

Identifying Factors Affecting Choice of Counseling Theory among Counsellors in Malaysia

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ARTICLE INFO: Received: **03 Oct 2019**; Revised: **08 Jan 2020**;
Accepted: **16 June 2020**; Available Online: **23 June 2020**

Abstract

Psychotherapy theory is an essential element in effective counselling sessions. The theories used not only assist the counsellors in handling their sessions with appropriate techniques, but also guide the counsellors to conceptually understand the issues that are confronted by the client. The purpose of this study is to identify the potential factors leading to the choice of counselling theory among counsellors in Malaysia. This study is intended to analyse the main reasons behind counsellors' choice of theoretical orientation in their readiness to provide counselling services in Malaysia. Sixty questionnaires were distributed to randomly selected counsellors. However, only thirty-one (n=31) were accepted for analysis using percentage and mean. A quantitative approach was used, where the participants completed an instrument named Theoretical Contributing Factors Scale which consists of nine (9) sub-scales of potential factors. The findings demonstrated that internal factors were the most significant contributing factors for the participants in selecting their counselling theoretical orientation. This study will also encourage other researchers to explore further the factors that contribute to theoretical orientation selection among practicing counsellors in a larger sample.

Keywords: *Counseling, theoretical orientation, counselling theory, registered counsellor*

Introduction

The development and utilisation of theory in counselling practice are significant issues that need to be given full consideration by counsellors (Zakaria, 2010), especially for the beginner counsellors (Spruill & Benshoff, 2000). Practicing counsellors need to understand from the beginning of their learning stage (Corey, 2013; Melati Sumari, Sh. Marzety Adibah, & Chen Lee Ping, 2009) that they are operating on the basis of counselling theories (Zakaria, Ahmad Jazimin, & Nur Ezdanie, 2011a). By not having a systematic basic theory, counsellors will lose strength, consistency in their practice and the unity needed during counselling session (Zakaria et al., 2011a). Understanding and implementing counselling theories is vital for counsellors to effectively provide counselling services (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

A theory is a professional schema of a counsellor that assists them in managing the client's problems (Aina Razlin, Siti Norazilah, & Edris, 2013; Murdock, Banta, Stromseth, Viene, & Brown, 1998). Therefore, in seeing the issues which relate to client's problem, a counsellor must possess a specific theory in his or her intervention so that he would be able to provide support to client (Zakaria et al., 2011a). It is also a good start for the counsellor's development and self-training to have at least one specific theory to be used in his counselling intervention process (Burwell-Pender, 2009).

Identifying the main factors that contribute to the selection of theoretical orientation by the counsellors will enhance our understanding of counselling practice among Registered Counsellors in Malaysia as a whole. Therefore, this study will describe the influence of relevant factors that may contribute to theoretical choice of the participants and examine whether there is any positive and significant relationship between the variables.

Problem Statement

The development of counselling study in Malaysia is still at the initial stage (Ramizah, 2016; Melati Sumari et al., 2009; Ng & Steven, 2001). The training provided for the counselling students may focus more on counselling techniques. Further to that, it has been debated since the early year 2000s that counselling training has minimal emphasis on theoretical aspects, which may lead the counsellors to come up with their own theoretical orientations based on what learned from their counselling techniques class. From the perspective of training hours provided by most of the Malaysian Public Universities, the counselling courses for students only allocate three credit hours of the curriculum for counselling theory. Comparatively, in counselling training at United States universities, the counselling theory subject is allocated four credit hours and it is intensively conducted (Zakaria, 2010; Zakaria et al., 2011a). With the current preparation given in the universities in terms of counselling theory subject hours, the practice in Malaysia still does not emphasise theoretical aspects, which may cause a lack of theoretical understanding among counsellors (Malaysian Board of Counsellors, 2000).

It is estimated that as many as 400 counselling theories have been developed (Corsini & Wedding, 2005) and there is still a problem to determine which unified theory would be more appropriate for a particular client. Although studies have been conducted for more than two decades, there have been no findings that point towards certain theories being more appropriate than others (Zakaria, Asyraf, & Wan Ibrahim, 2011c). Thus, there is the view that counsellors in Malaysia may be influenced by their family orientation, religious upbringing and culture, which become major factors in determining the suitability of the theory they choose. Moreover, with the sentiment that many counselling theories were developed by westerners, counsellors may hesitate to choose from existing theories. This ultimately weakens the consolidation and understanding of counselling theory in Malaysia. Therefore, this study provides an opportunity to identify factors behind the selection of counselling theory among the counsellors in Malaysia.

Objectives

The objective of this study is to identify the elements or factors that may influence counsellors in Malaysia in choosing their counselling theoretical orientation. More specifically, it is intended to identify the main factors that contribute to the selection of counselling theory by the participants. The study is also intended to develop an understanding of the factors contributing to the theoretical orientation choice that can be categorised into two separate elements of internal and external factors. The separation of

the contextual factors has not been discussed much in previous research. Therefore, the current study will look into merging some of the factors into these elements presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Categorisation of Factors Contributing to Choice of Theoretical Orientation

Internal Factors	External Factors
Personality	Lecturer preference
Family background	Training received
Religion	Peers orientation
Life philosophy	Economy
Life Experience	

Literature Review

In using a particular counselling theory such as the Reality Therapy, Person Centred Therapy or the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, the intervention used has a mechanism and strategy in helping to solve the root cause of the client's problems. The theory used may also contribute to the counsellor's understanding of the emotions, cognitive aspects and behaviour of the client in the situation that he is facing (Aina et al., 2013). However, Malaysian universities seem emphasise less on the theoretical aspects of counselling (Zakaria, 2010; Zakaria et al., 2011a; Zakaria & Asyraf, 2011a) and this may lead to a fragile understanding and counselling practice among counsellors. Therefore, it is suggested in this study that emphasis should be given to ensure that the counsellors are prepared in defining the counselling theory well and choosing a preferred theory to guide their practice.

The factors that influence a counsellor's choice of theoretical orientation has been a topic of interest to several researchers. Earlier researchers, such as Ogunfowora and Drapeau (2008); Vasco and Dryden (1994); Beutler and McNabb (1981); Lazarus and Launier (1978); Schwartz (1978); Cummings and Lucchese (1978), had suggested that external variables such as training, supervision by the lecturers and supervisors, economic factors and clinical experience are major influences on counsellors' choice of theoretical orientation. However, these studies do not reflect the diversity of factors that influence the selection of counselling theories. Therefore, this is one of the reasons why future studies needs to be done in order to conduct empirical and detailed research into factors influencing theoretical orientation selection.

The selection of counselling theories is also closely linked to the development of a counsellor in providing the best counselling services. Hence, in discussing the issue of counsellor's development, previous studies have taken into account this development which relates to theoretical orientation and interpersonal behaviour of the counsellors. It is a complex task to conduct a study on the impact of supervision on the development of psychotherapists (Guest & Beutler, 1998) and counsellors as a whole. Murdock et al. (1998) refer to the three-stage Integrated Development Model of counsellor development identified by Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987), where counsellors in the first stage of the development are greatly dependent on the supervisor in their function as counsellors. This study proves that supervisor preference is one of the strong factors in the selection of counselling theories. Murdock et al., (1998) stated further that adopting theoretical orientation is more a developmental process rather than a one-time static decision by the psychotherapists and counsellors.

Zakaria et al. (2011a) conducted a study to identify the theoretical choice among the Muslim counsellors in Malaysia where it was found that the factors contributed to the

counselling theoretical choice were personality, lecturer and supervisor influenced, background of the family, religion, self-philosophy and the counsellor's support to the theory that he choose. However, one of the findings of this research was that the counsellors were influenced most by the lecturers that had trained them at their learning institutions. Zakaria et al. (2011a) findings build on those of previous researchers (Rak, MacCluskie, Toman, Patterson, & Culotta, 2003; Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003) that training received by counsellors, especially during their early exposure of the world of counselling at universities and colleges, constituted another factor in counsellors' theoretical orientation choice and therapeutic style development (Aslina et al., 2016).

Zakaria, Ahmad Jazimin and Zainab (2010) conducted a study on the selection factor and the role of counselling theory for counsellors in Kuala Lumpur. They found that the five factors that contribute to the choice of counselling theory are personality, influence of lecturers or supervisors, life philosophy, family upbringing and the influence of the founders of the theory itself (Zakaria et al., 2010). The researchers further elaborated that theory is essential to produce a therapeutic counselling process, and its importance was realised by participants in their study (Zakaria et al., 2010). However, the participants had difficulties explaining how counselling theories help them, particularly during counselling sessions. Since this study was conducted used a case-study approach, the findings could not be generalized to all counsellors. Therefore, Zakaria et al. (2010) recommended that a survey or case study that takes into account the registered counsellor population, wider location selection, random sampling, triangulation of data collection and data analysis involving descriptive and inferential statistical techniques be carried out in future.

The review of previous studies suggests that there is no variations in the main factors underlying theoretical orientation selection especially of novice counsellors. Studies also show that personalities play a big role in contributing to counsellors' theoretical selection, however this is not a concrete finding. Research that can give a definite opinion that personality is a major factor in the selection of counselling theory for the counsellors in Malaysia is not evident. Therefore, this study aims to contribute towards the understanding of the factors that contribute to the choice of counselling theory among Registered Counsellors in Malaysia.

Research Methodology

Sampling Method

As of, December 2019, there were 9,054 counsellors registered with the Malaysian Board of Counsellors. For the purpose of this study, a total of sixty (60) counsellors were identified and selected. However, only thirty-one counsellors (12 males, 19 female) agreed to participated in this study by returning the questionnaires given. The response rate was 52% ($n=31$). The participants were randomly selected from the list of Registered Counsellors from the Malaysian Board of Counsellors. Table 2 presents the participants' demographic data. The average age of the sample was 37.6 years. Females outnumbered males 61% to 39%. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 69 ($M = 37.6$, $SD = 9.89$), with the age range of 30 to 39 having the highest frequency (39%).

Table 2
Participants' Demographic Data (n=31)

Demographic Profiles	Category	Numbers	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	12	39
	Female	19	61
Age	20-29	7	23
	30-39	12	39
	40-49	9	29
	50-59	1	3
	60-69	2	6

Instrument

A review of literature revealed that no specific instrument has been designed to measure the factors that may contribute to the choice of theoretical orientation. Therefore, the Theoretical Contributing Factors Scale (TCFS) was designed to assess the nine factors that were highlighted in this study as it may contribute to the decision making of the participants in choosing their theoretical orientation. The factors are personality, lecturer influence, family background, training received, religion, self-philosophy, life experience, peer orientation and economy. These factors were depicted in Table 1 and discussed along with the objectives of this study.

The items in TCFS are rated on five Likert-point scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”. It consists of 45 items which were randomly arranged. For each of the eight contributing factors, the researcher had randomly scattered five (5) questions each, which were later scored by adding the items for each factor. The instrument was back-translated to Malay language, to give participants the choice of responding in English or Malay.

Participants also completed the Demographic Information Form. In addition to providing information about their age and gender, they were asked about their preferred theoretical orientation. The participants were asked to identify one primary counselling theory from a list of eight (8) choices namely, psychoanalytic, person-centered, existential, Adlerian, reality, rational emotive behaviour (REBT), cognitive behaviour (CBT) and Gestalt theory. We intentionally excluded the eclectic approach as it was predicted that most of the participants would select this approach if it were included.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study was conducted using a quantitative approach. At the initial stage, the selected participants were contacted via phone and asked about their willingness to participate in this study. Once they agreed to participate, their personal details including their electronic mail (e-mail) address were acquired. The Theoretical Contributing Factor Scale (TCFS) and the Demographic Information Form were then forwarded to the selected participants via e-mail. The participants were given one (1) month to complete the questions given. They were also instructed to submit their completed questionnaires via e-mail to the researchers. Descriptive data analysis was used to obtain the demographic profile of the participants. In addition, analysis of the data using percentage and mean was performed using the SPSS software version 22.

Findings and Discussions

Findings

The study concluded that there is no specific factor element; whether external or internal factor, that determines the counsellors' theoretical orientation choice. Table 3 shows the most influential factors that contributed to participants' counselling theoretical orientation choice ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 4.88$). The data shows that 45% ($n=14$) of the participants chose 'personality' as the main factor in selecting a theoretical orientation. This was followed by 'lecturer influence', where 23% ($n = 7$) of participants indicated that it is a determining factor in their selection of counselling theory. The data also shows that 19% ($n = 6$) of the participants chose the 'training received' factor as a factor in their choice of counselling theory while 6.5% ($n = 2$) of the participants chose 'self-philosophy' and 'religion' as the factor determining their choice of counselling theory. Finally, the findings show that none of the participants chose their 'life experience' factor, the 'economic' factor, 'peer orientation' factor or 'family background' factor as affecting their theoretical orientation choice. This paper will focus on the three factors seen as the main factors affecting counsellors in their selection of counselling theory, which are personality, lecturer influence and training received.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics for Affecting Factors

Factors	Numbers	Percentage (%)
Personality	14	45
Self-Philosophy	2	6.5
Religion	2	6.5
Life Experience	-	-
Lecturer Influence	7	23
Economy	-	-
Peer Orientation	-	-
Training Received	6	19
Family	-	-
Background	-	-

Counselling theory is important as it shows the counsellor how to conceptualize client problems based on past, present and future behaviour (Zakaria et al, 2010). Through theory, counsellors can also design and carry out interventions that are appropriate to the condition of a client. Corsini and Wedding (2005) stated that there were more than 440 counselling theories produced since the development of Freud's theory, where each theory can make a valuable contribution to the counsellor who can use it optimally.

Table 4 shows the preferred counselling theories of participants ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 3.12$). The findings show that 29% ($n = 9$) of participants chose Person-Centred Therapy, while 23% ($n = 7$) participants chose Reality Therapy and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy theory. About 16% of ($n = 5$) participants chose Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) as their preferred theory, while 6% of ($n = 2$) participants opted for Gestalt Therapy and only one person selected Existential Therapy. None of the participants chose Psychoanalytic or Adlerian Therapy as their preferred counselling theory.

Table 4
Counseling Theories Preference

Counseling Theories	Numbers	Percentage (%)
Psychoanalytic	-	-
Person-Centered	9	29
Existential	1	3
Adlerian	-	-
Reality	7	23
REBT	5	16
Cognitive Behaviour	7	23
Gestalt	2	6

The findings showed that most counsellors in Malaysia chose Person-Centred theory as the main choice of theory in their counselling services (29% of all participants) while Reality Therapy and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy shows the same frequency of 23% each (n = 7). The findings also show that Psychoanalytic and Adlerian Therapy theory was not considered as a main counselling theory by the participants. This proves that both these theories are not evolving in Malaysia compared to other theories. It can therefore be concluded that this may be the result of a theoretical approach that does not influence the respondents of this study which may give them the impetus to explore and understand the counseling theory more deeply.

The findings show that Person-Centred Therapy is the preferred theory for counsellors in Malaysia, which is probably due to the client culture in Malaysia. The criteria involved in Person-Centred Therapy, such as listening, empathy, entertaining, congruent, and unconditional acceptance, make it most compatible with the people in Malaysia. The findings also support previous research that found that most registered counsellors chose Person-Centered Therapy as their preferred counselling theory to be used in their counselling sessions (Zakaria, 2010; Zakaria et al., 2011c).

It is likely that Adler's Theory was not chosen as a preferred counselling theory, because this theory requires a counsellor to undertake exploration of past experiences and client familial concerns. This is also the same technique and approach used in the Psychoanalytic Therapy, which appears to have minimal acceptance among Malaysian counsellors. Zakaria (2010) explained that Asian culture is particularly less encouraging when it comes to talk about one's past, especially if it involves sad events. In addition, people in Malaysia generally find it difficult to talk about their family to others, as this is seen as denigrating their own families. The authors of this paper also assume that the selection of counselling theory is closely related to cultural influences, which involve certain behavioural patterns related to one's thinking and beliefs. Therefore, the difference between Malaysian cultural values and Western values may explain why participants did not indicate a preference for Psychoanalytic Therapy and Adlerian Therapy as their primary counselling theory.

Discussions

Based on the information from Table 3, this study found that **Personality, Lecturer Influence and Training Received** are the main factors that may contribute to a participant's choice of counselling theoretical orientation. The following sections shall discuss how these categories influence the participants in their counselling theory orientation.

1. Personality

Personality can be described through an individual's characteristic interaction with others (Murdoch et al., 1998). A counsellor will choose a theory based on the suitability of theory with his own personality. The influence of personality has been identified as one of the most frequently referenced factors and a significant variable (Aina et al., 2013; Fitzpatrick, Kovalak, & Weaver, 2010; Bitar, Bean, & Bermúdez, 2007) in determining the influence of the counsellors in making their theoretical choice. Additional to that, successful therapists are those who choose a theory that suits their personality (Corsini & Wedding, 2005). Counseling students or novice counsellors will be successful and happy in using a method that suit their personality (Burwell-Pender, 2009). The factor of suitability of a theory with the personality of a counsellor is relevant to previous studies conducted by Petko, Kendrick, and Young (2016); Zakaria et al., (2011a); and Arthur (2001), which found that there were counsellors who chose their preferred theoretical orientation to correspond with their own character or personality.

2. Lecturer Influence and Training Received

There is no precise definition of who or what is being referred to when it comes to "lecturer or supervisor" influence" and "training received". This is because previous studies have not defined this factor in depth as it is seen to be very closely related. In a study which found that the training received by the counsellors is also a factor in the selection of counselling theory, the researchers believe that there are important implications for training received by the counsellors in helping them to choose the orientation that suits them (Fear & Woolfe, 1999).

Lecturers or supervisors are among the individuals who can influence counsellors in choosing their counselling theory. This because lecturers or supervisors are models for counsellors and among those closest to them at the beginning of their involvement in the world of counselling. There is also an interaction between personal and professional issues in the selection of counselling theories, which becomes a part a counsellor's on-going development in terms of their theoretical orientation. Fitzpatrick et al. (2010) highlighted that beginner counsellors tend to choose their preferred theoretical orientation based on the influence of their supervisors that they regarded as role models during their practicum posting or internship. However, the lecturer influence or supervision process does not continue after the counsellors complete their study. For instance, the Malaysian Board of Counsellors does not provide any supervision to the counsellors in determining the quality of services provided (Zakaria & Asyraf, 2011b). For this, it is believed that the counsellors may change their theoretical orientation in later stages of their development. A study can be done to assess what causes counsellors to change their theoretical orientation.

The participants may have one particular theory to be used; either it is Choice Theory (Reality Therapy), Rational Emotional Behaviour Therapy, Existential Therapy, Person Centered Therapy, Adlerian Therapy and others. In fact, there are more than 400 different counselling theories that have been developed in the 21st century (Petko et al., 2016; Aina et al., 2013; Corsini & Wedding, 2005), with many studies conducted on them. However, this study only established the factors that may have influenced participants' decision making in selecting their preferred theory to be used in their counselling practice. This study also did not aim to investigate the knowledge, comprehension and application of the counselling theory among the participants. In a research done by Zakaria (2010), the findings showed that there was a significant relationship between knowledge and application of theory, and between comprehension and application of theory. However, there was no significant relationship found between the theory knowledge of the participants and the theory comprehension of the participants. Nevertheless, in understanding the counselling

development process, knowledge and comprehension of a theory are necessary in selecting a counselling theory.

Conclusion

The process of developing a personal theory of counselling begins during a student's practicum and internship programme and will continue throughout his professional career (Spruill & Benshoff, 2000). By having a preferred theoretical orientation, counsellors will have a guide to manage therapeutic counselling sessions (Zakaria et al., 2011a). The current study highlights the factors that may affect the theoretical choice of graduates of OUM's Master of Counselling programme. These factors include personality, family background, religion, life philosophy, life experience, lecturer preference, training received at university, peer orientation and economy, where the findings conclude that three factors have the most influence on the participants' theoretical orientation choice. In understanding the choice made by the counselling graduate students from OUM in their theoretical orientation, a model of counselling development is required to provide them with a guideline in evaluating their counselling practice. It is recommended that a longitudinal study be conducted to identify the changes in counselling graduates' preferred theory as students tend to change their perspectives due to the training and experience received during their graduate programs (Spruill & Benshoff, 2000). Further allocation of credit hours is essential for the subject of Counseling Theory in OUM so that training received during the course of study will encourage further selection of appropriate counselling theory. This should also be followed by the learning assistance from the lecturer in an approach to a deeper understanding of the counseling theories. This study clearly shows that the selection of counselling theories among counsellors in Malaysia is influenced by three main factors, namely personality, lecturer influence and training received. However, as this study only examines a small number of participants, generalisation to all counsellors is not possible. Therefore, a survey or case study that takes into account the registered counsellor population, triangulated data collection and data analysis involving descriptive statistical techniques is recommended to future researchers.

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