Integrating Spirituality into Counselling among Malaysian Counsellors: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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While the surge in both quantity and quality of research involving spirituality has been quite noticeable for the past two decades, interests in research on the integration of spirituality involving the helping professions have gained momentum in recent years as well. The purpose of the paper was to explore the experiences of six professional Malaysian counsellors on the integration of spirituality into counselling.

Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, two in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the counsellors for detailed engagement. Most of the research participants were recruited through snowballing with purposive sampling in mind. In line with the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis, each interview with a research participant was completed before moving to the next participant (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Each interview typically lasted for about an hour, although the first interviews with research participants tended to be longer than the second interviews. Among the semi-structured questions asked on the participants were: What does spirituality mean to you? What is your perception toward integrating spirituality into counselling? What is your experience of dealing with the spiritual dimension of your clients in the counselling process? What is the role of spiritual dimension in the counselling process? The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

Among the findings were: a) relationships with people and connections with the sacred are often regarded as significant in the practice of spirituality; b) case conceptualization affects the way counselling service is provided to the client; c) theoretical orientation and counselling approaches of the counsellor play a role in the counselling process; and d) effective integration of spirituality into counselling could involve creativity on the part of the counsellor.

The present study has recruited six research participants only from West Malaysia and none of the participants was from East Malaysia and the Federal Territories. Future studies could consider recruiting participants from the Federal Territories and other states not represented in the current sampling. Another aspect that is lacking in the present study is the absence of atheist participants. Future studies could consider recruiting counsellors as participants from among those who do not affiliate themselves with any religion. Such studies could also look into the possibility of surveying the contributions of atheist counsellors as well as comparing them with counsellors who affiliate themselves with a religion.

The experiences of the counsellors who participated in this study are exemplary illustrations of how their spirituality can be appropriately integrated into counselling. However, there is a great deal of room for creativity whereby the individual counsellor is the most qualified person to decide what are the best practices for their individual client. Ultimately, adequate professional training, constant updating in skills and knowledge as well as one’s professionalism in clinical practice are necessary to effectively help clients to function optimally as they seek counselling. While fulfilling the requirements of a professional counsellor, innovation and an open attitude in integrating spirituality into counselling on the part of the counsellor would further enhance the quality of counselling services provided to the clients.

Keywords: Spirituality, counselling, counsellors, interpretative phenomenological analysis.
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References