

The Experience of Practicum Students in the Use of Theories While Conducting Counseling Sessions

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims to understand and explore the experiences of study participants in applying theories during their practicum. A total of seven participants in the study were purposely selected and they were the eighth semester counseling students undergoing practicum in Kuala Terengganu and Kuantan District. Data collection used the methods of structural interview and analysis of documents which were the outcomes of the study participants' diary writing. The main themes that emerged in the study are including existing theories, views on the theories, the impacts of theories, driving factors in using theories and the obstacles in applying their theories. The findings indicate the study participants admitted that trainings in counseling laboratory help them tremendously in undergoing practicum, especially in the use of theories in counseling sessions. In addition, the experience of being a client and the experience of conducting counseling sessions with real clients make the participants believe they can improve their confidence in using the theories before leaving for practicum.

Keywords: practicum, counseling theories, counseling sessions, counseling laboratory

1. Introduction

The term practicum is used for the Bachelor of Counseling undergraduates who are undergoing industrial training. Practicum is a supervised clinical experience in order to enable students to build and develop basic counseling skills and integrates professional knowledge (Board of Counsellors, 2003). Counseling practicum is designed to allow students to practice the theories and skills learned in the classroom into real situations. For the Bachelor of Counseling students in Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, the duration of practicum is for 6 months involving eighth semester students and consisting of 12 credit hours.

Practicum training is to provide counselors with practical training. This is acknowledged in the report by the Malaysian Board of Counsellors (2003) that stressed on practical training to familiarize the trainers with the state of society and so that they will not hesitate to carry out counseling in a real setting. Among the evaluated aspects during the practicum are supervision of counseling sessions (70%), industrial supervisor report (20%) and final reports (10%). The highest evaluation marks are the aspects of handling individual counseling and group counseling that involve the use of counseling theories.

Counseling theories are learned by students in the second semester and therefore are applied in the laboratory in Group Counselling 2 subject (sixth semester) and Counselling Process 2 (seventh semester). However, the students are unable to master the aspects of counseling while undergoing practicum (Supervision Report, 2011). It is alarming if these conditions persist to happen when they become counselors in any work organizations. The mastery of theories should be an important element in terms of accreditation by the Malaysian Board of Counselors (through the Counselors Act 1998) before practicing certificate or license is awarded to a counselor. Therefore, a counselor who wants to be a practitioner should obtain a certificate of practice so that his or her practices do not conflict with the code of practice prepared by the Board of Counsellors Malaysia. According to Zakaria (2011), the knowledge of counseling theories among practicing counselors in Malaysia is low and not sufficient to meet the growing complexity of client issues.

The use of theories in counseling among counselors in Malaysia is limited and the failure of counselors to learn more about counseling theories show the counselors' weaknesses (Abdul Halim, 2001). According to Amla et al. (2001), effective counseling sessions show the features of a structured interview, have continuous storylines, goes well, there are themes of exploration of client problems, explain, give insights, have a tentative plan of actions and have elements that support clients.

All these criteria will automatically be included if counselors use a specific theory in session. Smooth counseling process will be interrupted if the counselor does not use counseling theory (Brammer & Shostrom 1982, Baruth & Huber, 1985, MacDonald, 1991, Murdock 1991). Most of the counseling practitioners are still tied to the use of the main theories of practice while the trend was moving towards the use of a variety of theories that can be adapted to the diversity of client problems (Arnkoff & Glass 1992; Norcross & Arkowitz 1992) . This study aims to explore and understand the experiences of seven counseling practicum trainees in using theories while undergoing practicum.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative approach from a phenomenological perspective. This approach was used to explore, observe and help interpreting deeper meaning of those experiences by the trainees during the practicum program.

2.2 Location, population and sampling

This study was carried out in locations where practicum students were placed in the district of Kuantan and Kuala Terengganu. They were selected from different backgrounds to ensure the variation of obtained information. The population size of this study was 84 people, which consisted of all eighth semester students who were involved in practicum. This study used purposive sampling procedure in which the selected sample consisted of 7 people who have experience and knowledge about counseling practicum, have the ability to reflect on and give clear explanations about the research aspect.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data were collected using two methods, namely depth interviews and analysis of documents (writing a diary). Interview protocol was used to interview participants in a semi-structural study. Diaries writing involved a period of three consecutive weeks to ensure there was a progression in the use of theories among the studied participants. Data were analyzed and coordinated manually. Next the researchers transcribed, stored, coordinated and organized research data systematically and further showed the main theme as the findings of the study.

3. Research Findings

3.1 Research theme and sub theme

- 3.1.1. Existing theories
 - Mastering 2 or 3 theories only
 - Mastering foundation theory only
- 3.1.2 Views on the applied theories
 - Interest
 - Self suitability
 - Easy
 - Session experience
 - Client issue suitability
- 3.1.3 Counseling impacts in the use of theories
 - Positive
 - Goals (kr)
 - Session direction (Kr)
 - Satisfaction and relief
 - Effects of client's problems guideline (kr)
 - Client's developmental growth
 - Insights
- 3.1.4. Helping factors in the use of theories
 - Counseling laboratory findings
 - Client's experience
 - Continuous training (micro laboratory, process 1 and process 2)

- 3.1.5. Obstacle of using theories
- Self confidence
 - Lack of understanding of theories
 - Not familiar with techniques
 - Less exposure to real clients
 - Lack of confidence in theory selection with client's issue
 - Concerned in giving bad affect
 - Exhausted mind
 - Clients who want answers to their problems
 - Lack of creativity
 - Afraid of hurting client's feeling
 - Uncomfortable with certain techniques

Existing theoretical knowledge

Existing theoretical knowledge among trainees only consisted of 2 to 3 theories on average even though they have been exposed to 8 theories in counseling and psychotherapy theory courses in the second semester of the first year of study. The participants admitted that they forget the theories taught by lecturers except for certain theories only. The three main theories that become their existing theoretical knowledge among the trainees are Person Centered, Gestalt and REBT theories. Out of the 7 study participants, 5 of them mastered in Person Centered and Gestalt theory, one of them dominated 3 theories which are Person Centered, Gestalt and REBT while another one mastered in REBT and Person Centered theories.

"...I feel that I can apply Person Centered, Rogers and Gestalt theories. Erm I think these two theories are..." (TB/P1/3)

"...The theories that I master now are Person Centred, Rogers and Gestal theories..." (TB/P2/4)

"...Throughout my studies in UMT, there are many theories learnt but I only master in three theories which are Rogers theory, and then Gestalt theory and REBT..." (TB/P5/3)

"...Frankly, I do not entirely understand the existing theories because there are too many so I don't really know which one is suitable and therefore I just know the bsaics..." (TB/P6/2)

The study participants combined the use of theories in a session. Usually they started with Person Centered theory and another theory which consists of techniques like the theories of Gestalt atau REBT.

"...In most of my sessions, I prefer to begin my session with Rogers and I end it with Gestalt technique..." (TB/P3/4)

The theoretical knowlegde is weak and limited based on the requested explanation. Most of the study participants were unable to elaborate further when asked.

Views on the theories used

Theories are used based on interest, a certain liking on a theory, self suitability, easy and having the experience while applying them. Study participants will choose their favorite theory to be used during counseling sessions. When dealing with clients, study participants will start with the basic skills of Person Centered theory, then the theory of interest will be used to help clients. The study participants tend to use the theoretical techniques to help clients.

According to the study participants, a theory would be applied when it has easy techniques to be used onto the clients.

"...for me, I like the theory and I think that the theory is suitable with me... Gestalt theory is easy to apply..." (TB/P1/11&13)

Frequently, a study participant chose a certain theory based on his or her likings and interest of the theory.

"...Ok, the factors that encourage the use of theory, might be due to the fact that I like the theory ..." (TB/P3/23)

The participants used theories or techniques in which they have the experience using them. Through this experience, it was easier for them to understand and using the theories confidently.

"...the main reason I choose Gestalt theory is because I used to be a client and also there was once a counselor applied the use of Gestalt theory on me when I was a client..."(TB/P2/8)

Through diary writing, it is obvious that the study participants were satisfied with the choice and the use of theories that focus on the client's in-depth feelings even though it was exhausting.

I choose this theory because the clients can easily talk about their problems together with their feelings. Each time I would stress on the client's feeling. The clients would become more passionate and determined in telling their problems and hoping that the counselor can understand and help them. The use of theory today is exhausting for me as a counselor because I need to show empathy towards client's emotion. (PD1/P2/1)

There are a few study participants that chose theories based on the suitability with the client's issue. This can help them assisting their clients more effectively.

I chose Rogers theory for today's session because it was suitable with the client's issue. In this theory, each client comes to meet the counselor to express his or her problem, with the structure of the theory that treats clients unconditionally and stresses the aspects of empathy and client's feelings. (PD1/P2/2)

The impacts of using theories

Counselors realize the impacts of the use of theories in sessions usually when it brings positive impacts on counselors and clients. The participants seemed to have goals during sessions, have directions and they could easily detect problems when using theories. Consequently, the study participants became more confident, more motivated, more interested and less stressful while conducting sessions.

According to the study participants, the impact to the client will be seen through the satisfaction and relief, personal growth and insight. This situation will often encourage the clients to continue the sessions or return to see the counselor for the next session.

"...in helping the clients, when we have the theories, both parties can achieve the goals the counselor can help the client, the client can gain positive impacts that are beneficial in terms of their feelings, long term aspect of reaching his goal..."(TB/P2/14)

"...from the aspect of differences based on my own experience, I have seen clients that achieve better satisfaction level and better relief level whenever I use the theories..." (TB/P3/17)

"...so when there is a theory, we have a guideline on how we can detect the core problem during the counseling session from the beginning..." TB/P4/15)

"... the impact on the counselor, the counselor also achieve it and it means that it is more towards the counselor where he needs his client's satisfaction so that he can function well and the client can automatically develops, and manage to realize when he is out of reach from other people's help, so we can see the difference between a counselor that applies theories and those who do not..." (TB/P4/17)

"...The impact on the counselor is firstly we see there are direction and goal..." (TB/P5/25)

"...Based on the impact on the client, most probably when there is a theory I am convinced that the client can make a decision or give clear insights to himself where whenever he is facing..." (TB/P5/25)

Based on the diary writing, the study participants shared about the effects of using theories on them and the clients. One of the effects is feeling satisfied whenever he or she managed to help clients.

The theories that are used give impact to the clients and me. It can be proven by the existing of new feeling of the clients after sessions are conducted. As for me, I am satisfied because I manage to understand my clients' feelings, thoughts and actions. (PD2/P2/2)

There are positive effects on my clients when I apply REBT theory for the succeeding sessions. If I don't apply the theory, most probably my client is still at the same level of thinking. (PD8/P2/4)

The most transparent difference is that when theories are applied, the clients feel relieved with the session that we conduct. When theories are not used, they will tell the same things only during the counseling sessions. The best impact to the clients is they manage to deal with their problems without getting help from other parties. The impact on the counselors is the feeling of contentment with the sessions conducted. PD10/P2/4)

Driving factor

Learning from counseling laboratory is found to be a very effective method to increase skills, confidence, guidance and experience in conducting counseling sessions. The experience of becoming a client allows the trainees to experience the clients' feelings when confronting a counselor. In this way the study participants can differentiate what is best to be used when handling the session. Ongoing training in counseling laboratory begins from Micro Counseling, Counseling Process 1 and Process Counseling II which allow the participants to improve their skills.

"...because I have learned in the laboratory, I manage to apply them, and I have practiced them in the counseling laboratory, so I think that is a factor to convince me in handling theories in counseling sessions..." (TB/P1/30)

"...second year, third year is when we did a practical in the laboratory, in the laboratory while learning. So actually that is where my skills were developed and the skills give me confidence day by day to use theories and from there also I have new knowledge where my previous perception about counseling was wrong..." (TB/P5/29)

The experience of becoming the clients to lecturers who use theories gives deep impacts to the study participants. This is when they feel and experience the counseling process themselves.

"...One of the factors might be the learning experience. It is because when I was still learning, I could see there is a difference when a theory was used or not. So, when I experience myself as a client in the laboratory where the lecturer who taught me how the process happens..." (TB/P6/22)

According to the study participants' diary writing, it was found that their driving factor and confidence booster in using theories in sessions are when recalling their lecturers' teaching in laboratory, clients' positive self development and clients' smile.

There are apparent differences when I use the theories in this session where I can see the client's growth towards a better future. For the clients, they feel that they gain input when they are in this counseling session... (PD13/P2/3)

However for me, I am satisfied when I can make clients smile after counseling sessions. This increases my confidence level in using theories in each counseling session that I have. It also depends on me to determine the right direction in choosing suitable theories while conducting sessions with the clients. (PD13/P2/4)

The factor that convinces me to use theories is the guidance that I gained while in the laboratory with the lecturer. Demonstrations and trainings that were conducted in the laboratory make me understand theories better and have more confidence in using the theories in session. (PD1/P3/4)

Obstacles in using theories

The obstacles mentioned by the study participants in using theories are lack of self-confidence, lack of understanding of theories, not familiar with the techniques and lack of exposure to real clients. They often feel less confident when dealing with clients who have specific problems such as the drug addicts. It is worse when they do not have sufficient experience dealing with this kind of clients while still studying in the university. Young and single study participants found it rather difficult to face clients who are already married and older.

"....In terms of self confidence level, I still feel as a counselor when dealing with a client, my confidence level is still in lower level. For example when I am facing a client with a background as a former drug addict..." (TB/P1/40).

"...It means that when I want to use the theory, it seems like I am not confident for example Gestalt, we feel that for this session, it is suitable to use Gestalt but because there is no self confidence, so we feel that we can't conduct it. If it were conducted, it will be like Rogers..." (TB/P6/30)

Some of the study participants admitted their lack of theories understanding. They are still not entirely clear of the theories and this condition has become their main cause of facing problems in applying theories.

"...the main obstacle is the fact that the mastery of theories is undeniable if we wish for conducting good counseling session and therefore the mastery of theories also has to be good..." (TB/P2/20)

"...when I have less understanding so my confidence and conviction level to use the theory become limited..." (TB/P6/26)

The aspect of techniques requires specific skills before the study participants applying them. Different techniques need different skills. Common techniques used by the participants are empty chairs, dialogue technique from Gestalt theory and also debate technique applied from REBT theory.

“...I myself feel the lack of skills in technique applications, I think there are a lot that I have to improve as best as I could in the use of techniques...” (TB/P1/38)

“...At the same time I am not confident to use in certain techniques...” (TB/P5/35)

“...Yes if in terms of less skills in applying the techniques so yes I am less skilled in applying a certain techniques....” (TB/P3/29)

Lack of experience in dealing with actual clients became the main obstacle for the study participants in using theories effectively. They wish that they had experienced real experience and practice with the intention that they were well prepared for practicum training.

“...I was not exposed to a variety of clients, so it means that if when in the university I was only exposed to clients who are students, consequently my development in sessions was just projected among groups of students only...” (TB/P4/23)

“...Perhaps people say that in terms of the way the case is carried out, perhaps less exposure...” (TB/P7/ 58)

Based on the diary writing prepared by the study participants, it was found that their focal obstacles in using theories are lack of confidence in the choice of theory with client's issue, being concerned of giving bad effects to clients, exhausted minds, clients who insisted answers to their problems, lack of creativity, afraid of hurting clients' feelings and are not comfortable with a few techniques.

I am scared and I am not confident when the theories that I apply are really-really suitable or not with the clients' issues. Besides that, I am concerned if the use of these theories will only bring bad impact on the clients. (PD/P1/6)

The obstacle in using theories is, I become confuse and tired because there are so many sessions. My focus on the forth individual sessions was getting less because I had less energy to listen to the client's problem. (PD7/P2/3)

Clients are more interested in listening to counselor's answers. There is a noticeable difference when the clients only can please themselves with getting the answers to their questions. This is not an in-depth matter and it doesn't even touch their feelings. They most probably return meeting the counselor when facing problems. (PD12/P2/3)

The obstacle would be lack of comprehensive supremacy of the theories where I as a trainee counselor have lack of creativity in making effort to guide the clients by challenging them and at the same time I am hugely concerned that I might hurt the clients' feeling and that will hinder the process of exploration. Other than that, I feel uncomfortable because I do not like to argue and make confrontation during sessions. (PD1/P7/6)

Discussion and Recommendation

The experience in the use of theories in counseling sessions among the study participants is found to have a trend of its own. Although they acknowledge that the theories are important in effective counseling process, but in terms of practicing them is different. This is evident when the results show that out of 8 theories that they have learned; only 2 or 3 theories are used in the counseling process. The main theories that have become the study participants' preferences are Person Centered, Gestalt and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) theories. The trainees use the theories by combining at least two theories. The main theory which is commonly used in the beginning of sessions is Person Centered followed by another theory. The second selection of theory which is often made by the study participants is when they want to use the techniques in the theory. The findings of the study support the use of multiple theoretical findings as to suit the diversity of client problems (Arnkoff & Glass 1992; Norcross & Arkowitz 1992).

The experiences of the study participants in using the theories in counseling sessions during practicum are centered on a number of factors. One of the factors is the trainee's interest in certain theories. In addition, theories that are selected are often associated with self personality. The findings of this study support the research result (Zakaria, 2011) which found that the selection of theories by a counseling practioner is influenced by personality factor. For the study participants, a theory is chosen because it is easy to use.

Besides, the study participants are found understanding the theories which they had encountered as a client during trainings in the laboratory better. In this case, the role of the lecturers is very important to demonstrate a theory before it is put into practice by the students. These findings explain the trainees' experience that theories help them and the clients based on several aspects such as the satisfaction and relief achieved by the clients when using theories. Theories can also help clients gain insight even faster while developing towards a more positive direction. In addition, the trainees found that the goal and the direction are easily achieved when using theories during counseling sessions. Theories can be seen as helping the study participants to detect and conceptualize the clients' problems easier. This is consistent with the previous studies which found that a smooth counseling process will be interrupted if the counselor does not use counseling theory (Brammer & Shostrom 1982 Baruth & Huber, 1985, MacDonald, 1991, Murdock 1991).

The findings explain several factors that encourage the study participants in the use of theory. The first factor is counseling laboratory. The trainings from the counseling laboratory are proven to be very effective to help the participants in using the theories. Counseling program which is offered requires the study participants to go through continuous training in counseling through laboratory subjects such as Micro Counseling, Counselling Process II and Group Counseling II. If the training in counseling laboratory could be well achieved by the participants in the study, therefore they will be more confident to use the theories. The second factor is in terms of the experience gained as a client in a real session. The study participants' experience in becoming clients in a session will enable them to use the experience during their practicum better.

Several aspects need to be considered to help the study participants undergoing practicum training particularly in the use of theories. The main focus is in terms of how self-confidence can be enhanced so that the participants can apply the theories better. The theories which are not well understood may affect the participants' theory mastery and make it difficult to use. Theoretical techniques require skill and experience to be applied. Techniques are applied in order to raise awareness, make a difference or to explore. The use of wrong technique will bring more harm than benefit to clients (Corey, 2012). Actual clients' exposure is expected by the study participants in providing them with client variation other than training with each other.

Based on the study participants' experience from this practicum training, it can be concluded that the teaching in the laboratory is the most effective method to help them in developing their skills in counseling sessions. Due to that fact, the university is suggested to strengthen the teaching of laboratory skills to enable the future counselors' skills to be enhanced. The experience of being a client to a counselor who has long been involved in this field can help participants experience the real experience as a client. This experiences allow the participants to understand the clients better. Other aspects required by the study participants before undergoing the practicum was to be able to undergo counseling sessions with real clients. Through this experience, the study participants can be confident in using their skills and experience as preparation for the actual clients during practicum.

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