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***Research paper***

# Towards Effective Counseling Approaches and Contextual Factors Enhanced Diversity Collaboration

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**Abstract**

This study explored the counselling approach and contexual factors to enhance diversity collaborations among ethnic, religious people, teachers and parental involvement in Malaysian secondary schools. Specially, the study outlined cross-cultural counselling and related training approaches and effective factors that needs in Malaysian society. In particular, the researcher investigated the effectiveness of multi-ethnicity of students and diversity of approaches in their counselling contexts. Qualitative data were obtained from field survey while secondary data collected from various sources. The study focuses the main difficulties in general contexual literature, theoretical or ideological, and collaborative diversity approaches showing in the countries concerned. A qualitative case study approach was also represented on the experience of counsellors of eleven muslim schools in the Muar district through primary and secondary data analysis. The study recommended that effective counselling environment context enhanced diversity collaboration with their training models in various ways in relation to the contexual factors studied.

***Keywords***: *Counselling Approach, Contextual factors, collaborative diversity, Malaysia*.

## 1. Introduction

A number of different concepts have been used to examine the relationship between counselling approaches and contexual factors such as ethnic and religious diversity, teacher collaboration, parental involvement, and condition of service delivery, and the extent to which these factors influence the impact of a counselling approach. According to Fisher et al., [1] stated that three approaches can be identified in cross-cultural counselling, namely: universalist, contextualist and integrationist. The universalist approach adopts the methods and goals of traditional mainstream psychology. In this approach, the goal of counselling is to discover abstract, nomothetic, and universal laws of human functioning. Proponents of a contexualist or etic perspective have argued that existing psychological theories and techniques are robust enough to have universal applicability for ethnic or cultural groups living in the United States [2, 3]. Typically, they have embraced western-based counselling theories and associated helping strategies that they assume to be cross-culturally effective. Proponents of an "emic" perspective, on the other hand, have argued that helping strategies unique to the client's culture are needed to effectively meet the needs of ethnic minority clients [4]. According to Wohl [5] " culturally specific approaches are psychotherapeutic methods designed to be congruent with the cultural characteristics of a particular ethnic clientele, or for problems believed to be especially prominent in a particular ethnic group or to ethnic groups in general".

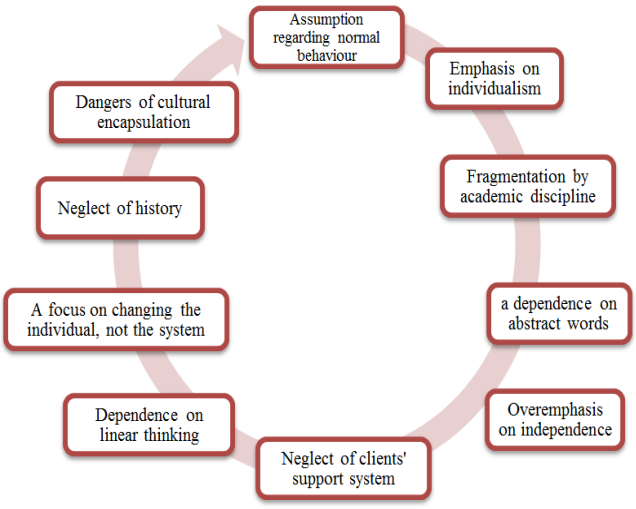



**Fig. 1:** Embedded assumptions on multicultural couselling [6].

Lastly, the integrationist approach emphasises the need to integrate knowledge generated by indigenous psychologies and cross-cultural testing of psychological theories. The integrationist approach represents the third goal of cross-cultural psychology: to integrate knowledge gained from cross-cultural testing of counselling theories with local indigenous knowledge to arrive at verified universal knowledge. Within this approach, two types can be identified: indigenization from without and indigenization from within [7, 15]. Pedersen [6] shared the view that a new approach is needed to suit cultural differences. Indeed, he lists ten frequent assumptions that reflect European and Americal culture

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and that are embedde in the literature about multicultural couselling and development, which showed in Figure 1.
From the Fig. 1, linear thinking is described as the process whereby each cause has an effect and each effect is tied to a cause. The assumption is that everyone depends on this causative relationship. How then can counsellors adapt couselling to a cultural context", Pedersen asks [6], "where the cause and the effect are seen as two aspects of the same undifferentiated reality with neither cause nor effect being separate from the other?"Some cultures describe events as being independent of their relationship to surrounding, preceding or consequent events.
Counsellors, Pedersen suggests are much less likely to attend to clients who talk about the history of their people. In many cultures the connection between past and present history makes it necessary for counsellors to understand clearly the client's historical context as a way of understanding their present behaviour [8]. The final assumption that Pedersen discusses is the tendency for counsellors to believe that they already "know" their own assumption, but to be unaware of the cultural biases within these assumptions. Within a multicultural society, and as a consequence of the counselling context, counsellors need to recognize the danger of any closed, biased and culturally encapsulating system that promotes domination by an elitist group. If counsellors are unwilling to identify and challenge their own assumptions they will be less likely to communicate effectively with persons of different cultural backgrounds [8].

## 2. Methodology

The study was based on multiple sources of evidence provide the validity of the study. In-depth interviews as the main method, supported with non-participant observation and document analysis were employed a methods in data collection. Categorical aggregation method was applied within-case and cross case interpretation of data. For multiple case studies, the above methods were crucial in the search for relationships and meaning through the data. This research was based on the case selection of eleven Muslim counsellors, with each case study involving one counsellor in contact with two students over a period of time. Case studies were conducted in the Malaysian secondary schools and each case involved the application of a number of different counselling approaches. Lastly data compilation and data analysis with required software.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Contextual Factors

Counsellors perceive a need for training regarding language adaption when communicating with students from different ethnic backgrounds. Counsellors have had to fall back on their own experiences and skills to simplify the counselling sessions. Counsellors who lack experience face particular difficulties handling this situation. Counsellors feel that they should have been trained in how to adapt their language with ethnic clients.
Table1: Counsellors' Perception of the Adequacy of their Training Models in Addressing Contextual Factors.

| Contextual Factors | Counsellors' Perception |
|---|---|
| Students' Ethnicity | -Lack of rapport-building skills with ethnic students.<br>-Lack of language adaptation skills.<br>-Lack of research on Malaysian ethnic cases. |
| Students' Religion | -Lack of spiritual focus in training models.<br>-No structure in spiritual counselling.<br>-No explanation of treating clients with different gender.<br>-Relationship approach is suitable but not widely taught. |
| Teachers' Collaboration | -Lack of knowledge and skill in building rapport with teachers.<br>-No training or experience in consultation skills. |
| Parents' Involvement | -Need for parent consultation skills.<br>-Lack of case studies and research for family counselling and parents consultation in Malaysia. |
| Counsellors' Workload | -Training did not take the large number of students at school into consideration.<br>-Training should emphasise group counselling.<br>-Training is emphasising the traditional counselling model.<br>-Training did not focus on administration of students' welfare.<br>-Training is more oriented to voluntary client. |
| Physical Environment of counselling unit | -Training model does not consider the facilities and set-up of the counselling room provided by the school.<br>-Training did not focus on the real issues of the location of the counselling room. |

In fact, Pedersen [9] notes that much of the criticism directed at multicultural counselling relates to communication problems which interfere with the counselling process. Westwood and Ishiyama [10] provide the following guidelines regarding the communications process in multicultural counselling. Firstly, counsellors should check with the client on the accuracy of the interpretation of nonverbal communication. Secondly, counsellors can promote catharsis by encouraging clients to use their own language to express a particular feeling when another language cannot accurately describe it [16, 17]. Thirdly, counsellors should try to learn culturally meaningful expressions of the client to accurately describe the client's inner process. Finally, counsellors should use alternative modes of communicating, such as art, music and photography. There are some contextual factors regarding Counsellor's perception, which as shown in Table 1.

### 3.2. Ethnic Perspective

In general, all the counsellors involved in this research are faced with three ethnic groups, which are the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. Only one school (G) has 100% Malay students. The ethnic students in these schools involved in this research with maximum Malay students 100% in G school, where 14.4% lowest in K school to compare with Chinese and Indian as shown in Figure1. In reality, students from ethnic backgrounds, possess different values, cultures and native languages. All of these ethnic groups respect their elders and have very strong family connections. The values of life for ethnic groups are family centred.

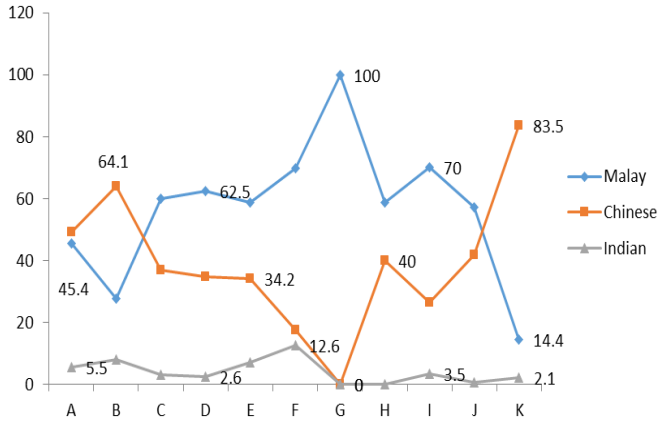



**Fig. 1:** Ethnic students in the 11 schools in Muar District

All successes and failures is shared among the family. Therefore, these students find it hard to share their problems with outsiders including counsellors. The main reasons of ethnic minority groups fail to utilize counselling and drop out of treatment early can be

found in the biases in the counselling services provided [4]. Counselling services offered are often inappropriate and/or antagonistic to the cultural context and life experiences of ethnically different clients. Furthermore, the ineffectiveness of cross cultural counselling is thought to result from the lack of adequate training of counsellors [11].

Counsellors also perceive that they need examples of Malaysian ethnic case studies taught at university. The current training is oriented more towards generic and Western approaches and lack of a focus on diversity of clients within the Malaysian context. The training should explain and discuss what types of approach seem effective for Chinese, Indian and Malay clients. Training should also determine the suitable approach to be applied in the contexts of various ethnicities. By examining the common problems and selecting effective approaches to ethnic clients in Malaysia, the training given to counsellors will be more suitable in a real school context. Training should give counsellors some awareness of the importance and relevance of the client's cultural background and explore how clients are shaped by their ethnic culture. Counsellors also need to be exposed to information about Malaysian ethnic cultural background and how this factor influences the counselling approach. Current training should be also include specific skills and professional techniques when dealing with Malay, Chinese and Indian clients each of who may share some values and at the same time, have unique values. Thus a study of specific ethnic problems and cases would allow greater coverage of the three areas of multicultural competence outlined by Holcomb-McCoy and Myers [12] awareness of one's own personal worldviews and how one is the product of cultural conditioning, a) knowledge of the worldviews of culturally different clients, and b) skills necessary for working with culturally different clients.

In addition to improve their training, the counsellors have also expressed several views on improving their knowledge and skills in the field in order to be more responsive to the ethnic context. Counsellors expressed the importance of having frequent counselling sessions with ethnic Chinese and Indian students to improve their skills in multiethnic counselling. Counselor has mentioned that, when counsellors have a toolkit of experience with multiethnic counselling, they will be able to understand about their own racial and cultural heritage and how it personally and professionally affects their definition of normality-abnormality and the process of counselling.

This is supported by Sue and Sue [8] who stated that a culturally competent counsellor is seen as working toward three primary goals. First, a culturally competent helping professional is one who is active in the process of becoming aware of his/her own assumptions about human behavior, values, biases, preconceived notions, personal limitations, and so forth. This basic objective has not been explained by the counsellor when the Chinese client faced a conflict between his father and peers. Counsellor could study more about the relationship between the father and son based on Chinese culture. This is to avoid the counsellor equalizing the relationship between father and son from Chinese, Malay Muslim, and other ethnics' background. Second, a culturally competent helping professional is one who is actively attempts to understand the worldview of his/her culturally different client. The multicultural counselling techniques have not been implemented by the counsellor when facing ethnic clients. For example counsellor did not investigate the Chinese viewpoint on the issue of committing suicide. The understanding of this perspective would support the process of helping the client as explained by Sue and Sue [8]. Third, a culturally competent counsellor is one who is in the process of actively developing and practicing appropriate, relevant and sensitive intervention strategies/skills in working his/her culturally different clients. Mustaffa and Lowe [13] have mentioned that the counsellor did not apply any specific strategies towards particular ethnic groups but rather applied a universal approach (traditional counselling). Hence in order to produce a counsellor that is culturally sensitive competent and able to confront the diverse ethnicities in Malaysia [14], training should focus on three main objectives previously cited [8].

Knowledge about multiethnic counselling can be enhanced by reading counselling books, journals, research papers from seminars and counselling magazines. By reading, consultation and supervision counsellors can gain a deeper understanding of the complex concepts of race, culture, ethnicity and how these relate to their own heritage and thus affect their perceptions of the world. Furthermore, the counsellors gain an understanding of the historical and contemporary relationship between their own culture and others, and how systems of racism and oppression operate. However, the issue arising is how the counsellor can find the time to read and refer to multicultural counselling texts and materials as they already have a heavy workload. One solution that seems workable is by adjusting work duties by having a suitable time for the counsellor to study multicultural counselling issues each week. By having the time to ready and study, counsellors will be equipped with updated knowledge and understanding in concepts and theories in multicultural counselling and will act with more awareness when facing this problem at school. There is lack of seminars about multicultural counselling in Malaysia. So it would be beneficial to increase the effort to organize seminar that can create counsellors who have less interest in increasing his or her skills and knowledge in this field.

Frequent gathering with other counsellors is another way to increase knowledge in multiethnic counselling. From the discussion with other counsellors, a counsellor can get information about how culture, values and ethnicity impact on their client's development, and how they motivate their actions in society. This will give them knowledge of the cultural limits of counselling. From the findings, junior counsellors may act as peer supervisors to other counsellors who have received less information regarding multiethnic counselling during their training at university. This situation is opposite to that recommended by Peace and Sprinthall [14] which indicated that school counsellors stand as an important educational resource for beginning counsellors. However, supervision from senior counsellors to junior counsellors does not systematically occurred at Muar. Instead, to get recent information regarding multiethnic counselling approaches, senior counsellors have to seek advice from recently graduated counsellors.

Counsellors also suggested that they should have constant and ongoing communication with university lecturers. Lecturers can give suggestions and suitable alternative solutions for client's problems. Therefore, counsellors will not be left behind in getting new ideas about helping multiethnic students at school.

## 4. Future Challenges

From the research findings, it requires the resources and time that were unavailable in present research. Depending on the aims of the particular study, this may involve a different balance in the trade-off between number of cases and richness of details systematically in order to improve consistency, reliability and cross-checking of data and interpretations. Also, there are other contextual factors which could usefully be examined for their potential influence on the practice of training models, like gender, cultural values and socio-economic differences. Furthermore, the focus of the research could be extended to include the experiences and views of relevant stakeholders including clients, teachers and parents.

## 5. Conclusion

The research provides a methodology on counselling approach and contextual factors, which may contribute to the study of counselling in general, not just in Malaysian schools but in the

broader field of counselling in settings such as in industry, rehabilitation centres, hospitals and community agencies. By grounding, the research in the actual in the actual experiences of practicing counsellors, this qualitative case study approach may offer a useful complement to others forms of scholarship which may be more quantitative, theoretical or ideological in nature. Overall, the study clearly propose the essential of representing counselling approach and contexual factors at training institutions, through the extent to which this should happend and the priority of training is yet to be enhanced with diversified collaboration.

## 6. Conflict of Interests

The authors have no conflicts of interests.

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