', frustrated, helpless and 'pissed off'. So, they used these examples to evaluate themselves and their practice experience.

Participants also shared some valuable lessons that they learned from their engagement experience with culture and diversity. According to them, these lessons helped them in three ways: by improving their current multicultural counselling practices; by improving their spiritual and mental wellbeing, especially when dealing with culturally challenging cases; and by being able to educate others (the public or other counsellors for professional development). Among the lessons that these participants learned were having constructive views of mistakes, using a praying strategy, and having positive mindsets.

4.5 Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that Malaysian professional counsellors, as a group, perceived themselves to be multiculturally competent. This is reflected from their overall mean rating scores ($M = 3.55$, $SD = .34$) and responses on their level of preparedness and confidence in dealing with unique multicultural cases in Malaysia, in which about 70% reported that they would be prepared and confident to deal with multicultural cases. This is interesting because despite reporting a lack of practice in multicultural counselling, the Malaysian counsellors perceived that they had the necessary qualities to deal with and respond to issues on culture and diversity. This is consistent with their responses on the best course of action for dealing with a multicultural case, in which about 60% considered that they would provide appropriate counselling, while the remainder would make appropriate referrals, seek appropriate consultation, or would first develop MCCs.

This research also revealed that more than 80% of Malaysian counsellors reported that they had not encountered a multicultural scenario similar to that in the vignette involving an elderly client from low socio-economic status. Both survey and interview findings suggest that the practice of multicultural counselling may still be somewhat limited in the Malaysian context, especially involving clients from specialized cultural groups such as gays, lesbians, disabled, and elderly people.

Two possible explanations may account for the results. First, there could be a possible limitation in the current multicultural curriculum or multicultural training because most counsellor education programs in Malaysia are still emphasizing more on theory-based

components rather than practical components. A participant's comment on a lack of practical training in the teaching of a multicultural counselling course substantiated this point, *"...at undergraduate level, we don't have a practical aspect of this subject. So, we can't conduct any practice. So, the skill-based element became less. The skills were told but weren't practiced. Even at a Masters level, we still have no practical training."*

Second, the role of culture and context play a significant influence in the understanding and practice of multicultural counselling in Malaysia. For example, gay and lesbian individuals have problems in accessing counselling services in Malaysia because their existence and lifestyles are not recognized by the local people. Furthermore, as Islam is the state religion in Malaysia and Islam prohibits gay and lesbian lifestyles, the gay and lesbian population becomes a minority group and their issues become culturally encapsulated. The majority of the Malaysian population does not accept homosexual existence and lifestyle.

This also explains why Malaysian counsellors perceive issues such as casual or pre-marital sex, incest, and polygamy (see Table 3 for details) as culturally complex and sensitive issues. The fact is these issues violate not just the Syariah laws but also the cultural values and norms of the general population. As most providers of counselling in the Malaysian context are Malay-Muslims, they face some discomfort and difficulty in dealing with issues that deviate from their personal values as a Malay and a Muslim. Furthermore, most counsellor education programs do not provide sufficient room for multicultural counselling practices during formal training especially those involving clients from minority groups. Hence, Malaysian counsellors are not prepared and not confident when dealing with issues presented by clients from minority groups (e.g. homosexual group).

The interview results complement the survey findings by providing further information on a workable counselling process to describe how Malaysian counsellors engage with culture and diversity. Although the approach resembles a general counselling process, it was found that the drivers and facilitators of the multicultural counselling process were mostly counsellors' perceived MCCs and their multicultural experiences. Perhaps this model can become an exemplar model towards a better practice with culturally different clients because it was based on empirical data and it follows a systematic and culture-sensitive counselling framework to effectively engage with the diverse cultures in the Malaysian context. This implies that most counsellors in Malaysia must develop the required qualities: counsellors' background knowledge and experience, multicultural awareness, knowledge of culture and diversity, deeper understanding about cultures, and multicultural skills. The results provide support that MCCs are very important qualities for professional counsellors to successfully

practice multicultural counselling in the specific cultural context of Malaysia. Hence, MCC guidelines and standards should be made available to all practicing counsellors in Malaysia.

Some limitations of this study include the low response rate of 34% and as a result the findings cannot be generalized to the overall professional counsellor population in Malaysia. Besides that, the majority of the sample are from the Malay ethnic group, this is due to the fact that over 75% of registered practicing counsellors in Malaysia are Malays. Future studies could also look into the viewpoints of clients from diverse cultural groups on the effectiveness and culturally sensitive skills exhibited during counselling sessions. Despite these limitations, this study serves as an eye opener and is the first step to more rigorous research in Asia.

In addition, this research has direct implications for the education and training of counsellors in Malaysia. First, counsellor education and training are very important to prepare trainees to become multiculturally competent which is consistent with the findings from Chao (2012). Pre-service counsellors have to be educated with the Malaysian concepts of culture and they have to reflect on the meaning of these concepts in their cultural selves. This process helps them to become more aware of their cultural self and the cultural identity of their clients, more knowledgeable to recognize issues on diversity and culture in counselling in a specific cultural context, and more skilful in dealing with such issues in the counselling context. On the other hand, in-service counsellors need to be given opportunities for constant professional development through multicultural counselling training. For example, continuous seminars, conferences and training workshops on understanding and practice of multicultural counselling in Malaysia can be conducted to enhance their current practice.

Second, the education process (teaching and learning) must place more importance on multicultural components of the counsellor training and education programs. Rather than relying on the multicultural counselling course as an inclusion criterion, perhaps all other courses should infuse multicultural issues and diversity in their teaching and learning activities. From this research, it can be posited that how counsellors identify, recognize, and deal with issues on culture and diversity might influence clients' acceptance, counsellors' competence, and overall outcome of counselling. For instance, if culturally different clients thought that their counsellors lack understanding or are ignorant of their culture, would they trust their counsellors? Would a counsellor who went through 'culture-bound' or 'cultural encapsulation' practice be more likely to have a successful outcome of counselling with culturally different clients? Therefore, future research should also include the client's perspective in order to gain better understanding of how to engage with diversity and culture when counselling culturally different clients.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the present study revealed that most Malaysian professional counsellors, perceived themselves to be multiculturally competent. Although they are prepared and confident in dealing with unique multicultural cases, there is still a lack of practice in multicultural counselling. Additionally, the practice of multicultural counselling may still be somewhat limited in the Malaysian context, especially involving unique cultural groups such as gays, lesbians, disabled, and elderly people. Therefore, education and training groups should recognize the critical importance of infusing multicultural counselling education into all subjects and training programs in counsellor education programs and training of novice counsellors in order for it to be seamlessly incorporated into counselling practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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