



## The Application of Multicultural Counseling to Help Mental Health Problems During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Malaysia

*Nor Kamilah Abd Latif, Abu Yazid Abu Bakar\**

Country Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

\*Correspondence: E-mail: [yazid3333@ukm.edu.my](mailto:yazid3333@ukm.edu.my)

### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the application of multicultural counseling to help mental health problems of individuals affected by the covid-19 pandemic. To address the issue of counseling involving multicultural clients, counselors need to examine many matters related to multicultural aspects for the counseling sessions to run smoothly. Therefore, there are eight aspects of the importance of multicultural counseling that have been discussed in this concept paper and can be used as a guide by counselors during the session. Among the interests is the establishment of effective communication, building trust relationships between counselors and clients, enhancing the seriousness and understanding of values, unconditional positive acceptance, enhancing empathy, integrating the application of counseling theory, avoiding culture encapsulation, and increasing the self-efficacy of counselors. In addition, challenges and constraints are also discussed which are the challenges faced by counselors and clients. Many suggestions have been set out in this concept paper that counselors need to enhance their knowledge, experience, and exploration of the culture and differences of the surrounding society so that appropriate skills, theories, and approaches can be applied in counseling sessions.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a country with a multi-racial, religious, and cultural population, thus making it a unique nation. Although there are many differences, the majority of the people in this country live in peace and harmony, unity, and respect for each other. To ensure that this well-being is ensured, the mental health aspect should also be emphasized so that the people born from this lucky earth are not only physically but also mentally healthy.

Starting in early 2020, the world has been shocked by the spread of a new Coronavirus, causing the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare it a pandemic. The virus, which is dangerous and too fast-spreading, has resulted in many countries around the world including Malaysia having to close all sectors including the education and business sectors to avoid more serious transmission as the pandemic can take lives and pose a dangerous effect on sufferers. In line with the closure of all sectors and various restrictions announced to prevent the spread of the pandemic, new norms were introduced by the government so that all communities can cooperate to comply with every regulation outlined by the government. Then, it begins a new episode that creates various difficulties that have to be faced by the community around the world, particularly in Malaysia. Restrictions and limitations in social, economic, and daily activities lead to stress that can cause the individual's mental health to be compromised.

Several studies have been carried out to look at the effects associated with mental health due to the spread of this dangerous virus. Among them, a study conducted by [Aziz et al. \(2020\)](#) stated that among the negative impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are aspects of mental health that are difficult to detect but can become cancerous and can worsen the situation if left to persist. According to [Aziz et al. \(2020\)](#) again, if a person's mental health condition is affected, there will be maladaptation in his management such as difficulties in carrying out daily activities, and problems with self-management, which can affect the rational way of thinking.

Therefore, counseling practitioners, psychologists, and other professionals in the field of psychiatry need to take into account the differences in race, religion, and culture in assisting all citizens to help all groups without feeling marginalized from the inherent differences. Therefore, counseling services should also take into account the cultural diversity in society so that all individuals can be helped regardless of their skin color, race, culture, or differences so that mental well-being can be enjoyed together without bias.

## 2. METHODS

This study is a literature survey. Data were obtained from internet sources, specifically from articles in international journals. Data were used as literature, collected, reviewed, and compared with current conditions.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. The Multicultural Counseling Application during Covid-19 Pandemic

Life stress factors, an unstable economy, and social disconnection can create stress and mental health problems in the community in Malaysia. Therefore, the mental health aspect should always be emphasized and assisted immediately by professionals and skilled people such as counselors so that it can be controlled. Since Malaysia is a plural country with a multi-racial and multicultural society, the use of multicultural counseling techniques and skills can help clients from different cultures and backgrounds get equal services to return to function well in life and have prosperous mental health.

The significant racial differences in mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia (Coyoca *et al.*, 2022). It shows that mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and stress are seen to be higher experienced by the Chinese community in Malaysia due to the COVID-19 pandemic when compared to other races. The results of this analysis were based on the DASS Healthy Mind Screening test of 762 respondents online. Thus, the multicultural counseling service is seen as one of the platforms that can help the community at a time when the situation is becoming more critical than it is today.

In addition, the cooperation of three dimensions of knowledge, namely counseling, psychology, and psychiatry should also be enhanced as these three areas are in demand and need to be supported by each other due to the relationship. It is clear to further strengthen the government's desire to improve the mental health of the community in our country. Hence, alignment of goals between stakeholders concerning the field of counseling is essential that all parties work together to ensure that all the roles, functions, goals, and philosophy of the provision of counseling services will reach the community and accept them without any further doubt or question marks.

### **3.2. The Importance of Multicultural Counseling**

#### **3.2.1. Creating Effective Communication**

In multicultural counseling, the diversity of client backgrounds such as dialect, race, religion, speech intonation, and so on causes the client's communication to have various patterns. Competent counselors need to be prepared with various constraints and challenges when handling sessions. Shah (2019) stated that the competence of counselors to understand the differences in verbal and non-verbal communication that exists in the session will make them a professional person and no doubt the implementation of the session. For example, a counselor who is from Sarawak and handles client issues that are from Kelantan. A good knowledge of the dialect of the language will make the counselor not take a negative view of the meaning that his client wants to convey.

For instance, a client says the word 'semak' which means good appearance by an individual man. If the counselor does not understand the context of the client's state dialect well, the counselor will misunderstand the meaning that his client wants to convey by referring to the word 'Semak Samun' in the Malay language. Therefore, something like this should not be underestimated because an unskilled counselor will limit the friendly relationship with the client to the point of misunderstanding.

#### **3.2.2. Build Trust Relationship between Counselor and Client**

The psychosocial development of each individual varies according to the background and influence of the surrounding situation as they are brought up. Therefore, different cultures will certainly affect individual changes of attitude and one obstacle in their lives. To avoid the occurrence of negative stigma and awkwardness in multicultural counseling sessions, the most important first step for counselors is to build trust with the client. By showing awareness of differences and openness to client understanding, counselors can build more effective trust and relationships during the session.

One way to conduct multicultural counseling sessions is to assess the background and beliefs of the counselor himself. Counselors need to understand the fundamentals of cultural assumptions to train themselves to see their views as a whole and make the sessions conducted more effective as a result of the relationship of trust between the client and the

counselor. Counseling is not a regular conversation, but it is a process that involves two-way interaction between the counselor and the clients through a particular development stage.

### **3.2.3. Improvement of Purposefulness and Value Understanding**

The aspect of seriousness and value should also be taken into account by the counselor in the process to assist the client, especially when it comes to multicultural clients. According to [Jamal \(2020\)](#), this aspect of seriousness includes the deep interest of a counselor to help clients get better well-being especially emotionally and psychologically. Passion means the willingness of a competent counselor to help clients with problems.

The value aspect, on the other hand, is an added value for multicultural counseling. The value aspect is also seen as very important in multicultural counseling; for example, when it comes to clients who have gay and lesbian problems. This is because counselors need to have a deep knowledge of the human values that make up the belief system of the client. Differences of opinion regarding the values held by the counselor and the client may lead to a conflict between the counselor and the client. Therefore, as a counselor with high competence, counselors should be aware of these differences and try to accept and find solutions so that they do not interfere with the course of counseling sessions.

The importance of the counselor's competence based on this aspect of seriousness and value can help the counselor to have a deeper interest in deepening each client's problems by showing good value and attitude when conducting counseling sessions so as not to exhibit biased or prejudiced attitudes towards the client. The counselor's skills and ability to effectively provide counseling are the results of his/her efforts and dedication to understanding himself and improving his competence. In this regard, one of the duties and responsibilities of counselors is to constantly enhance knowledge and experience related to culture and to celebrate differences among people so that the services carried out are more effective and help clients holistically.

### **3.2.4. Unconditional Positive Regards**

The focus of multicultural counseling is not only on cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity, but it also refers to various other small groups such as people with disabilities, sexuality, spirituality, and others. In the field of counseling, unconditional positive regard is one of the skills that counselors need to have to be able to accept clients openly without making any judgment. This skill is very important for a counselor so that they can accept clients who come from a variety of backgrounds and cultures.

The counselors also cannot judge clients with oblique views even if clients come up with negative problems and are at odds with the counselor's cultural holdings. If the counselor practices this unconditional acceptance, the client will feel more comfortable and willing to share the problems faced by them without any gaps between the counselor and the client.

### **3.2.5. Increased Feelings of Empathy**

In multicultural counseling, emphasis on empathy skills is very important as it is a unique way for counselors to understand clients more deeply. However, the counselor can also make the wrong understanding if they misinterpret the issue brought by the client due to the differences that exist especially in terms of the language used. Therefore, the counselor needs to improve the skills in verbal and non-verbal communication to avoid this misinterpretation thus bringing about an unequal understanding of the client.

Feelings of empathy can also create a client's feelings of security and a sense of better understanding if the counselor has high empathy during counseling sessions. In addition, the

client's problems are also easier with this skill as the client can express what he is facing more calmly and comfortably with the counselor. Therefore, the importance of counselors' competence in multicultural counseling is not only about counseling skills that are mastered but also about the aspect of empathy. If this aspect is ignored by the counselor, the client will begin to close his feelings to share problems or issues that could cause the exploration process to become more difficult.

### **3.2.6. Integration of Counseling Theory Applications**

Theoretical applications in counseling practice can help counselors provide assistance and tailor it according to client diversity (Shah *et al.*, 2017). The use of theory and techniques in counseling sessions is an important basis to ensure that the counseling sessions conducted are purposeful and more guided. Each theory used must be compatible with the problem or issue brought by the client so that the exploration process takes place more smoothly and accurately. When it comes to client issues from different cultures, the integration of theories and techniques applied by the counselor must be thorough and appropriate to the client's situation. The use of the right theory will help the current counselor make exploration and make the counseling process more effective.

Clients will also feel more comfortable recounting the problems they face when the exploration process is more directed and has clear goals. Herdi *et al.* (2019) stated that to become a counselor with high competence in dealing with unique cases related to cross-culture, a counselor must not rely only on theory and skills but need to enhance their knowledge, experience, and exploration of the culture and differences of the community around them so that counseling sessions conducted on clients are more effective.

### **3.2.7. Avoidance of Culture Encapsulation**

Having a little understanding of other cultures can lead to cultural tunnel vision which is a perception of reality that is based on a very limited set of cultural experiences. This situation can lead to the possibility of counselors imposing their values on the client by assuming that everyone shares the same values. If this happens, the counselor will not be sensitive to the client's needs until the sessions or interventions carried out will be less effective. Culture encapsulation can occur when there are elements of counselors determining reality according to a set of cultural assumptions held by them. This issue will also arise if the counselor is insensitive to the client's cultural differences and accepts unwarranted assumptions without evidence or ignores the evidence. In this regard, among the duties and responsibilities of counselors is to constantly enhance knowledge and experience related to culture and to celebrate differences among people so that the services carried out are more effective and help clients holistically.

### **3.2.8. Improvement of Counselor Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy is one of the important aspects that need to be improved in a counselor. Self-efficacy can be defined as the ability of an individual to make judgments regarding his or her abilities. This is related to the way a person performs a task or organizes in doing something. A counselor, who has self-efficacy, can set clear goals in each of his actions while providing services. Therefore, in the implementation of multicultural counseling, a counselor needs confidence and awareness of self-sufficiency while performing this challenging task. In addition, counselors also need to have high self-sufficiency and counseling skills related to culture as well as differences that exist between individuals for the counseling sessions to

achieve the goals set. Albert Bandura in [Herdi et al. \(2019\)](#) states that high self-efficacy can give value to a person and affect them while performing tasks as prescribed. Therefore, in the context of self-efficacy counselors who need to face the challenges of the multicultural counseling profession, should have the ability to master knowledge of the client's race, ethnicity, religion, culture, sexuality, and socio-economic background. This is because this issue of multiculturalism can pose a major challenge for counselors if counselors do not have specific preparation for multicultural awareness.

### **3.3. The Counselor's Challenges in Multicultural Practice**

One of the challenges in this multicultural counseling-related profession is the knowledge and competence of counselors on a particular culture, ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic background of the client. The diversity of client cultures presents a huge challenge for counselors in enhancing their understanding of different cultures with the counselor to have awareness of other specific cultures. To improve skills to become an effective counselor, the competency and understanding aspects of the client's socio-cultural aspects should be owned by the counselor. Therefore, the skills in the field of counseling are not only focused on skills, mastery of theory, or technique only but cover all aspects so that the counselor has a high self-efficacy before performing a session.

Moreover, the differences inherent in each individual will certainly cause them to look for similarities with each other so that it is easy to understand. This can also happen during the counseling process and is one of the big challenges for counselors if the client is not comfortable attending counseling sessions if it is different in terms of culture, values, sexuality, and others. The probability of clients choosing counselors who have similarities with them is high if the counselor fails to build trust with the client. Therefore, counselors need to be prepared for challenges like this and be competent in dealing with them.

Similarly, ethical issues faced by counselors concerning multicultural counseling present complex challenges in these helpful relationships. A time when faced with the issue of multiculturalism, many things need to be addressed and confronted with due consideration. This is due to the differences that exist in the counseling process that can certainly lead to conflicts and misinterpretations if not handled properly. Among the issues and ethics highlighted are related to client and counselor relationships, crossing the boundaries of professional relationships, countertransference, informed cooperation, confidentiality and privacy, parental disclosure, documentation, and record-keeping, group performance, termination session, and reference as well as finally related to counseling remote and social media. All these ethical issues raised should not be taken lightly as they may affect the counseling sessions conducted if the counselor fails to address the issues that may arise regarding the ethics of counseling. Therefore, every counselor needs to be aware of the latest issues that may arise even if they are unprecedented so that they can help clients achieve their goals.

### **3.4. The Client's Challenges in Multicultural Practice**

The issue of trust is one of the issues that clients often face before starting a counseling session. This will become more complicated when the client realizes that the counselor who will handle the session with him is different from the point of view of the existing values and beliefs. This obstacle may be a significant challenge in the process of helping relationships in the context of multicultural counseling due to the issue of trust between the client and the counselor. Clients who refuse to be open in this matter will certainly refuse if it is necessary to use the services of a counselor who has a different cultural background than his.



Furthermore, public awareness in this country of counseling services is still limited. Among the challenges and issues that often arise are unrealistic expectations of the effectiveness of a counseling session. At times, clients want immediate results and hope that counselors can resolve the problems or issues they bring. This unrealistic expectation does not coincide with counseling services as the counseling session itself is a process where there is a need to go through certain stages to help the client. The client's misconception about the counselor's job is also one of the reasons for this unrealistic expectation that the counselor's job is to help clients gain literacy in solving their problems. This is because the counselor cannot help the client solve the problem as it can lead to the client's dependence on the counselor.

Concurrently, although counseling services in our country have been established for a long time, there is still a negative stigma that arises among the under-exposure community concerning mental health. According to [Corrigan \(2004\)](#), stigma can be divided into two types, namely stigma of society and self-stigma. The stigma of society is the negative perception of the community towards individuals seeking counseling services while self-stigma is a negative perception of individuals seeking counseling services towards themselves. The consequences of these two stigmas can lead to an individual's lack of confidence and self-appreciation and loss of social opportunities. According to a study conducted by [Corrigan \(2004\)](#), people from different cultures are more likely to be negative about those who seek counseling services and they try to avoid seeking counseling because they are worried about being labeled with negative views by others.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The competence of a counselor in this helping profession is not only focused on professional characteristics such as mastery of theory, techniques, or skills learned but also involves development in self-efficacy. In conclusion, the competence of counselors in conducting counseling sessions involving multicultural counseling requires counselors to further enhance their knowledge, experience, and exploration of the culture and differences of the surrounding community so that appropriate skills, theories, and approaches can be applied in counseling sessions. [Bakar et al. \(2017\)](#) stated self-efficacy, attitude, readiness, and challenge of conducting special needs client counseling. It stated among the factors that make counseling teachers ready to conduct guidance and counseling sessions for students with special needs is the self-efficacy that the counseling teachers themselves have ([Zauddin & Bakar, 2022](#)). Experience, mastery of skills, self-efficacy, and competence in a counselor are the important components that can shape a counselor to make this helpful relationship more effective and thus help the counseling session to be more effective. The process of counseling in helping clients achieve literacy is a process that is not easy and requires effort and skills that need to be constantly improved. Therefore, the counselor needs to re-evaluate each session so that it achieves the goals set with the client at the beginning of the session. Exposure to the public about the importance of counseling services is also important to give them a positive view that counseling sessions are not just empty talk or just tools to solve problems. This service is one of the services that is needed by all people in today's increasingly challenging world era because mental health problems are like diseases that can be self-consuming.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the competence of counselors in conducting multicultural counseling sessions is very important nowadays. The weaknesses in conducting sessions with clients from various backgrounds will cause the community to generalize the ability of counseling services to help the community. Thus, there are negative stigmas that lead to public distrust to seek help from counselors. If this problem occurs, then a cultural group will only find anyone among them who is likely to have the ability to help others. Such issues will show the profession of counseling as if there are gaps and cultural sentiments although the cultural entities sitting in one country are not single. Therefore, to meet the challenges of helping clients during the COVID-19 pandemic, the application of skills, mastery of multicultural knowledge, and enhancing the efficiency of multicultural counseling are important components to counselors. Thus, trust can be carried out properly.

## 6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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