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

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Abstract. 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. 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.

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

1 Introduction

The notion of spirituality is nothing new but the surge in both quantity and quality of research involving spirituality has been quite noticeable for the last two decades. Subsequently, not only the field of studies have extended beyond the realms of spirituality and religion itself but in as many disciplines as one could imagine, which include but not limited to medicine, nursing, mental health, psychotherapy, counselling, social work, and so on.

The number of studies on spirituality in counselling too has gained momentum over the years at the international level. However, there is still a lack of data on the integration of spirituality among Malaysian counsellors. It is hoped that studies on integrating spirituality into counselling such as this one will motivate more studies to be conducted throughout the world, including Malaysia in order to improve on the counselling services provided.

1.1 Purpose of Study

The main purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of six professional Malaysian counsellors on the integration of spirituality into counselling.

1.2 Operational Definitions

Religion. An organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols meant to bring people closer to the sacred or transcendence as well as to foster a better understanding of one’s relationship and responsibility with people in the community [1].

Spirituality. It can be defined as "the motivational and emotional source of an individual’s quest for a personally-defined relationship with people and the non-human environment; for some, it includes a
connectedness with a higher being, inner peace, life satisfaction” [2]. Yet for others, it could include the search for meaning, sacred space, and the divine.

Counsellor. Otherwise known as Registered Counsellor. A counsellor is one who has gone through an accredited programme in counselling and is currently registered with the Board of Counsellors, Malaysia.

2 Literature Review

A review of literature relevant to this study on spirituality, covering journal articles, books, dissertations and theses shows that there has been indeed an increase in quantity and quality of research on spirituality since the 1990s. However, these studies that have been published to date mostly come from researchers in the United States, with publications on spirituality in medicine topping the list. The number of published studies on spirituality in counselling is considered sparse while such studies conducted in Malaysia is even rare.

Counsellor educator Oliver J. Morgan [3] who edited Counseling and Spirituality: Views from the Profession emphasizes the renewed interest in spirituality in the present world as well as the movement toward integrating spirituality into clinical care. He is among those counselling professionals who calls for the recognition of spirituality as the counselling’s fifth force in view of its prominent place in the caring professions, following psychoanalysis as the first theoretical force, then behaviourism came in as the second force, followed by humanism, and finally multiculturalism as the fourth force [4]. Similarly, Daya Singh Sandhu [5] too asserts such a recognition in Seven Stages of Spiritual Development: A Framework to Solve Psycho-Spiritual Problems. He writes, “I suggest that spirituality should be identified as the fifth force... I believe that spirituality itself is pan-cultural and overarching, and it can stand independently as the fifth force in counseling and psychology”.

In Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred, clinical psychologist Kenneth I. Pargament [6] introduces the readers to his therapist’s office whereby he acknowledges that while his clients bring with them their struggles in the therapy sessions, they also bring with them their spiritual beliefs, practices, and values. David S. Derezotes [7] who reviewed Pargament’s book wraps up very neatly as he writes, “the author has put together a theory that integrates spirituality with psychotherapy that can help both students and practitioners in this still-emerging area of practice…”

On the other hand, Dykes, Postings and Kopp [8] maintain that the psychodynamic approach does not contain the spiritual dimension of the psyche and therefore limiting its usefulness as spiritual life is seen as significant to many people. Ultimately, as a client in consultation, one has the right to choose whether to apply the psychodynamic approach as well as other approaches that may or may not deal with the spiritual dimension.

In Malaysia, Mazidah Mohd Dagang [9] proposes in her doctoral thesis that religion, which is part of the wider spectrum of spirituality to be integrated into counselling as it is an important factor influencing the cultural development of an individual and society. As such, ethical issues on integrating religion or spirituality in counselling need to be addressed with individual client at the beginning of the counselling process and the counsellor needs to ensure that professional standards are maintained at all times. Since this was a quantitative study based on data collected from a sample of 240 Malaysian counsellors, a qualitative study based on a much smaller sample with in-depth study on a similar topics would be invaluable to compare and explore further the current scenarios of counselling practices in Malaysia and elsewhere.
3 Methodology

While the committee responsible for screening the research proposal indicated that they did not detect anything in the research design that was likely to contravene the ethical standards of research, the author wish to declare that there is no conflict of interests with parties involved in this study.

Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), each of the six participants in the study was interviewed twice. Although ‘sampling to saturation’ is closely associated with grounded theory whereby sampling and data analysis are being continued in the research process [10] until nothing new is generated, the purpose of the second interviews in this study is meant to achieve detailed engagement with the research participants by allowing them to recount their life experiences with sufficient opportunities so that the interview may enter their lifeworld [11].

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?

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 [11]. Each interview typically lasted for about an hour, although the first interviews with research participants tended to be longer than the second interviews by as much as 30 minutes as this usually involved ice-breaking or warming up. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim and the following are relevant particulars of the participants based on the chronology of the interviews.

Table 1. Background of Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Lily</th>
<th>Nik</th>
<th>Pasha</th>
<th>Tony</th>
<th>Tim</th>
<th>Aini</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>30s</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Islam</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as Registered Counsellor</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>10+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 Findings and Discussion

The data from the interviews were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis and classified into super-ordinate themes and themes. Among the superordinate themes that emerged were: a) connection with people, which could include a relationship with the sacred as an important part of spirituality; b) case conceptualization affects the way counselling service is provided to the client; c) theoretical orientation and counselling approach of the counsellor play a role in the counselling process; and d) integrating spirituality into counselling could involve creativity on the part of the counsellor.
There are people who are not affiliated with any religion, as well as people who do not believe in the existence of god who are classified as atheists [12]. Regardless whether one identifies oneself as with or without a religion, or an atheist, anyone can have his or her spirituality. However, all six participants in this study claimed that they are affiliated with a religion (see Table 1). Future studies could consider having atheists or people without a religion as part of their samples on topics related to spirituality and counselling as a means to improve on the services provided by counselling and allied professions.

Unlike other participants who believe in God, Tony who is a Buddhist does not have a deity in his belief system but seeks attainment to spiritual liberation on the path to enlightenment [13]. He emphasizes on existential values by connecting with people as he elaborates, “... spirituality, existence is not only about self but co-existence. It’s also between myself and other people...” While religion is part and parcel of a wider spectrum of spirituality, the six participants claimed that having a relationship with the sacred is an important aspect of their spirituality. In their daily practice as Muslims, both Nik and Aini accept fully that Islam is for them a way of life.

As in any profession, a counsellor typically goes through years of accredited training and supervised internship before being granted a license to practice. These are important steps to professional practice but it takes more than that to provide counselling services that are deemed outstanding. A good counsellor obviously needs to be empathic, a listening ear in addition to the many skills and a solid theoretical foundation in counselling and behavioural sciences, it is also essential that he keeps them up to date. As Lily puts, it is important that a counsellor sees the problems from the client’s perspective. While maintaining ethical and professional standards at all times, it is necessary for the counsellor to keep a good rapport with client, as Tim says, “You need this close human connection in order to foster better therapeutic relationship”.

A typical accredited counselling programme in Malaysia takes a minimum of two years of full-time study leading to a master’s degree or it may take four years leading to an undergraduate degree. Both graduates from local and foreign universities are eligible to be licensed for practice in Malaysia as a Registered Counsellor by the Lembaga Kaunselor [Board of Counsellors], an umbrella body of the Government of Malaysia, under the auspices of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. Nevertheless, it is commonly understood that current counselling practices in Malaysia are very much Western in orientation from basic theoretical approach to clinical practice.

While a good grasp of theoretical foundation is essential, a professional counsellor who is efficient would probably need to adapt his approach to the local setting as in Malaysia, since there are many unique aspects of the local culture that may be quite different from the rest of the world. To this, Aini voices that she does not always follow the Western model of counselling she had been trained. She said she sometimes practices a *tasawwuf*-based psychotherapeutic model which emphasizes the process of growth and enlightenment on his Muslim clients when it is appropriate to do so [14].

Finally, it is the choice of the counsellor to exercise creativity in integrating spirituality into their clinical practice. For Pasha, she would seek the client’s permission before she confronts them with their own belief system. Ultimately, a counsellor who has to deal with a client’s spirituality at least needs to be trained in the basics of integrating spirituality into counselling as well as learning about the different faith traditions of her clients.

The above discussion only reflects on the emerging common superordinate themes as well as themes shared by the six research participants expressed in the interviews with the researcher. Since this study is based on interpretative phenomenological analysis, there are other useful data that can be further explored and discussed from the verbatim, particularly from the principles of idiology, which centres on the uniqueness of each research participant. Such information can be synthesized to provide practical insights to this research and the pool of knowledge gathered thus far.
5 Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Studies

It would defeat the whole purpose of discussing limitations of research by displaying a long list of inadequacy encountered in the research process or for that matter, anything considered to be a weakness related to the study. For obvious practical reasons, only the following aspects are covered in this paper.

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 of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, and Labuan. Future studies could consider recruiting participants from East Malaysia and the Federal Territories as well as from other states not represented in the current sampling, i.e. Perlis, Kedah, Pulau Pinang, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor, Pahang, and Terengganu.

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.

Besides interpretative phenomenological analysis, other forms of qualitative and quantitative studies on integrating spirituality into counselling will complement each other and further enhance the betterment of services in the helping professions rendered thus far.

6 Conclusions

The experiences of Lily, Nik, Pasha, Tony, Tim, and Aini (pseudonyms) as counsellors 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.

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References


