Barriers and challenges in the practice of multicultural counselling in Malaysia: A qualitative interview study

Rafidah Aga Mohd Jaladin

Published online: 15 May 2013.

Submit your article to this journal ⬀

Article views: 615

View related articles ⬀

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Barriers and challenges in the practice of multicultural counselling in Malaysia: A qualitative interview study

Rafidah Aga Mohd Jaladin*

Department of Educational Psychology & Counselling, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and Faculty of Education, Monash University, Australia

Counsellors face a lot of problems and stressors in their daily lives. As a person, counsellors may face challenges to deal with their personal expectations and responsibilities in life, work, family and community. As a professional, counsellors may face difficulties in dealing with professional issues and ethical dilemmas in their professional practice such as countertransference and value conflicts. These raise issues concerning their perceived multicultural competence and the adequacy of their training. Informed by a multicultural counselling perspective and drawing on semi-structured interviews with 12 professional counsellors in Malaysia, this study discusses the types of barriers and challenges faced by Malaysian counsellors and how these challenges were manifested and addressed in the cross-cultural counselling sessions. Results revealed five emerging themes based on participant counsellors' responses on the barriers and challenges encountered in their practice of multicultural counselling in Malaysia. These were challenges related to counsellors', clients', presenting issues', third-party and specific contexts' characteristics. Research implications for the education and training of counsellors in the specific Malaysian socio-political context are also discussed.

Keywords: multicultural counselling; culture and diversity; multicultural competence; Malaysian counselling profession; professional counsellors; qualitative study

The Malaysian counselling profession has made substantial progress since 40 years ago. Despite this long-standing history and current accomplishments, there are still some issues and concerns with regard to counselling diverse clients in the Malaysian context. This study reports a qualitative examination of Malaysian counsellors' barriers and challenges when counselling clients from different cultural backgrounds. The study first introduces the concept of multicultural counselling competency (MCC) and then discusses current issues and challenges faced by the Malaysian counselling profession. It is argued that the prevalence of these issues is embedded in the theory, practice, education and training, and also research aspects of Malaysian counselling, which have overlooked the importance of addressing culture and diversity in counselling.

*Email: rafidah_aga@um.edu.my

MCC as a concept

One of the major and most recent contributions to the body of knowledge on multicultural counselling is the work on developing MCCs among mental health professionals to work effectively and ethically with culturally diverse clients (D'Andrea & Heckman, 2008a, 2008b). Pioneering work on this concept defines MCC as a counsellor's (a) *beliefs* and *attitudes* regarding racial and ethnic minorities, the need to check biases and stereotypes and the development of a positive orientation towards multiculturalism; (b) *knowledge* of one's own worldview, knowledge of cultural groups with whom one works and knowledge of socio-political influences on members of these groups, and (c) *skills*, strategies and interventions needed to work with minority groups within a cross-cultural counselling context (Sue et al., 1982). It is recognised that there are critiques of multiculturalism (e.g. Patterson, 2004), but these critiques are misconceived, misleading and do not hold weight in a Malaysian context and reflected an Euro-American bias. For a more balanced account, see Bassey and Melluish (2013).

Malaysian counselling profession: current issues and challenges

Currently, there is a critical question of whether the contemporary Western-based counselling theories that most practising Malaysian counsellors use to guide their practice, most counsellor educators use to train their trainees, and most researchers use as a theoretical framework in their study do actually work with the diverse needs of the Malaysian clients (Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2008; Salim & Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2005; Sumari & Jalal, 2008). Previous literature on multicultural counselling and cultural values has argued that these theories may or may not be culturally relevant to specific cultural contexts (Cheung, 2000; Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner, & Trimble, 2008; Sue & Sue, 2008). Culturally relevant theory is the foundation of effective counselling practice (Griner & Smith, 2006) and successful training of counsellors (Smith, Constantine, Dunn, Dinehart, & Montoya, 2006). However, Malaysian counsellors have not yet developed good and culture-sensitive models for counselling the Malaysian clients (Salim, 2004; Salim & Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2005), but see Alladin (1993, 2009) for a more universal culture-sensitive model, which it is claimed, can be used for people across the world since it places the person at the centre of counselling efforts and does not ignore the culture or the socio-political context of countries. Malaysian counsellors should also consider the guidelines of the American Psychological Association (2003) from which they can profit and no doubt adapt to the Malaysian context.

Another important issue in the Malaysian counselling profession is related to the need to modify the counselling models imported from abroad. Many Western-trained counsellors are concerned regarding the extent of modification needed to culturally adapt the counselling process that they learnt abroad in order to be consistent with the clients' diversity and multicultural issues in the Malaysian context. In view of the religious and racial/ethnic diversity in Malaysia, it seems that the development of a truly "Malaysian" counselling approach would not be possible (Scorzelli, 1987), but this view seems premature and more recent developments such as those reported in Moodley, Rai, and Alladin (2010) have yet to filter through to Malaysian counsellors. However, dealing with the current Malaysian situation, most experts believe that counsellors trained in Western countries must be able to adapt the theories, skills and

techniques to suit the social and cultural norms of their clients (Ismail & Othman, 2001; Othman & Aboo Bakar, 1993; Pope, Musa, Singaravelu, Bringaze, & Russell, 2002). However, it is necessary to determine what is working or useful in these Western models for Malaysian clients and what is not working and needs to be modified. Therefore, research exploring Malaysian counsellors' counselling practices is of paramount importance.

The current status of counselling practices in Malaysia is yet to be determined. Although knowledge about counselling theories are the foundation for guiding practices, it is possible to develop an individualised theory or approach to counselling based on practice experiences and reflections in counselling (Constantine, Melincoff, Barakett, Torino, & Warren, 2004; Dickson & Jepsen, 2007). As Malaysia is a multicultural context, it is possible that the current practices of Malaysian counsellors are based on the principles of multicultural counselling. Unfortunately, little is known about the current understanding and practices of multicultural counselling among the Malaysian counsellors because there is a dearth of empirical literature exploring such topics in the Malaysian context. In particular, there are no published empirical studies exploring the barriers and challenges encountered by current practising counsellors in Malaysia.

Constantine et al. (2004) gave a significant insight into the first-hand experiences and thoughts of multicultural counselling scholars. Their study, which is qualitative in nature, aimed at uncovering the critical elements of effective counselling for all clients, by examining the experiences and perceptions of 12 multicultural counselling scholars with regard to the field of multicultural counselling in the USA context. The study adopted Hill, Thompson, and Williams' (1997) Consensual Qualitative Research methodology, which they claimed had been used to explore other topics in counselling. This approach involves the development of a semi-structured interview protocol based on a thorough review of the literature related to multicultural counselling. Pilot interviews were conducted in order to modify and refine the interview protocol. Based on a qualitative analysis, the results revealed that many of the participants noted that aspects of being a multiculturally competent counsellor included open-mindedness, flexibility, a commitment to the field, active listening, knowledge and awareness of cultural issues, skilfulness in making cultural interventions, commitment to social justice issues, self-awareness and exposure to broad and diverse life experiences. Most of the participants also stated that a challenge associated with being a multicultural counsellor was colleagues', institutions' and others' resistance towards and lack of support for multicultural counselling issues. These findings are highly relevant to the current study because it is predicted that some of the themes on competency of multicultural counsellors and potential challenges of being a multicultural counsellor might be further elucidated in the present study.

In Malaysia, most research studies are conducted by student-researchers in the local universities (who conducted their research to fulfil their degree or diploma requirements in counselling), they have a limited focus, that is, "on the areas of career and guidance and also on general psychology" (Ismail & Othman, 2001, p. 21). Therefore, this research aimed to probe into Malaysian counsellors' practice of multicultural counselling in order to understand the barriers and challenges they encountered and the ways they addressed these barriers.

Method

Research approach and design

This study adopted a qualitative approach because "it offered greater flexibility in exploring the ways in which psychotherapists incorporate culture in conceptualising their cases, a task appropriately multidimensional and complex" (Neufeldt et al., 2006, p. 466). In addition, qualitative study provides the richest and most descriptive data (Creswell, 2007) and thus is the appropriate research process for eliciting perceptions and lived experiences. The use of semi-structured in-depth interviews also facilitates participants' self-disclosure on their personal and professional experiences and invites open discussions of individualised approaches when negotiating their own values as a person and professional when counselling culturally different clients.

Sample

A purposive sample of 12 registered practising counsellors with the Malaysian Board of Counsellors, which consist of five men and seven women, participated in this study. Participants were predominantly Malay (50%), Chinese (25%) and Indian (25%). The majority were in the age group of 50 to 59 (50%), had postgraduate education (66.7%), were married (66.7%) and were Muslim (58.3%). The participants' workplace was varied: two from schools, three from universities, three from government departments, two from the police force and one each from NGO and private manufacturing company. Inclusion criteria were (a) registered practising counsellor status, (b) diverse ethnicity, religion, age group and work setting, (c) counselling experience of more than 1 year and (d) counselling experience with a culturally diverse or different client population to that of the counsellor.

Interview protocol

The development of the interview topics was guided by the previous and recent literature in multicultural counselling (e.g. Constantine, 2001; Constantine et al., 2004; Sumari & Jalal, 2008) and included topics on participants' barriers and challenges when counselling culturally different clients and their survival strategies. These topics were then systematically organised and listed in the form of an Interview Protocol sheet.

Procedure

After approval from the SERCH and Malaysian Board of Counsellors was obtained, the procedure for conducting semi-structured individual interviews began. Twenty potential participants from survey respondents (the first part of a PhD research) who had provided their contact details for follow-up participation in the research were selected. These potential participants were then contacted to arrange for the date, time and venue for face-to-face interviews. A total of 12 interviews were conducted. The names used in this paper are pseudonyms to safeguard confidentiality. Eleven interviews were in-depth, exploratory and interactive based on the topic guide developed prior to the study, whereas one interview was e-mail-based due to interviewee's workload and work commitment. After the consent form was signed during a face-to-face meeting, the

interviews were conducted and recorded. All interviews were transcribed (verbatim) using Microsoft Word 2007 and later analysed using *NVivo 8*.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Richards (2005) was used to analyse the 12 verbatim transcripts. This method is systematic, thorough and grounded in the data. A qualitative computer program called *NVivo 8* was used as a tool to store data, organise data, enable the researcher to assign labels or codes to the data during first-cycle coding using free nodes, refine and making connections between codes during second-cycle coding using tree nodes and child nodes, and facilitate searching through the data and locating specific text or words (Bazeley, 2007).

Results and discussion

Thematic analysis revealed a list of barriers and challenges reported by 12 participant counsellors in their practice of multicultural counselling in Malaysia. These challenges

Table 1. Emerging themes and categories on the barriers and challenges in the practice of multicultural counselling.

Themes	Categories (Sub-themes)
1. Counsellor characteristics	• Language barrier • Lack of practice experience and exposure to diverse cultures (macro and micro) in Malaysia • Perceived multiculturally incompetence • Counsellors' value conflicts
2. Client characteristics	• Clients' resistance – lack of acceptance, trust, confidence • Clients' misconception/pre-judgmental beliefs about counselling or counsellor • Clients' dependency
3. Presenting issues/problems	• Culturally sensitive issues • Culturally complex issues
4. Third-party characteristics (e.g. organisation, client's support system, society)	• Stigmas and misconceptions • Negative societal labelling • Organisational expectations/pressures • Resistance and lack of support systems
5. Counselling context	• Unconducive counselling room: inappropriate physical setting and infrastructure • Conflicting work values and work cultures

were clustered into five main themes: challenges related to counsellor characteristics, to client characteristics, to characteristics of the presenting issues or problems, to third-party characteristics (i.e. clients' support systems such as community, colleagues and bosses and family members) and to specific counselling contexts (i.e. counselling rooms and work settings). Table 1 presents these themes and their emerging categories.

Challenges related to counsellor characteristics

Counsellor characteristics emerged as the first theme of barriers and challenges in the practice of multicultural counselling in Malaysia with four categories: language barrier, lack of experience and exposure to diverse cultures, perceived multicultural incompetence and counsellors' value conflicts. Among these, language barrier was the most frequent response reported by most participant counsellors, especially when counselling clients from different cultural backgrounds. As the majority of Malaysian counsellors are Malay-Muslim, the non-Malay counsellors in this study felt that their workload increases because of Malay counsellors' language restriction. For example, Fred, who could speak three languages well, said,

> … in government service, welfare department, the vast majority are Malay-Muslims. That's a few challenge. That is why "sana" [over there] I got so many clients because those Indians want to see me due to language problem and that kind of thing. Those English speaking want to see me. Because counselling is people service, so you need to at minimum language *lah*. People who can speak the language that their clients are comfortable with. This is a big challenge that we are having in this country.

In view of this problem, he then further urged the Malaysian counselling profession (including all counsellor educators) to tackle the language problem among professional counsellors because he perceived this problem is serious because it could lead to inaccessibility of counselling services, especially among the ethnic-minority client population in Malaysia.

This finding, indirectly, explains why language competency emerged as one of the dimensions of MCC in this study. If counsellors were multi-linguistically competent, they could work well with linguistically diverse populations. In Malaysia, ideally, they need to be tri-lingual in addition to English, and this could be asking too much.

Participant counsellors also perceived themselves as not as multiculturally competent as they would like to be. According to them, their background knowledge and understanding of multicultural issues, self-awareness on culture and diversity, and multicultural skills in dealing with culturally different clients or culturally sensitive and complex issues in Malaysia are lacking. For example, Elaine was frustrated with her limited knowledge and skills in Islam in order to better serve her Malay-Muslim clients. She said,

> OK, my client is a Malay, she's a Muslim; So, I can't, I don't have any like, maybe at that time, something like a word of comfort from the [*Quran*]. If it is from the same religion, it is easy for me to comfort by taking some quotations from anywhere and tell her. But, for her being there, I don't know much about [Islam]. So, of course, I can't go more onto helping her in the religious, to bring back in the religion, you see.

This finding suggests that professional counsellors must develop competency in spiritual and religious aspects of counselling in order to successfully and ethically practise multi-cultural counselling in the Malaysian context. This has direct implications for the education and training of counsellors in Malaysia.

The final category under this theme involved counsellors' value conflicts. Participant counsellors reported experiencing conflicting personal and professional values and conflicting cultural values between them and their clients. Due to these, some faced problems such as unfinished business, countertransference, frustrations and learned helplessness in their counselling practice. For example, Ali, who sometimes felt some "initial discomforts" in the cross-cultural counsellor–client relationship, used self-reminder technique to focus on his counselling:

> I would normally tell myself that you just have to remain objective, respect your clients. OK, it's their choice. The choice is still theirs. We are helping them to make the best choice to suit their situations but we are not going to make decisions for them.

On the other hand, Cheng, who sometimes experienced countertransference, helplessness, and burnout in her multicultural counselling practice, emphasised explicitly the importance of counsellor self-awareness and the use of self-checking to deal with these personal issues.

Overall, counsellors in this study have shared various challenges and barriers that are related to their personal and professional characteristics such as language barriers, lack of practice experience with and exposure to diverse cultures, counsellors' perceived multicultural incompetence and value conflicts. This finding highlights the importance of counsellors developing competency in multicultural counselling so that they can be better prepared and confident to practise counselling with diverse Malaysian clients.

Challenges related to client characteristics

Under this theme, three categories emerged: clients' resistance (lack of acceptance, trust, and confidence towards a culturally different counsellor), clients' misconception or having pre-judgmental beliefs about counselling or counsellor, and clients' dependency. Some participant counsellors, especially those who worked with younger generation clients and male clients, felt that their clients sometimes showed a lack of acceptance, trust, and confidence towards them, and this may be due to stigmas. For example, Dharma, who used to counsel clients from hospitals but now focuses more on counselling students at a private college, explained by comparing counselling in the Western countries and in Malaysia:

> Because their negative stigmas are still there. It's not like Western countries where people go and see a psychiatrist when they have some problems but "sini takde" [here it's not like that]. Kalau you pergi and see a psychiatrist [If you go and see a psychiatrist,], you already endorsed, people endorsed you "psychiatric [patient] ni orang gila" [psychiatric patient as crazy person]. I mean the Asian concept is still there.

Dharma's comment, while it overstates the case of lack of stigma in the West, is consistent with the multicultural counselling literature because multicultural counselling, or

even general counselling, is generally perceived as an emerging profession in most Asian countries (e.g. Othman, 2001; Tol, Jordans, Regmi, & Sharma, 2005; Yu, Fu, Zhao, & Davey, 2010).

In addition, clients' misconception or having pre-judgmental beliefs about counselling or counsellor may also pose some challenges to Malaysian counsellors. For example, Kasmah was concerned that her physical appearance as a female Malay-Muslim, as expressed in terms of her clothing, may affect her culturally different clients' first impression of her:

> … I have my own way of life, I have my own belief. Belief of something, when client believes something, I think it is really hard to change. If he sees us like we are wearing "tudung" [head scarf] and said, "This Muslim girl, she doesn't know anything about me". That kind of perception, the belief, the self-concept, I think, about counsellors. I think, it is a big challenge for us to change the perception, to change, "Hey, we are capable to help you out here, you know".

This is interesting because it opens up future research direction to explore clients' perceptions of a multiculturally competent counsellor in Malaysia. Would they associate counsellors' competency with the counsellors' outward appearance?

The final category under this theme involved dealing with clients' dependency due to culture. For example, Dharma, who shared his counselling experience with Malay-Muslim housewives (whose husbands were abusive) suffering from marital problems and depression, reported some difficulties and discomforts to help these clients because:

> Sometimes they become very dependent on you, and then you are also worried about transference and all that, you know … I have clients who sometimes who have problems with their husbands and all that, and at the middle of the night, you know, they call you, "can I see you, I am waiting out here". So, you have to be very careful with this kind of thing.

So, counsellors must always be "very careful" about boundary issues and practise "professionalism" in dealing with this issue and also other potential challenges related to clients' characteristics or attributes.

Challenges related to the presenting problem(s) in counselling

Participants' responses under this theme revealed two main categories: dealing with culturally sensitive and culturally complex issues in Malaysia. Some counselling problems presented during counselling relate to different norms and values than those upheld by most Malaysians. Issues such as gay or lesbian lifestyles, pre-marital or extra-marital sex are generally perceived as culturally sensitive because these violate the cultural norms and values of Malaysians in general. Hence, counselling clients with such issues poses some challenges to Malaysian professional counsellors. For example, Ali, who had experience counselling a male Malay-Muslim client with multiple issues (gay relationship, marital problems, self-esteem and family issues), indicated that his case was complex because:

> … it involves of course religious values, it involves also sexuality issue, and it also involves family issues there whereby he's got problems with his siblings as well. He's the

youngest. The only child, the only person in the family who did not go to the university. So, self-esteem issues also came in. So, it's quite complicated in that sense.

So, when the presenting problem(s) involved an intersection of culturally sensitive issues related to ethnicity, religion, sexuality and family relationship, the case may be perceived as most challenging by Malaysian counsellors, especially when it violates the cultural norms and values of Malaysians.

Challenges related to third-party characteristics

Under this theme, third party refers to individuals other than the client himself or herself such as the parents, teachers or top bosses. Participants' experiences were categorised into four: stigmas and misconceptions about counselling and counsellor concepts, negative societal labelling towards some client groups, unrealistic expectations and pressures from top management, and resistance and lack of support from clients' support systems. Most participants agreed that the stigmas and misconceptions about counselling and counsellors in Malaysia were generally based on a mistaken viewpoint that "counselling is to fix or change people" and the "counsellor is a problem solver" (e.g. Fred, Interview 6), respectively. In view of this, some participant counsellors purposely conducted talks and training, as part of their counsellor roles, to educate parents, teachers or even community people regarding the real meaning of these concepts so that the practice of counselling would be less challenging.

In addition, some participant counsellors reported that even among the Malaysian paraprofessional counsellor community, negative societal labelling towards some client groups such as victims of forced prostitution, abused wives and abused children did exist. For example, Fred, who used to give counselling training to the NGO staff community (i.e. mostly paraprofessional counsellors) working with victims of human trafficking who had been forced into prostitution, was concerned regarding the staff's negative labelling towards these victims due to culture. He said,

> … we focus on the staff – the staff working with these girls in the shelter. The staff, if they were not careful, they will look at these girls as bad girls. They don't look at them as victims because in our culture, sex is dirty (outside marriage). If you are a prostitute, you are a bad person. So, even when you are forced into prostitution, people feel sorry for you because you are forced into it but behind of it, bla … bla … bla … sleeping around. So, these kinds of things need to be sorted out.

This means that to successfully practise multicultural counselling, counsellors must constantly check themselves whether they have any negative labelling, stereotypes or prejudices towards certain groups of people in the Malaysian society. If they do, they have to be able to deal with such labelling and stereotypes effectively to be multiculturally competent counsellors.

Some participant counsellors reported their challenges when dealing with the bosses or top management in their work organisations. For example, both Hidayah and Fred were concerned regarding their bosses' attitudes towards counselling:

> … they [the top management people] wanted it to be quick. When staff went for counselling, they expected the case settled. However, in reality, we couldn't do that. It all depend

on our clients, maybe they took some time [to change]. That's the challenge. They want fast results. (Translated to English from Hidayah, Interview 8)

This finding shows that Malaysian counsellors face many challenges from different angles and parties when it comes to the practice of multicultural counselling in their respective work organisations. Not only had they to deal with the challenges of their clients' resistance and misconception, but they also had to deal with their top management expectations.

Resistance and lack of support from clients' support systems, especially if the clients came from school student population, were also reported by some participants. For example, Bee shared her problems and difficulties when counselling Malaysian school students. According to her, counselling in schools became a real challenge to her when it involved dealing with two school-related parties: (a) the clients' parents from specific cultural groups, who were sometimes lacking in cooperation and acceptance towards the clients' positive changes due to their parenting styles) and (b) the teachers, who seemed judgmental towards the culturally different counsellor and some clients. So, dealing with the attitudes of clients' support systems is another critical challenge that professional counsellors in Malaysia have to deal with, especially for those who work with younger clients such as the school students or teenagers in general.

Challenges related to the counselling settings or contexts

Under this theme, two categories emerged: unconducive counselling rooms and conflicting work norms and values. Regarding the first, some participants voiced their concerns regarding the location, seating arrangement and appropriate environment of the counselling rooms in their workplace. According to them, these factors could pose some challenges or potential challenges in their practice with culturally diverse clients or prospective clients. This seems very true in view of the existence of societal pre-judgmental beliefs, stigmas and stereotypes about counselling and counsellor, as earlier discussed. For example, Fred, who used to counsel poor clients from ethnic-minority groups and victims of domestic violence, said:

> For years, I've been seeing that we should never do counselling across table. We should be like in this room – L setting. But sometimes I find clients are more comfortable when they sit across a table because they also need to protect themselves from the counsellor. The table makes them feel secure. That is something that I found out.

The underlying meaning of this quote shows that Fred learnt the most from practice experience rather than from former counselling education to be multiculturally competent in dealing with specific groups of clients. This finding is consistent with the findings from surveys. (Note: It was found that participants' perceived MCCs were not influenced by their completion of multicultural counselling courses).

The second category under this theme involved dealing with conflicting work values due to differing work cultures in various work sectors. Since all participant counsellors came from diverse work settings, some of them reported the challenges that they had to deal with in order to fit in the existing work cultures. In some work cultures such as counselling in schools, counselling in hospitals and counselling in the uniformed civil

defence and force unit, some existing work values were not compatible with the coun-
selling values, principles and ethical guidelines. For example, Ika, whose background
was not related to police and had limited work experience in the uniform civil defence
and force unit, said (translated to English):

> … when a civilian entered a uniformed unit, there is a gap. What I meant by "gap" is in
> terms of the implementation of power. For example, the civilians' voices were less heard
> even though we have complied with the rules and regulations that all decisions have to be
> made by the senior uniformed officers … So, when it came to giving orders, we found it
> very challenging. Indeed, a civilian officer had difficulties to adjust to anything pertaining
> to administrative matter.

This reflects two things for consideration: the potential challenges that could happen to
other civilian counsellors (or general counsellors) whose first posting was in the "unfa-
miliar work environment" and the importance of having adequate practice experience
during internship. This finding has direct implications for the education and training of
counsellors in Malaysia.

To summarise, we have discussed some challenges (or potential challenges) and bar-
riers faced by Malaysian counsellors in their practice of counselling with diverse clients
in diverse work settings. The challenges were related to attributes of counsellors, cli-
ents, or third parties, counselling problems or counselling contexts. Among the top three
challenges reported by participant counsellors were language barriers, lack of practice
with and exposure to diverse cultures, and counsellors' perceived multicultural incom-
petence. The findings suggest two areas for further improvement: (a) better education
and training for counsellor trainees and practising counsellors so that they can develop
MCCs to better serve diverse clients in diverse work settings, and (b) better promotion,
facilities and infrastructure for counselling so that the quality of services can be guaran-
teed to meet the individual and cultural needs of diverse Malaysian clients. The follow-
ing paragraphs discuss the emergent themes in detail and the implications of research
for counselling theory, practice and counsellor training in Malaysia.

Discussion

The emergent themes are discussed in relation to the primary research question and the
findings from previous research.

Detailed documentation of the challenges involved in the practice of multicultural
counselling suggests that these challenges emerged from several categories (clients'
characteristics, third-party's characteristics and specific counselling contexts or work
cultures), but the most frequently reported challenges are embedded in counsellors' per-
ceptions of their current MCCs (e.g. perceived multicultural incompetence). This finding
is interesting because it proves that counsellor preparation seems to contribute to most
of the key challenges faced by these Malaysian counsellors in the practice of multicul-
tural counselling. Several possible explanations are useful to be considered to account
for this finding. First, perhaps Malaysian counsellors were not trained properly during
their previous counselling education and training. This has direct implications for the
education and training of counsellors, especially in terms of the adequacy of counselling
curriculum, the credibility and qualifications of the educators or trainers, and the quality

of teaching in the counselling programmes. Second, this finding could indicate that the current multicultural counselling courses may have unclear focus and hence, do not contribute to developing counsellors' MCCs. This is evidenced further by a critique of Malaysian counselling literature, which states that there is lack of empirical evidence regarding the state and extent of multicultural education and training in the counsellor education programmes in Malaysia (Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2003, 2008; Ng & Stevens, 2001; See & Ng, 2010).

Participants also noted other challenges associated with counsellors' attributes such as language barriers, value conflicts, and lack of multicultural exposure to diverse cultures. These categories appear to highlight the importance of being a multiculturally competent counsellor in the Malaysian context because the socio-cultural dynamics among Malaysians are unique. For example, because of its cultural diversity, many Malaysians are bilingual or multilingual. Most of them can speak Malay as it is the national language and this is combined with other community languages such as English, Mandarin, Tamil, Hokkien and some others. With their history, location and societal composition, Malaysians have unique needs and values that are specific to their cultural context and ethnic/religious backgrounds, and it is argued that it is in this context that Malaysian counsellors should be multiculturally competent and needed most.

Previous research has provided details of the aspects of multicultural competence and one of these aspects is to be *exposed to broad and diverse life experiences* (Constantine et al., 2004). In this research, it was also found that one of the challenges reported by participant counsellors in the practice of multicultural counselling is lack of practice experience with and exposure to diverse cultures, which represent the other side of the same phenomenon. This means the aspects of multicultural competence are inversely proportional with the barriers and challenges in the multicultural counselling practice. Therefore, it is recommended that counsellors should enhance their multicultural competencies to minimise practice barriers and challenges.

Research implications

The knowledge garnered from this admittedly small-scale study indicates tentatively that MCC is a broad and multidimensional construct and is a very important foundation in the practice of multicultural counselling. This has direct implications for counsellor preparation in the field of professional counselling in Malaysia.

Firstly, the education and training of counsellors should incorporate and emphasise all six components of MCC in the development of better counsellor education programmes and multicultural counselling courses. Perhaps counsellors and trainees should be first introduced to the six core qualities of MCC (multicultural skills, knowledge and beliefs and attitudes, awareness, understanding and experience) revealed in this study, which underlie the dimensions of MCC and core characteristics of a multiculturally competent counsellor. This can be successfully achieved through an experiential teaching-and-learning process or infusing these qualities in the current curriculum of counsellor education programmes or current policies pertaining to counsellor preparation in Malaysia.

Secondly, to better educate and train counsellors to become multiculturally competent practitioners in the field of multicultural counselling, the findings suggest several potential implications for better practice:

(1) The findings seem to suggest that the counsellor education and training programs should place more emphasis on the practical components of counselling in the curriculum. Currently, according to the standards for accreditation of counsellor education and training programmes in Malaysia (Lembaga Kaunselor Malaysia, 2003), the allocated hours for the practical component in a Bachelor and Master degree programme are 66 (out of 120 total hours) and 33 (out of 48 total hours), respectively. This raises some concerns regarding the quality of the graduates produced by these theory-based programmes. Perhaps, it is high time that policy makers reviewed the relevant policy pertaining to standards in counsellor education and training in Malaysia. It is recommended that the allocated hours for the practical components for both Bachelor and Master's programmes should be increased in order to make sure that the trainees have sufficient practical training with culturally diverse clients during their preparation time.

(2) The teaching and learning process should place more emphasis on the multicultural components of the counsellor education and training programs. Perhaps the inclusion of the Cultural and Social Diversity component or multicultural counselling courses is insufficient to contribute to counsellors' multicultural competence. So, the solution for policy makers is twofold: by increasing the allocated number of credit hours for the social and cultural diversity component and by infusing and emphasising the multicultural components in the teaching-and-learning of the other seven core components of the counsellor education programmes.

Conclusion

The results and implications emphasise that multicultural counselling is a rapidly recognised area of counselling practice in Malaysia. MCC needs to be integrated into all counselling in Malaysia. Continuing support from practising counsellors, counsellor educators and training institutions, government and non-government bodies to promote and enhance current theoretical understanding and practice of multicultural counselling is needed. The current research findings should be regarded as tentative owing to the small sample size but it is not unreasonable to suggest that the themes identified have both face validity and make sense to both counsellors who participated in this study and to the researcher and the more experienced supervisors of the study. Future research should be directed for improving the current education and training of counsellors in Malaysia.

Acknowledgements

Education (i.e. Faculty Research Fund) and University of Malaya Research Grant (UMRG) for research related expenses. This research was supervised by Dr Janette Simmonds and Dr Cynthia Joseph, both from the Faculty of Education, Monash University, Australia.

Notes on contributor

Rafidah Aga Mohd Jaladin is a senior lecturer at the University of Malaya. She is a registered counselor with the Malaysian Board of Counsellors, a life-time member of the Malaysian Counselling Association, and a member of various international psychology and counselling associations such as American Psychological Association (APA) and Australian Psychological Society (APS). She has academic and professional training in the field of Psychology (BSc. with Honours) and Counseling (Master of Counseling) from Australia and Malaysia, respectively. Her PhD research focuses on multicultural counseling. The title of her PhD thesis is "*Professional counsellors' understanding and practice of multicultural counselling in Malaysia.*"

References

Aga Mohd Jaladin, R. (2003). *Students' evaluation of undergraduate counselling education programmes at two public universities in Malaysia. Master of Counselling* (Unpublished master's research report). Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

Aga Mohd Jaladin, R. (2008). Pendidikan kaunselor di Malaysia: Cabaran dan harapan [Counsellor education in Malaysia: Challenges and hopes]. In N. Idris & N. A. Nik Pa (Eds.), *Perjuangan memperkasakan pendidikan di Malaysia: Pengalaman 50 tahun merdeka* [Efforts in strengthening education in Malaysia: 50 year post independence experiences] (pp. 466–490). Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publilcations & Distributions Sdn Bhd.

Alladin, W. (1993). The ethnomedical model as a conceptual tool for counselling in health care. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 21,* 8–19.

Alladin, W. (2009). An ethno biopsychosocial human rights model for educating community counselors globally. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 22,* 17–24.

American Psychological Association (2003). Guidelines on multicultural education, training, research, practice, and organizational change for psychologists. *American Psychologist, 58,* 377–402.

Bassey, S., & Melluish, S. (2013). Cultural competency for mental health practitioners: A selective narrative review. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 26,* 151–173.

Bazeley, P. (2007). *Qualitative data analysis with NVivo*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cheung, F. M. (2000). Deconstructing counseling in a cultural context. *The Counseling Psychologist, 28,* 123–132.

Constantine, M. G. (2001). Multicultural training, theoretical orientation, empathy, and multicultural case conceptualisation ability in therapists. *Journal of Mental Health Psychotherapy, 23,* 357–372.

Constantine, M. G., Melincoff, D. S., Barakett, M. D., Torino, G. C., & Warren, A. K. (2004). Experiences and perceptions of multicultural counselling scholars: A qualitative examination. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 17,* 375–393.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

D'Andrea, M., & Heckman, E. F. (2008a). A 40-year review of multicultural counselling outcome research: Outlining a future research agenda for the multicultural counselling movement. *Journal of Counselling and Development, 86,* 356–364.

D'Andrea, M., & Heckman, E. F. (2008b). Contributing to the ongoing evolution of the multicultural counselling movement: An introduction to the special issue. *Journal of Counselling and Development, 86,* 259–261.

Dickson, G. L., & Jepsen, D. A. (2007). Exploring the relationships among multicultural training experiences and attitudes toward diversity among counseling students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 36*, 113–126. Retrieved from http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=31550342&site=ehost-live

Griner, D., & Smith, T. B. (2006). Culturally adapted mental health intervention: A meta-analytic review. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice Training, 43*, 531–548.

Hill, C. E., Thompson, B. J., & Williams, E. N. (1997). A guide to conducting consensual qualitative research. *The Counseling Psychologist, 25*, 517–572.

Ismail, R., & Othman, A. H. (2001). Counseling issues in Malaysia: Towards professionalism. *Cross-Cultural Psychology Bulletin, 35*, 18–22.

Lembaga Kaunselor, Malaysia. (2003). *Piawai dan kelayakan latihan kaunselor* [Standards and qualifications for counsellor training]. Kuala Lumpur: Lembaga Kaunselor.

Moodley, R., Rai, A., & Alladin, W. (Eds.). (2010). *Bridging east-west psychology and counselling – exploring the work of Pittu Laungani*. New Delhi: Sage.

Neufeldt, S. A., Pinterits, E. J., Moleiro, C. M., Lee, T. E., Yang, P. H., Brodie, R. E., & Orliss, M. J. (2006). How do graduate student therapists incorporate diversity factors in case conceptualization? *Psychotherapy, 43*, 464–479.

Ng, K.S., & Stevens, P. (2001). Creating a caring society: Counseling in Malaysia before 2020 AD. *Asian Journal of Counseling, 8*, 87–101.

Othman, A. H. (2001). Guidance and counselling in Malaysia: An emerging profession. *Cross-Cultural Psychology Bulletin, 35*, 18–22.

Othman, A. H., & Aboo Bakar, S. B. (1993). Guidance, counseling, and counselor education in Malaysia. In A. H. Othman & A. Awang (Eds.), *Counseling in the Asia-Pacific region* (pp. 1–25). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Patterson, C. (2004). Do we need multicultural counseling competencies? *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 26*, 67–73.

Pedersen, P. B., Draguns, J. G., Lonner, W. J., & Trimble, J. E. (Eds.). (2008). *Counseling across cultures*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Pope, M., Musa, M., Singaravelu, H., Bringaze, T., & Russell, M. (2002). From colonialism to ultranationalism: History and development of career counseling in Malaysia. *Career Development Quarterly, 50*, 264–276.

Richards, L. (2005). *Handling qualitative data: A practical guide*. London: Sage.

Salim, S. (2004, January 19). *Perkhidmatan Kaunseling di Malaysia: Perkembangan, Cabaran dan Halangan* [Counselling services in Malaysia: Developments, challenges, and barriers]. Paper presented at the Inaugural Speech, Faculty of Education, University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

Salim, S., & Aga Mohd Jaladin, R. (2005). Development of counseling services in Malaysia. In Z. A. Ansari, N. M. Noor, & A. Haque (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in Malaysian psychology* (pp. 237–264). Kuala Lumpur: Thomson Learning.

Scorzelli, J. F. (1987). Counseling in Malaysia: An emerging profession. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 65*, 238–240.

See, C. M., & Ng, K.-M. (2010). Counselling in Malaysia: History, current status, and future trends. *Journal of Counselling and Development, 88*, 18–22.

Smith, T. B., Constantine, M. G., Dunn, T. W., Dinehart, J. M., & Montoya, J. A. (2006). Multicultural education in the mental health professions: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 53*, 132–145.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Sue, D. W., Bernier, J. E., Durran, A., Feinburg, L., Pedersen, P., Smith, E. J., & Vasquez-Nuttall, E. (1982). Position paper: Cross-cultural counselling competencies. *The Counseling Psychologist, 10*, 45–52.

Sue, D. W., & Sue, D. (2008). *Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice* (5th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Sumari, M., & Jalal, F. H. (2008). Cultural issues in counselling: An international perspective. *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health, 4*, Counselling in the Asia Pacific Rim: A coming together of neighbours special issue, 24–34. Retrieved from http://www.cphjournal.com/archive_journals/Melati_Sumari_and_F_H_Jalal.pdf

Tol, W. A., Jordans, M. J. D., Regmi, S., & Sharma, B. (2005). Cultural challenges to psychosocial counselling in Nepal. *Transcultural Psychiatry, 42*, 317–333.

Yu, C. K.-C., Fu, W., Zhao, X., & Davey, G. (2010). Public understanding of counsellors and counselling in Hong Kong. *Asia Pacific Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy, 1*, 47–54.