

Counseling in the Context of Malaysian Living Style

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Abstract: This paper is based on the Malaysian living style and their perception towards seeking counseling aid. In today's living context in Malaysia, it is learnt that people are still reluctant to seek counseling guidance. They seem to have a total different view on the counseling concept. This paper is based on the researcher's own based understanding, and experience experienced on her context of Malaysian living style and their belief towards counseling system.

Key words: Counseling, Malaysia, living style

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is located in South East Asia and consists of federation of 13 states. Malaysia is a country of great cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity, occupying the beautiful land. This is one of the country's major attractions. Even the most superficial observer cannot but be charmed by the constant contrast between the various peoples; to the most observant it is a constant challenge to understand and appreciate these cultural backgrounds (Tregonning, 1966).

Counseling has grown over the course time in Malaysia. Looking back from the time we achieved independence in the year 1957, Counseling was never a subject in the mind of people. It was then not understood or it was due to lifestyle people lived. Several authors (Lyold, 1987; Ng and Stevens, 2001; Pope, Musa, Singarevelu, Bringaze, and Russell, 2002; Scorzelli, 1987) have reported on the history and development and trends of counseling in Malaysia in the past.

Currently, Malaysian society is experiencing social changes and challenges, such as increased urban migration, aging population, raising divorce rates, family structure transformation and illegal immigration (Phua, n.d.; Pope *et al.*, 2002). Crime rates have also tremendously increased over the years. Adequate offerings of help and programs to highlight such occurrences could have played a vital role on the increase. In every department or organization, a counselor is a need, to obtain maximum guidance and fruitful results from the respective individuals' who seeks help mentally, physically, and emotionally.

Multicultural Society (Statistics):

According to the department of statistics Malaysia (2009) showed a population of 28.31 million and according to the US central intelligence's agency's (2009) estimated, there were 50.4% Malays, who are Muslims by birth; 23.7% Chinese, who are mainly Buddhists and Taiosts, with some Christians; 11% indigenous people, who are mainly animists; 7.1% Indians, who are mainly Hindus, and 7.8 % others. Currently, Malaysia is experiencing population growth in the native Malay sector through high native Malay birthrates and through encouraging immigration from nearby Indonesia (95% native Malay; Mahathir, 1997). Official language in Malaysia is Bahasa Melayu and English Language as the second language.

Psychological Poverty:

Psychological poverty, which refers to the lacking of insight thinking, feeling, and behavioral problems, could be best resolved through appropriate techniques and approaches applied by counselors. Many have underestimated the use of counseling treatment in their everyday life issues. In some cases, they assume that counseling is only for the mentally ill people. This belief has ruined or avoided people from taking advice or seeking professional counseling consultation.

Looking onto the population growth of Malaysia and living style of the society, it is very much obvious what people are experiencing and learning from the environment, family and friends. Psychologically the mind building of morality has decayed due to the exposure of immoral lifestyle, such as free sex, living with partners before marriage, dressing inappropriately and etc. Some people are influenced by the western culture which might not be suitable for the Malaysian's values and culture.

At some point of time, the values, the thinking pattern has changed so enormously that it has caused damage to oneself, physically, mentally, emotionally and morally. Psychologically poverty is like an immune deficiency where people start to lead their lives in this fast paced modern world with too much going yet little time spend on valuable issues. Eventually, some may dwell in unnecessary problems where they can become prisoners in themselves.

Counseling is an area, where one could groom and polish themselves and learn of their insights to enhance their living styles. Living style can be healthy in the sense; it is built with good culture values and possessing of effective psychological strength and the ability to strengthen the views, feelings, and carrying out their daily course of life.

Counseling Profession in Malaysia:

The guidance and counseling movement reached Malaysia through the work and leadership of the counseling profession in the United States (Lloyd, 1987) as it did in most of the world (Pope, 2000). Scorzelli (1987) stated that it is "unlikely that family therapy in the Western sense will ever be an important part" of the counseling profession in Malaysia. He goes on to say why, stressing the issue of "loss of face" for the head of the family. Scorzelli is right, but only in a limited sense. Family therapy "in the Western sense" will never take hold in Malaysia; like any other technique or strategy, model or theory, it can never be wholly imported from another culture with expectations of similar results.

Culturally appropriate modifications will always need to be made. The analogy is like planting a new variety of rice that has been developed in the United States and watching it grow under the environmental influences of the Malaysian culture. It may or may not take root; it may need less water, more phosphorus; it may bear unusual fruit; but over time it will adapt to Malaysian conditions or die if adaptation fails. Culture is a set of a behavior patterns related to thoughts, manners and action, which members of a society have shared and passed on to succeeding generations.

Family therapy or career counseling (Pope, 1999), or cognitive therapy (Varma & Zain, 1996), or management science (Pearson & Entekin, 1998) can only exist where it is modified in culturally appropriate ways. Varna and Zain (1996) and Pedersen (1983) reported that religion is an important sociocultural value in Malaysia. Each of the four major ethnic subdivisions of Malaysian society has its own distinct majority religion or philosophical orientation: Malays and Islam, Chinese and Buddhism, Indians and Hinduism, and aboriginal peoples and animism. The emphases vary by group and individual, but the religious/philosophical values are always a part of the life of the person. For the Malays, Islam is very important and guides all of their decisions throughout their lives.

One disturbing issue that continues in the society is the absence of anger management projects for Malaysians who, although are able to go about with their daily lives quite normally, have realized that they have anger problem, and keen to learn how to manage their anger. It should be brought to attention for these individuals to learn more about their anger as well as to discover new coping skills that works best for themselves. We have recently read in the papers of the incidences on how people become uncontrollable over their anger. It provokes them into harming themselves and others. Even to the extent of murder.

Being a developed multicultural society, multicultural counseling proficiency training in most counseling training programs should be implemented. Consistent theoretical framework for counseling should be focused. For future growth to take place, counselors need to incorporate various therapeutic approaches into their practice techniques, for example, family therapy, developmental approaches, and multicultural approaches. Counselors need further clarification and explanation for counselors to effectively incorporate them into their functions.

Also more research is needed to help counselors further define and improve its purpose and directions, theory and practice, and training framework. Empirical findings are needed to improve the professionalism and professionalization of counseling. Counseling professionals and researchers need to work toward shaping the future of multicultural counseling and not rely on the government to classify what is and what will be counseling. Currently, despite increased family and relationship problems in the country, there remains a serious lack of practitioners in family, couples, and marital counseling and substance abuse/addiction counseling in the community settings (Ng, 2003; Ng & Stevens, 2001).

Malaysian Culture, Values and Norms:

The key to a deeper understanding of culture is to examine its values. Values are developed from fundamental assumptions and beliefs of its members and can only be qualified from people's behaviors. Malaysian values are deep-rooted and are quite different from the Western values (Mansor, 2010). Malaysian values involve respecting the elders, group orientation of 'we more than I' or emphasis on belonging to an in-group (Jamal, 2006), a harmonious relationship, a concern for face saving, and a religious orientation (Abdullah, 2001).

From an international perspective, according to Manery (2000), some characteristics that distinguish Malaysian and other Asians from dominant Western culture are the importance of extended family, shame and face-saving reactions, pressure for academic achievement, authoritarian and patriarchal family structures. However, the most important dimension is individualism versus collectivism (Hofstede, 2001; Noordin, Williams, & Zimmer, 2002; Triandis, 2004)

Understanding Malaysian culture and traditions is also helpful in addressing counseling approach and practice in Malaysia. In discussing four synthetic cultures to address cultural differences on values of people in

more than 50 countries around the world, Hofstede (2001) concluded that Malaysia could be considered an Alpha culture with key characteristics of large power distance societies as in family, school and workplace. This included a concept whereby inequalities are both acknowledged and required.

For instance, in the workplace, less powerful people are more reliant on more dominant. The subordinates wait for direction and the supervisor is a manager who anticipates privileges. At home, parents are expected to teach children to obey the rules and gain respect from their children. In educational setting, teachers exercise full initiative in class and communicate their knowledge and wisdom. As such, students show respect to their teachers. Thus, in general, Alpha culture connotes that everyone values authority and there exists an inequality between higher-ups and lower-downs.

Therapeutic Counseling:

Empirical evidence hypothesizes that the values and aspirations of one's family life and their vulnerability to change need to be explored when attempting to understand an individual (Hoelter, 1983; Quek, 1993; 1994b; Super & Sverko, 1995). These considerations form the environment that develop self-concept which then influences one's academic and career aspirations (Chew, Lee & Quek (Eds.), 1995). The individual's academic and career aspirations are also influenced by changes in society.

Additionally, with the current trend of dual-income families and smaller families, there arises responsibility problems of balancing professional life with family life and delegating to domestic helpers at home and at the child-care centers the task of bringing-up children. This direction calls for career counselors to be more skillful in the areas of stress-management and psychological contracting which focuses on issues of dual career counseling.

Such creation in counseling tends to lead to success when people are assisted in integrating work and family life in this informational age. Various approaches and techniques applied by counselors in different aspects of problems could bring forth many disturbing issues within the family setting to a settlement. By doing so, complex issues in the family environment will be understood and handled accordingly.

The approach to therapy is one which focuses on helping individuals better understand, and learn how to change, problematic feelings and behaviors. By providing support in making lifestyle changes, and insights into how thoughts, feelings and behaviors are all related, it helps clients to effectively address the difficulties which have led them to counseling. However, as every individual and situation is unique, the therapeutic goal and counseling techniques utilized are specifically tailored for each client. In the Malaysian scope of living style, the society has to gain trust and confidence in seeking therapeutic counseling.

In addition, it provides consultation to parents and organizations who are struggling to understand and meet the unique needs of children and/or individuals with disabilities. Consultation is a process which allows parents, educators, and other professionals the opportunity to meet and discuss specific concerns with a counselor. The goal of this process is to provide a parent or professional with a better understanding of the problems they are faced with, and to develop strategies for managing their worthwhile life journey.

Malaysians' Fear in Counseling:

Malaysians still don't feel comfortable when someone utters "Why don't you meet a counselor for some professional help?" Malaysians still believe that people only with mental illness need to seek a counselor. The Malaysian society is not open to the counseling concept yet. Lack of in-depth understanding and inadequate knowledge about counseling has created a fear whereby they might be labeled as "Gila". Being a counselor at a hospital, I have personally encountered these problems. Family members refuse to receive counseling aid even though their family members are at high risks.

Cases, such as domestic violence, rape victims, abuse, alcoholics, and substance abusers etc. are reluctant to seek counseling services which is merely the "ego" instincts they possess in them. At one point in time, they create a fear within themselves that nothing is going to be helpful in the counseling treatment. Malaysians should be educated on the importance of counseling benefits. The society should help one another in reaching out to help or advise those in need of assistance to enhance the living standards both for themselves and their families. Living styles differ for everyone. Malaysian counselors are well defined on the multicultural differences.

Training programs are conducted at various organizations and institutions, but it only stretches to a certain standard group. What is trained and projected among the professionals should be also made aware to the society as to how they would benefit from their sessions and their participation in the counseling therapy. There are also clients who have attended counseling sessions, they feel quite uncomfortable and fear the process of talking at length about private thoughts and feelings to a stranger. In Malaysian context, the ability to self-disclose and talk about the confidential aspects of one's life is much valued. However, disclosures of one's personal problems reflect not only on the individual but also on the family system. Thus, most family exercise strong demands on the members not to disclose deep personal matters to 'outsiders'. As such, some counselors may mistakenly perceive that the client is unresponsive. So much so in counseling, the procedure of informing parents

about their child's problem must be avoided. Indeed students often prefer their family not to know. On the other hand, family concerns may push them to seek counseling.

Being assertive is much encouraged in societies based on Western value but not in Malaysia. Malaysian society highly value and respect authority and being assertive might be conflicting. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Malaysians are unassertive or lack initiative. Most Malaysians wait for a clear instruction and prefer an authority figure to make decisions, but this should not be mistaken for a lack of motivation or self confidence.

Thus, counseling can possibly be seen as an easier route towards seeking counseling. However, an 'invitation' to counseling needs to be made in total secrecy so as to protect an individual from losing face, since this embarrassment, especially in front of colleagues or worst, family members, is very difficult to cope with. Sometimes, they are more inclined to state their problems and expect the therapist to provide them with solutions (Mansor, 2010).

Counseling Alertness:

Counseling actually plays a vital role in our lives. Different counseling approaches can be conducted pertaining to the type of issues the clients are facing. As in the Malaysian context, it is the doubtfulness or lack of knowledge about counseling that has blurred the society to seek for counseling aid. In many cases, inferior complexity or self pride has also been the cause. For Malaysians, mostly about their mind setting and culture that could discourage them into taking the next steps towards counseling. Interventions programs such as, on parenting skills, motivational programs, thinking "out of the box", self awareness, and self grooming should be implemented.

Schools should also participate, and educate students to feel it is alright to seek professional help if needed by them. They should be let known that some issues should be brought to the attention of parents or teachers, such as, being molested, raped or sexually harassed. These seem one of the main focused problems for adolescents and underage children in Malaysian. Malaysian society should be taught to feel, it is "ok" to talk to someone when they are hurt or need help.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the influence on counseling should be placed at importance. Malaysians must have an open concept about counseling aid and the results they would obtain. This would bring fore a magnifying change in their psychological aspects. Conscience guidance and clear explanations allows one to consider making a change to themselves and people around them. As the saying goes 'If there is a will, there is a way'. Malaysians should emphasize on counseling philosophy to enhance on their living style and encounter problems in their day to day activities.

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