

## AN ACTION STUDY ON TEACHING GROUP COUNSELLING SKILLS AMONG POSTGRADUATE COUNSELOR TRAINEES

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### Abstract:

The counselling profession is known as a professional body that is entrusted to deal with the well-being of clients. In order to help clients to have greater psychological development, group counselling is one of the methods to be utilized by counsellors. The competency of counsellors especially counsellor trainees in conducting group counselling is critical to ensure the quality and effectiveness of counselling sessions. However, there is a gap between the current training practices and student outcomes as counsellor trainees found to have a good knowledge on group counselling, but lack of skills to put theory into practice, especially to apply group counselling skills in their counselling session. Thus, this study was carried out to look at the best method that is preferably useful and most effective in teaching group counselling skills among postgraduate counsellor trainees in Malaysia. A total of 35 counsellor trainees was recruited from an education focused university in Malaysia using a purposive sampling method. This study consisted of four cycles including planning, action, observation and reflection. Several teaching methods were utilized such as traditional method, experiential learning, simulation, mind map and role play to impart knowledge and skills to students. Results showed that by using the traditional methods, students have the knowledge of conducting group sessions, however they have difficulty in applying the group counselling skills. However, after planning for a better method, experiential learning was used where trainees are required to explain and present the skills, giving examples and present them in a mind map. Then, it is followed by trainees role play the skills. The practical part was done several times until all students were able to show the particular group counselling skills. Through the experience and the application of using different methods of conducting group counselling session, it is suggested that the integration of multiple teaching pedagogies in teaching group counselling skills is more effective and practical compares to the traditional method. Therefore, this study provides some insight to counsellor educators and counsellor trainees on teaching and learning group counselling skills for effective group practice.

**Keywords:** *group counselling skills, counselling trainees, simulation, role play.*

### INTRODUCTION

Counselling is a helping profession that needs counsellors to be equipped with interviewing skills and group counselling skills. These skills are considered a central component in the training of counselling for master's level students. It also clearly written in the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs (CACREP, 2014) and Malaysia Counsellor Training Qualification and Standards (2012). According to Masson, Jacobs, Harvill and Schimmel (2012), group sessions enables counsellors to deal with many clients at one time. This group process involves a unique interplay between the self, understanding and relating to others, and the complex interpersonal dynamics of the group as a whole (Berg, Landreth, & Fall, 2017). Group members are able to share experiences and ways to handle their problems through the self-discovery process. Members in group counselling also gained insight faster and received experiential learning through group counselling sessions. Seemingly, then, group counselling is the great place for dealing with adjustment difficulties as interaction with other members can help creating an accepting climate in which members can test their new behaviours. Hence, Berg et al. (2017) viewed the group as a mini-society, whereas it provides an opportunity for group members to experiment in their own way with reality as perceived by them.

Shumaker, Ortiz and Brenninkmeyer (2011) found that group counselling is an important subject as it has been found effective in addressing a variety of issues and problems with more clients at one time. Due to the group members will share their own similar experiences in a group, the process of normalization occurs and creates the sense of commonality among group members (Jacobs et al., 2012). It also allows group members to experience a sense of belonging in the group and open to receive accurate feedback from others in the group. The sense of secure, belonging and being accepted will encourage group members to attempt social contact at greater feeling-oriented levels confidently.

Sufficient research highlighted that group counselling is part of the process of helping individuals to grow, especially effective in dealing with primary school children (Trunckova & Viney, 2008), secondary school students (Aslina & Suradi, 2011; Mohammad Nasir et al., 2015; Mohammad Aziz Shah et al., 2015), and university students (Vassilopoulos & Brouzos, 2012). The effectiveness of group counselling may result from the first group task - that is to establish an atmosphere of safety and respect. The characteristics and skills of the group leader or counsellor is stated to be the important aspects that can contribute to the therapeutic environment (Jacobs, et al., 2012). Group members are able to listen carefully to others, reflect on others' feelings and issues, and become aware of their own feelings could create a force that encourages members to become less defensiveness and open to specific personal sharing. This process will create opportunities for change among group members.

Additionally, ample time and space for experiential learning is also provided in group counselling. According to Shumaker et al. (2011), experiential learning is encouraged group members to explore group processes and other commonalities of group formation then that reduces the risk of members feeling coerced to share deeply personal information. By experiencing the therapeutic environment themselves, members are encouraged to listen to others, express themselves, and think of the main issues that has been focused in the group (Corey, 2012). At the same time, group leader or the counsellor serve as the role model in conducting groups, giving constructive feedback, and being the helper for the group members.

According to Trunckova and Viney (2008), research has shown that small-group group counselling is a useful and efficacious intervention, which improves the psychological functioning of not only primary school students, but also secondary school students (Aslina & Suradi, 2011; Mohammad Nasir et al., 2015; Mohammad Aziz Shah et al., 2015). Counsellors or counsellor trainees should develop and maintain effective leadership and group skills. In fact, many studies found that there is a gap between knowledge and practice of counselling group skills due skills shortage among counsellor trainees. They were struggling to involve practical integration of learning attributes and prior knowledge into a new situation (Adams, Vasquez, & Prengler, 2017). Furthermore, CACREP suggested a minimum of 10 hours of student participation in a small group activity over one academic term of the course (CACREP, 2009), however, the Association for Specialists in Group Work (AGSW, 2000) agreed with 20 hours of observation of participation in a group experience as a member or leader. Obviously, there is no specific standard or guideline is better for counsellor training, especially in Malaysia context, scarcity of study focused on group counselling skills development. Thus, it appears no consensus of how to enhance counsellor trainees group skills competency.

Therefore, to equip postgraduate counsellor trainees with sufficient knowledge and competent in conducting group counselling, this action research aimed to investigate the impact of utilizing different methods of training such as traditional teaching with the integration of

experiential learning, simulation, role play, presentation and mind map on counsellor trainees in mastering group counselling skills.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Action research was chosen to investigate the impact of different methods of training on counsellor trainees in mastering group counselling skills (Kemmis & MacTaggart, 1988). A case study approach was utilized to define the gaps between knowledge and practice and implement several different methods of training to solve the problem that discovery by the researchers. There are four cycles involve in the action research, namely (a) first cycle that involves planning, (b) second cycle that relates to action, (c) third cycle that involves observation and (d) last cycle that relates to reflection (Kemmis & MacTaggart, 1988). For the first cycle in this study, the researchers identify the problems of counsellor trainees in conducting group sessions. Based on the findings, we planned certain mode of teaching and learning, that involves experiential learning through simulation, presentation, mind map and role play. Action taken by utilizing the new mode of teaching and learning, followed by observation based on their peer and researchers feedback as well as counsellor trainees' reflection. The last cycle focused on the researchers reflection on the main issue, i.e conducting group session utilizing appropriate group skills.

Counsellor trainees who were involved in this study consisted of 35 postgraduate students who were taking the group counselling course in 2018. Thirteen of them were male and twelve were female. Data collection was done through observation, peer and lecturer feedback, as well as counsellor trainees' self reflection journal. Data was analyzed using qualitative procedures from various collected data sources and have been triangulated to ensure the quality of the data.

## **RESULTS**

There are four results according to the cycles of research.

### **a) First Cycle (Planning)**

Looking at the performance of students in assignments and in internship in 2017, students are found to be facing difficulties in conducting group sessions. The feedback was given by fellow colleagues of the department of psychology and counselling during the meeting. Based on the feedback given, we planned another mode of teaching and learning that is more student centered. Students were required to explain and give examples for the assigned topics to their friends. Simulation and discussion were conducted at the end of the class.

### **b) Second Cycle (Action)**

In the second cycle, trainees were required to explain and give examples for the assigned topics to their friends. We showed the skills through simulation and discussion were conducted at the end of the class.

Through observation, students were found to have the knowledge of conducting group sessions. However, the trainees still mentioned the difficulties of conducting group sessions

through their self-reflection as group leader in the role play session in the counselling lab. Feedback given are as follows:

- “ I know the methods but when it comes to real setting.. I don't know what to do”
- “Not sure what went wrong... blank... out of a sudden”
- “I can see how the lecturer do it, but still .... don't know”
- “ I have difficulty in conducting group sessions... I understand but I cannot do it”..
- “I know the facts but do not how to use it”

Referring to the feedback given by their peers, trainees do possess certain quality as group leader such as good attributes of leader such as empathetic, listen to the members, patience. However, they still lack in utilizing the group skills such as focusing, linking, drawing out and cutting off.

As feedback and performance shown are not as what was expected, we seek ways to train the trainees. Through reading and discussion, group counselling lab was conducted by asking students to do mind map of the skills, role play of students on the group counselling skills, followed by simulation by the lecturer. Specifically, trainees are asked to explain the assigned topics to their friends and examples of appropriate responses should also be given in the mind map that will be distributed to all members of the group. They were to experience conducting group sessions in class. Feedback was given by their peers and also lecturers after role play was done. We also demonstrated the group skills to ensure trainees have the opportunity how the skills are applied in the group sessions.

### **c) Third Cycle (Observation)**

After the mode of teaching and learning involved experiential learning where trainees have the opportunity to conduct the group session and practise the group skills, the promising impact was shown in the facial expression of the trainees. Most of them (98%) felt relieved and have more confidence in conducting group work in the future.

Feedback in trainees self reflections are as follows:

- “I have more confidence in conducting group counselling sessions”
- “I know what to do if my clients keep on talking and not tracking to the topic. And also what to do if my clients keep quiet”

### **d) Fourth Cycle (Reflection)**

For the last cycle, we felt relieved and found that the experiential learning has helped trainees in utilizing appropriate group skills while conducting group work. We also received positive feedback from trainees and internship supervisors who felt that the trainees showed ample knowledge and were able to use the appropriate group leading skills in conducting group work. They also know the terms for the group skills such as linking, cutting off, linking, drawing out and exercise.

## CONCLUSION

As conclusion, the results in this study shows that counsellor trainees are able to grasp the group leading skills through experiential learning. They are not only able to synthesize the facts and arrange them nicely on the mind map, but also can role play the skills needed for certain problematic situation in group work. Skills that are found rarely been used by trainees are cutting off due to the cultural habits and beliefs. Malaysian children usually are reminded not to interrupt people while they are talking, where as in group work, group leader are supposed to cut off or block any members who have been directing the discussion on other irrelevant topic in the group. In this case, it is found that trainees need extra work and practise especially in utilizing “blocking” or “cutting off” while conducting group work. Future research should be done to explore more on the difficulties of utilizing group skills for trainees.

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