



Cultural Influences and Mandated Counseling in Malaysia

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Abstract

It is unfair to conclude that Western and Eastern differences have caused conflict in the practice of counselling, especially in mandated counselling. It is reasonable to assume that without the Western approach and understanding of counselling, the East would still be unable to develop their own theory of helping. How then does one compare different approaches? Such an assessment can be argued clearly from a cultural perspective as in the case of mandated counselling. This paper discusses the influence of culture which has shaped the practice of mandated counselling and the appropriate practice of mandated counselling in a Malaysian setting. Many of the points discussed here are drawn from the data informed by seven informants in a research entitled 'Mandated Counselling In Malaysia: A Heuristic Phenomenological Inquiry Of Involuntary Participation'. The phenomenon of counselling as originated and practised in the West, which has served as the significant model for the Malaysian style of counselling, is discussed. The concept of guidance and crisis intervention in counselling as practised in Malaysia has shaped the appropriate acceptance of mandated counselling. Respect for authority, a need to 'save face', directives from the authority and the values of *we-ness* makes mandated counselling in a Malaysian setting a relevant intervention.

Keywords: Mandated counselling, Referral, Malaysian culture, Helping, Phenomenology

1. Introduction

Culture is a set of a behaviour patterns related to thoughts, manners and action, which members of a society have shared and passed on to succeeding generations. Culture cannot exist without a society, as it is the people who create and give significance to its shared ways. A lot has been debated about the practice of mandated counselling. Proponents of mandated counselling claimed that clients could become counselling advocates, that they will seek counselling in future undertakings and that many were helped out of their initial involuntary involvement (Amundson & Borgen, 2000). There is an indication that the number of client legally mandated to receive counselling is increasing (Rooney, 2001). On the other hand, opponents of mandated counselling argued that mandated counselling is ineffective, is directed more toward the organisational or referral party's goals rather than the individuals, and is unethical as it undermines people's autonomy to decide on their own. In other words, the client is seen as not owning the problem and that the goal of counselling is merely to achieve the referral party's objectives and not those of the clients (Amada, 2001; Kirakofe, 1993) and may not necessary produce any significant behaviour change as client will just tell what the counsellor want to hear (Dannels & Consolvo, 2000). One general argument is that a reactant towards mandated counselling is culturally inclined. Mandated counselling can be assumed as a universal phenomenon, but a reactant to it is culturally different from one culture to another. Thus, Francis (2000) suggested that if practice of mandated counselling to succeed, clear and mutually agreed guideline need to be established.

2. Culture of society, community and organisation

Culture reflects a shared general beliefs which describe the 'should' and the 'ought to' of life for members in the society. As stated by Hofstede in his Theory of Cultural Dimension, culture involves shared characteristics including religion, heritage, language and values that distinguish one group of people from another. Thus, culture distinguishes the members of one group of people from another. Laungani (2004, p.13), concluded that culture is 'best understood as an umbrella term, which covers a variety of meanings and perspectives'.

As in the counselling practice, the success of the counselling services is dependent on the culture of the society and the organization. In a broader sense, the culture of a country has a strong influence on the way people behave, thus, plays a

significant role in developing the culture of an organisation. Therefore, a clear understanding of what constitute to acceptable practices of counselling such as in Malaysian culture is important. Otherwise, it may be considered as being too 'western' and therefore, are unacceptable. This is crucial as some might see the counselling technique used as too elusive. For example, there are many interrelated factors in help-seeking behaviour, such as the availability of social support whereby the individual differences in the propensity of reliance on social support networks in times of need could be a reflection of cultural values and norms (Kaniasty & Norris, 2000). For instance, in help-seeking behaviour, evidence suggests that seeking and receiving help be guided by general concerns of dependence versus independence (Nadler, 1997). This is clearly a construct of different cultures. Thus, in counselling practice, as narrated by Laungani,

“To ignore the problem of a lack of single theoretical framework for counselling in relation to culture (as has largely been the case so far) or to deny its salience is dangerous. To continue to operate with ‘free for all’ therapeutic strategies may eventually tarnish the image of this noble profession, and lead to a state of epistemological anarchy.”

(Laungani, 2004, p. 25)

3. Malaysian culture, values and norms

The key to a deeper understanding of culture is to examine its values. Values are derived from fundamental assumptions and beliefs of its members and can only be inferred from people's behaviours. Malaysian values are deep-rooted and are quite different from the Western values. Malaysian values involve respecting the elders, group orientation of 'we more than I' or emphasis on belonging to an in-group (Jamal, 2006), a harmonious relationship, a concern for face saving, and a religious orientation (Abdullah, 2001). Zawawi (2008) in her study on cultural values of three main races in Malaysia found that the Malays and the Chinese were seen to have the most similar cultural values, which were ambitious, filial piety, honesty, knowledgeable, and trustworthiness. The Malays and Indians were only similar in their value of piousness, while the Chinese and Indians were similar in their values of rituals and traditions. From an international perspective, according to Manery (2000), some characteristics that distinguish Malaysian and other Asians from dominant Western culture are the importance of extended family, shame and face-saving reactions, pressure for academic achievement, authoritarian and patriarchal family structures. However, the most important dimension is individualism versus collectivism (Hofstede, 2001; Noordin, Williams, & Zimmer, 2002; Triandis, 2004))

Understanding Malaysian culture and traditions is also helpful in addressing counselling approach and practise in Malaysia. In discussing four synthetic cultures to address cultural differences on values of people in more than 50 countries around the world, Hofstede (2001) concluded that Malaysia could be considered an Alpha culture with a key characteristics of large power distance societies as in family, school and workplace. This included a concept whereby inequalities are both acknowledged and required. For instance, in the workplace, less powerful people are more reliant on more dominant. The subordinates wait for direction and the supervisor is a manager who anticipate privileges. At home, parents are expected to teach children to obey the rules and gain respect from their children. In educational setting, teachers exercise full initiative in class and communicate their knowledge and wisdom. As such, students show respect to their teachers. Thus, in general, Alpha culture connotes that everyone values authority and there exists as inequality between higher-ups and lower-downs.

3.1 The influence of collectivism toward mandated counselling

Conceptually, according to Hofstede (2001), a value of collectivism which is explicitly expressed in terms of the "we" orientation clearly signifies teamwork and collaboration. Thus, individualism-collectivism describes the degree to which a culture relies on and has obedience to either the self or the group. According to this construct, collectivistic cultures tend to be group-oriented, enforce a large psychological distance among same and different group members. The in-group members are expected to be compliant and demonstrate loyalty to the group. In a conflict situation, they are likely to cope using avoidance strategies or resort to getting help from a third party who acts as mediators.

In educational setting such as in the university, group orientation is significantly important among Malaysian students. Most Malaysian students work extremely well in a team environment as they have a strong sense of belonging and most have a preference for group assignments rather than individual ones. This clearly reflect their spirit of collectivism as being more important than individualistic tendencies and this is often translated in the willingness to give priority to group interests ahead of individual concerns. In the case of mandated counselling, provided that the referral party can clearly explain the aims behind their mandated action, students will negotiate with their personal need and the need of the majority or at least the authority. This might explain why most of them who were told to seek counselling, finally agreed to participate in counselling, regardless of the kind of problem they were experiencing. As according to Jamal (2006), in return for collectivist loyalty to different types of groups, they are provided with security and protection and reflect their loyalty by following passive, collaborative and avoiding strategies.

As suggested by Manery (2000), academic achievement by performing well at school or university is an important factor that differentiates Asian or Malaysian culture. Thus, academic achievement, as a concept seems to justify the practice of

mandated counselling, especially in educational setting. Such pressure to perform and succeed academically has made it easier or acceptable for the majority of people to seek counselling when they were instructed to do so. This can also be seen as an effort to meet the needs of collectivist orientation. For instance, in the counselling practice, the distinction between collectivistic and individualistic value orientations, at both the societal and or cultural level proved to be very useful in addressing cultural variations in social support and helping behaviour. Although the analysis of the attributes differentiating collectivism and individualism can be quite complex, collectivists such as Malaysians are particularly concerned with harmony in interpersonal relationships. In addition, they are very responsive to the needs of others, and are often willing to sacrifice their individual goals to promote the collective, be it family, neighbourhood or nation. As such, a suggestion for seeking counselling might address these needs to comply with societal norms. In contrast, individualists, on the other hand, value their own freedom and self-reliance, pursue their own individual goals, and often show less concern for other people's personal needs and interests (Triandis, 2004). Thus, as in the case of mandated counselling, an individual will find it overwhelming as independence and reliance of one's individual self is belittled. This is especially true as dominant features of individualism are the recognition of, and respect for, an individual's physical and psychological space (Laungani, 2004). If this is ignored, it will later raise the issue of autonomy and coercion, as they are more concerned with giving priority to their own personal goals rather than the group or community's goals.

Generally, the collectivist prefers relationship-based activity as compared to the task-oriented approach. Clearly, another important value of Malaysians is trust and relationship-building as there is a strong preference for a relationship-based orientation rather than a task-oriented approach in performing tasks. Developing trust and understanding are far more important than the obligation of getting the task done. Trust can be built after one is familiar enough and there is a sense of alliance with the other person. For example, the importance of the familiarity of the counsellor came out significantly in this present research. There is a greater tendency for students to seek counselling from counsellors that they know or have been in contact with, either as counsellor or as staff member of the university.

3.2 *The influence of power-distance*

The power-distance dimension as suggested by Hofstede (2001) assumes that people in high power distance cultures are much more comfortable with a larger status differential, than those in low power distance cultures. In Alpha culture, the portrayal of power-distance dimension is clearly evident in family, the relationship between teachers and students and among the young and elderly. For example, in a university setting, the power-distance phenomena can be seen in terms of communication between people of different ranks such as lecturer and student, and the need to preserve harmony with other people especially the authorities.

Work attitudes and behaviour of people in collectivist cultures are different from those in individualist cultures (Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006; Triandis, & Suh, 2002). Considering the culture and values of the Malaysian workforce, which can be considered an extension of what can be found at the university, Abdullah (2001) stressed the characteristic of non-assertiveness whereby people are eager to please others and may find it difficult to say "no". In fact, informants in this present research argued the notion of being assertive, a concept which is foreign to their vocabulary and everyday life. They elaborated the need to avoid assertiveness as it might reflect competitive behaviour and lead to conflict, which is socially unacceptable. This is supported by Triandis (2004), who notes that people with collectivist values pay much more attention to the social aspects of problems. This is especially true when the other party with whom they are trying to be assertive is their own supervisor or someone of higher rank such as a parent or lecturer. In terms of culture, this can be explained in the fact that most Malaysians also respect authority figures or seniors. Most Malaysian are known to be less comfortable in expressing conflicting views and are uncomfortable in critically evaluating peers in the presence of seniors. Giving negative feedback can be uncomfortable as indirectness is more the norm than directness (Abdullah, 1996).

Ward, Pearson and Entekin (2002) noted that the preservation of 'face' is important in Asian and in Malaysian culture. The notion of 'face' reflects the dignity resulting from an interpersonal relationship with others in the society. It is a reflection of social acceptance and respectability (Tan & Torrington, 2004). Students know that it is part of their responsibility to protect their lecturer's 'face'. For the same reason, some would pretend to understand the instruction given to them for otherwise they would be seen as stupid or refuse to respect the authority (Abdullah, 2001). In some instances, most are often reluctant to ask for help when they do not understand. They are loyal and tend to act with obedience towards authority. As such, mandated counselling is assumed to be accepted without much resistance by most people.

Another important trademark of Malaysians is their value of harmony. Most prefer compromise to confrontation, and often seek consensus in everyday living. Thus, the viewpoint of superior is less likely to be conflicting, as conflict is often not expressed verbally. Personal conflict is often apparent and attempt is made to preserve the 'face' of the others especially seniors or the elderly, especially those with authority figures. Open public criticism and outspokenness are to be stayed away from at all costs because they undermine harmonious relationships. Zawawi (2008) found that only one common cultural value that was similar for all the three main races in Malaysia is politeness (*Sopan-santun*). As such, any conflict need to be handled as courteous as possible. To a certain extent, self-expression or self-assertiveness as

according to Western value is a difficult phenomena for Malaysians to understand and can be usually mistaken as being rude or selfish. Thus, in the educational setting, this obviously enlightens the need to approach at-risk students so that they would feel helped and included in the system. Counselling as a self expression business is seen as complicated by informants and is attributed to their difficulty in expressing themselves and being assertive about their own needs which are culturally bound.

4. Counselling – a Western phenomenon

In the past, some researchers have asserted that the values of counselling may be antagonistic to the values of Malaysian. Most forms of counselling tend to be individual-centred, that is they emphasise the “I-You” relationship which is based on the concept of individualism. Noordin et al. (2002) discussed that the individualist culture emphasize on individual initiative, achievement and performance which signify the Western tradition.

In many Asian cultures, the psychosocial unit of operation is the family, group or society. As such, Malaysians do not define the psychosocial unit of operation in individual terms. In other words, in Malaysian society, one’s identity is generally defined within the family unit. In counselling practice, even to have a client use the word ‘I’ instead of ‘we’ would become a challenge as most Malaysians are exposed to think in group and not individual terms. This is clearly an advantage in mandated counselling as the ‘we-ness’ helps to interject other people’s expectations.

As for communication pattern, Malaysians tend to value verbalisations less as compared to the Westerners. The patterns of communication tend to be from those who are older or from the higher social status to those who are younger or of lower social status in the society and organization, making mandated counselling a form of proactive invitation that helps to reduce tension. As such, mandated counselling that from those in a position of higher authority would possibly be acceptable to most Malaysians.

One issue raised by informants was the business of expression in counselling. Self-expression was found to be difficult, yet in counselling, the ability to self-disclose and talk about the confidential aspects of one’s life is much valued. However, this is not easy for most Malaysians, as disclosure of one’s personal problems reflect not only on the individual but also on the family system. Thus, most family exercise strong demands on the members not to disclose deep personal matters to ‘outsiders’. As such, some counsellors may mistakenly perceive that the client is unresponsive. So much so in mandated counselling, the procedure of informing parents about their child’s problem must be avoided. Indeed students often prefer their family not to know. On the other hand, family concerns may push them to seek counselling.

Being assertive is much encouraged in societies based on Western value but not in Malaysia. As discussed earlier, Malaysian society highly value and respect authority and being assertive might be conflicting. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Malaysians are unassertive or lack initiative. Most Malaysians wait for a clear instructions and prefer an authority figure to make decisions, but this should not be mistaken for a lack of motivation or self confidence. Thus, mandated counselling can possibly be seen as an easier route towards seeking counselling. However, an ‘invitation’ to counselling needs to be made in total secrecy so as to protect an individual from losing face, since this embarrassment, especially in front of colleagues or worst, family members, is very difficult to cope with.

Opponents of mandated counselling claim that involuntary clients are unmotivated, that they are difficult to manage and will disclose very little in counselling sessions. This can also be seen to emerge from the cultural differences. For example, Malaysian feels comfortable with a silence in the conversation and so doesn’t feels obligated to intervene with more talk. In Malaysian culture, silence is traditionally a sign of respect for the elders or an authority figure. Thus, a counsellor who misunderstands silence may fill in the conversation and by doing so will unintentionally prevent the client from elaborating further. On the other hand, the directness of a conversation also varies considerably. Westerners tend to get to the point without going around in circles. In contrast, Malaysians take great care not to embarrass the other person by being ambiguous and ‘beat around the bush’.

In counselling modality, especially among cognitive behaviour counsellors, words such as ‘should’, ‘ought’ and ‘must’ are often disputed and changed to a more positive term. However, it is very difficult for Malaysian to adopt that stance as the cultural values have dictated the ‘should’ and ‘must’ early in our life. According to Abdullah (2001), it is through our interactions with our close and extended family members that we learn values at both cognitive and affective levels. It is through that medium where we are told, “don’t speak too loudly”, “don’t be rude”, or “don’t go under the ladder” (Abdullah, 1996, p.13). As concluded by the informants, it is acknowledged that Malaysians give instruction by using more “don’t than do”. This is clearly evident in the thinking process of the informants where most of them would think about the negative side of doing something, such as, “*If I don’t go what would happen*” (rather than thinking what would happen if I go) or “*If counselling doesn’t work! Would this benefit me?*” (rather than “*what if counselling does work*”). On the contrary, others said “*I don’t go because I don’t want my friends to see me climbing the stairs to the counselling office*”. In this present research, informants told that they received a lot of “don’ts” from their parent such as “*You have to be brave, you don’t show your problem, and you just show your happy face!*” It is clear that this kind of conditioning is manifested through an unwillingness to seek counselling. Thus, in terms of mandated counselling, that is an advantage, as

it has become a 'norm'. Referral for counselling with instructions such as "You should seek counselling" might be seen as acceptable.

4.1 Justified – culturally reactant

Thus, so far, based on findings informed by this research and supported by evidence from the literature review, it can be concluded that the influence of culture that directs the more positive reactant towards mandated counselling is possible. It has always been understood that some planned intervention is better than none. Thus, it can also be assumed that some form of counselling is better than no counselling at all. Even though counselling is claimed to be 'Westernised', it has evidently made an impact on the helping profession and helping strategies in a Malaysian setting.

It has been discussed earlier that the ways in which counselling, and specifically mandated counselling, is carried out can also be shaped by the organisation or in a greater sense, the culture where it is practised. Thus, cultural influences and attitudes toward authority and accepting enforced helping may be very well culturally influenced and proposing mandated counselling can be affected by how it is presented, how respectfully, and what choices are available. Thus, it certainly could give new opportunities for the practice of mandated counselling in more ethical and acceptable ways. In relation to the impact of culture, reactant or to being mandated may be cultural or social as some group may be accustomed to following the advice of authorities while other groups rebel against this. It is clear that both groups (those who react positively and negatively) could possibly exist within the same culture. Nevertheless, there is an explicit meaning that it can be justified through the influence of culture.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is postulated that the influence of culture on counselling cannot be under estimated. The world is changing to suit the needs of individuals and groups regardless of culture, ethnicity or locality. Cross-cultural differences will continue to exist in both the inter and intra-groups even of similar cultures. Counselling philosophy that emphasises individual differences has taken this into consideration.

It is clear that culture is embedded in individuals' everyday undertakings regardless of whether they realise it or not. This tentative argument about the positive reactant to being mandated for counselling is explained through cultural differences. Thus, it should not be seen as universal as it entails differences that are observed in term of physical boundaries, beliefs and the values of each culture. It is important to point out that culture is not the only factor influencing human behaviour. Similar to the postmodernist movement, it is not usually true that an individual from a certain culture will be shaped by only the culture. This paper have argued that mandated counselling can be seen as acceptable by drawing on cultural attributes with reference to Hofstede's Dimensions of cultural variation.

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