

## Counselors' Spiritual Competence in Malaysia

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### Abstract

This paper presents a review of recent study that investigates the level of spiritual competence among registered counselors in Malaysia. This study also examined the different levels of spiritual competence based on demographic factors such as gender, age, religion, ethnicity, educational level and tenure approval. A descriptive survey was conducted by administering questionnaires which was translated from the original survey of "the spiritual competency scale" by Young, Cashwell, Wiggins-Frame and Belaire (2002). A total of 240 registered counselors participated in this study. Results suggest that the majority of the counselors surveyed have a moderate level of spiritual competence with a mean of 3.64. In terms of differences in the level of spiritual competence, this study found no significant differences based on gender, age, education level and years of service. Only the religious and ethnicity factors have a significant difference in the levels of counselors' spiritual competence. Furthermore, with the findings obtained, some suggestions have been made.

**Keywords:** spiritual competence, registered counselors

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Spiritual Competence

Spiritual and religious aspect is a major component to be considered by the counselor to understand the issues or the problems raised by clients. These components are almost absent in counseling services even though the acceptance of spiritual elements in counseling had occurred during the transition period between these two theorists by the name of Alfred Adler and Sigmund Freud. Adler emphasizes on the approach of spiritual holism in order to comprehend clients' needs and problems in which will also lead to behavioural changes (Mohamed, 2005).

Spiritual and religious components begin to be given serious consideration in the mid-1990s when a conference on spiritual issues and religion held in 1995 which led to the existence of nine aspects associated with the counselor's ability to integrate spiritual and religion in counseling session (Miller, 1999). Lemkuil (2007) defined spiritual competence as the ability of the counselor to integrate understanding of religion in counseling process and it is based upon counselor's own belief towards their own ability or level of spiritual competence they possess.

Spiritual competencies that have been outlined are as follows:

- 1) A counselor should be able to explain the relationship between religion and spirituality, including similarities and differences.
- 2) A counselor should be able to describe religious and spiritual beliefs and practices in a cultural context.
- 3) A counselor should be able to engage in self-exploration of his/her religious and spiritual beliefs in order to increase sensitivity, understanding and acceptance of his/her belief system.
- 4) A counselor should be able to describe one's religious and/or spiritual belief system and explain various models of religious/spiritual development across the lifespan.
- 5) A counselor should be able to demonstrate sensitivity to and acceptance of a variety of religions and/or spiritual expressions in the client's communication.

- 6) A counselor should be able to identify the limits of one's understanding of a client's spiritual expression, and demonstrate appropriate referral skills and general possible referral sources.
- 7) A counselor should be able to assess the relevance of the spiritual domains in the client's therapeutic issues.
- 8) A counselor should be able to be sensitive to and respectful of the spiritual issues in the counseling process based on each client's preferences.
- 9) A counselor should be able to use a client's spiritual beliefs in the pursuit of the client's therapeutic goals as befits the client's preferences.

In addition, the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics and Standards has also included religions as one of the component in human diversity and spiritual concerns known as the V-code in the DSM IV (Briggs & Rayle, 2005).

### *1.2 The Significance of Study*

In Malaysia, religious issues in counseling have been raised since the beginning of the development of counseling in Malaysia, mainly concerned on the Islamic perspective towards counseling. Wan Ahmad Wan Kader (2006) has pioneered the concept of Islamic counseling, which suggested that, it is related, not only to the relationship between a client and a trained counselor in exploring emotions, values, perceptions and judgment of clients' future, but also clients' personal relationship with God whenever problems emerged. Othman Mohamed (2005) believed that the limitations in the theoretical approach in terms of spiritual dimension need to be emphasized. He put forward a comprehensive approach namely theory of Cognitive Psychology ad-Din in order to examine the nature of human behaviour from the Islamic perspectives.

Spiritual competence should be taken into consideration by counselors in order to provide holistic and effective counseling services. Generally, counseling services in Malaysia are based on western values (Kamal, 2000; Mardiana & Mastura, 2006). It was apparent that theories taught in the counseling program are accordance with the theories put forward by western counseling scholars such as Carl Rogers, Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler and Albert Ellis. These scholars are well known with western ideology that separate religion with mode of living. However, the separation between religion and mental health care's such as counseling and psychotherapy are indistinct. This is proved by the studies and scientific literature related to religious needs in the field of counseling and psychotherapy as set forth by Shafranske (1996), Miller (1999), Richards and Bergin (1999), Pargament (2007) and Briggs and Rayle (2005).

### *1.3 Statement of Problems*

In Malaysia, the training at universities varies according to higher education institutions that offer counseling programs. Reviews that have been made indicate that only four universities offer courses related to religion which focused on Islam (Board of Counselors, June 2010). Although there are subjects like multicultural counseling and ethnic relations, the question arises whether the competency level of spiritual and religion, as well as knowledge and training acquired during the program are sufficient to enable these future counselors to integrate the understanding of religion in their counseling sessions. A counselor can be considered unethical if he/she practice services outside of competence as contained in the ACA Code of Ethics (2005) under section professional responsibility (c.2.a). Counseling Association code of ethics counselor Malaysia (PERKAMA, 2008) also states that counselors should provide counseling services according to their areas of expertise with no cross-border expertise based on education, training and supervised experience. Studies related to spiritual competency among counselors in Malaysia is very limited. As such, it is uncertain to what extent the apparent spiritual and religious level of competency among the registered counselor. Therefore, the following research questions were presented:

- 1) What are the levels of spiritual competence among registered counselors in Malaysia?
- 2) Are there different levels of spiritual competence among registered counselor based on age, gender, religion, race, level of educational qualifications and length of service?

### *1.4 Objectives of the Study*

The main objective of this study was to determine the level of spiritual competency among registered counselor in Malaysia. In specific, this study was conducted in order to:

- 1) Determine the level of spiritual competence among registered counselors in Malaysia.
- 2) Identify the different levels of spiritual competency among registered counselors based on their age, gender, religion, and race, level of educational qualifications and length of service.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Design

The design of this study was a descriptive/survey involving descriptive analysis (mean and standard deviation) and ANOVA test. Descriptive studies can be used to explore areas that have not been studied and do not require treatment for control of the factors that influence events in the early stages (Majid, 2009).

### 2.2 Subject

The research sample consisted of 240 registered counselors. The sampling is done by using simple random sampling method. Selection method with simple random sampling was carried out after researchers obtain a list of registered counselors from the board of counselors. List of registered counselors is up to June 2010. A set of questionnaires with stamped and addressed envelope is sent to selected respondents.

### 2.3 Instrument

Instrument used in this study was a questionnaire consisting of two parts. Part A is the items intended to obtain demographic information. It also includes multiple-choice questions to attain respondents' views whether counseling programs/courses that they have acquired in Higher Education Institutions are sufficient to enable them to integrate the understanding of religion in their counseling practice. The choices of answers were divided into yes, no and uncertain. Whereas part B was a questionnaire on Spiritual Competency in Counseling Practice (KSdAK) designed to measure the level of counselor spiritual competency. This questionnaire has been translated using the collaborative translation that is modified from the spiritual competency questionnaire survey developed by Young et al. (2002). Collaborative translation method presented by Douglas and Craig (2007) is an alternative method to the 'back to back translation'.

This questionnaire contains 27 items using 5-point Likert scale from unprepared (1) to very prepared (5). This questionnaire has four components to measure the spiritual and religious competencies of general competency (item 1 to item 7), Counselor-Based Competencies (item 8 to item 13), Client-Based Competencies (item 14 to item 18) and Interventions and Techniques Competencies (item 19 to item 27).

From the analysis of reliability using Cronbach Alpha model shows high reliability. KSdAK questionnaire as a whole showed high standardized item alpha of .96. For each sub-components, the general competency obtained alpha values .88. Whereas, for Counselor-Based Competencies .75, Client-Based Competencies .87, and finally, Interventions and Techniques Competencies .95. This shows KSdAK questionnaire is reliable in determining competencies among counselors.

### 2.4 Data Analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive analysis (mean and percentage), independent samples t-test and ANOVA were used to describe the findings. In general, all data were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 18.

## 3. Results

A total of 240 registered counselors involved in this study. The highest proportion of respondents is Malay and Muslim descendent and age within 36 years to 55 years. Graduated with a bachelor's degree is 44.96 percent and the highest percentage of the period of service is between 1 to 5 years contribute to 39.2 percent. The detailed demographic distributions of respondents in this study are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic distribution

Demography	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	> 35 years	91	37.9
	36 to 45 years	69	28.8
	46 to 55 years	67	27.9
	< 51 years	13	5.4
Gender	Male	115	47.9
	Female	125	52.1
Origin	Malay	181	75.24
	Chinese	30	12.5
	Indian	14	5.8
	Aborigines of Sabah & Sarawak	12	5.0

Demography	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Religions	Others	3	1.3
	Islam	190	79.2
	Hindu	10	4.2
	Buddha	22	9.2
	Christian	17	7.1
	Others	1	0.4
Qualification	Diploma	17	7.1
	Bachelor	101	42.1
	Masters	107	44.6
	PhD	15	6.3
Duration of Service	1-5 years	70	29.2
	6-10 years	52	21.7
	11-15 years	41	17.1
	16-20 years	19	7.9
	20 years >	58	24.2

Table 2. Mean score and standard deviation of spiritual competence and sub-scale spiritual competency in counseling practice

Spiritual Competency	Mean	SD
Overall	3.64	.61
General Competency	3.46	.74
Counselor-Based Competencies	3.62	.61
Client-Based Competencies	3.91	.62
Interventions and Techniques of Competencies	3.67	.76

The mean value obtained for the overall spiritual competence among registered counselors in Malaysia is 3.64 with a standard deviation of .61. It is moderately prepared. For each part of the client component is the basic competencies acquired the highest mean value of 3.91 with a standard deviation of .62 min followed by technical competence and intervention with the mean value of 3.67 and a standard deviation of .76. Hence, the mean value of 3.62 with a standard deviation of .61 is for basic competency components counselors. The lowest mean value is for general competency component with a mean value with a standard deviation of 3:46 .74 (see Table 2). The overall levels of spiritual competence of registered counselors are at a moderate level.

Subsequently, the independent t test analysis and ANOVA test was conducted to answer the second research question which is to see the different levels of spiritual competence among registered counselor based on demographic factors based on the categories of age, gender, race, religion, level of education and experience working. Independent samples t test showed no significant difference for the mean gender mean scores for men ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = .60$ ) and female,  $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = .61$ ;  $t(240) = 1.52$ ,  $p > .05$ . Test analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to identify the different spiritual competency based on age category, race, and religion, level of education and length of service. The results showed no significant differences for age category,  $F(3, 236) = .46$ ,  $p > .05$ , level of study;  $F(3, 236) = .50$ ,  $p > .05$ , and experience working  $F(4, 235) = 1.02$ ,  $p > .05$ .

Only the factors of race and religion alone that showed there were significant differences at  $P < .05$ . There are significant differences in the mean scores based on the spiritual competence of hereditary factors  $F(3, 233) = 3.21$ ,  $p < .05$ . The magnitude of the mean difference between the value of the offspring is small eta squared = 0.04. Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's test showed that the mean score among Malay respondents ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = .58$ ) were significant difference of Chinese respondents ( $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = .65$ ). While the Indian respondents ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .67$ ) and respondents natives of Sabah and Sarawak origin ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = .69$ ) were not significant differences in the two groups.

There is a significant difference between the level of spiritual competencies among counselors which have been divided into four groups based on religion, namely Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, namely  $F(3, 232) = 4.20$ ,  $p < .05$ . The magnitude of the mean difference between religion were moderate with eta squared = .05. Tukey post-hoc comparison of mean score between Muslim groups ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = .57$ ) was significantly different with the Buddhist group ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = .70$ ). While the Hindu religious group ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = .88$ )

and Christians ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .44$ ) there was no significant difference between the two groups.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings also indicate that the level of competence of registered counselors in Malaysia is moderately high. This phenomenon may be due to lack of spiritual competence among those counselors during their period of study in university. It was supported by the findings of the open ended questions that were included in the questionnaire: do you think the course/program of study in an institution is sufficient to permit you to integrate the understanding of religion in your counseling practice? The highest proportion of 73.8 percent of respondents expressed a course or program of study undertaken by the institutions do not provide an overview of competence in the practice of spiritual counseling. Similar findings were also obtained by a study conducted by Cassidy, (2006). His findings indicate counselor trainees obtain a value mean 3.38 which determine a moderately high spiritual competency. It is also consistent with the study conducted by Young et al. (2002) which shows the mean value of spiritual competency among counselor educators who work in institutions which has been accredited by CACREP is 3.30.

The findings of the study for the second research question showed no significant differences between selected demographic factors namely age category, gender, educational qualification and work experience. Only hereditary and religious factors alone showed significant differences in spiritual competency among counselors in order to integrate understanding of religion in their counseling practice. The findings of this study clearly indicate that training plays an important role in assisting counselors to be proficient in order to incorporate understanding of religion in their counseling practice.

##### 4.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings obtained, the following recommendations are given to improve the level of spiritual competence among registered counselors in Malaysia:

- 1) Exposure should be given to counselors either through courses or programs organized by responsible parties such as higher education institutions that offer counseling, Counseling Association of Malaysia (PERKAMA) and the Board of Counselors.
- 2) Further studies should also be conducted to obtain more information about spiritual competencies and determine the factors that affect the level of spiritual competency among counselors.
- 3) Reference sources should be increased to enable the counselor to obtain information and knowledge related to competence in the practice of spiritual counseling.

##### 4.2 Conclusion

This research hopes to be a catalyst for more research related to competence in the practice of spiritual counseling so as counseling services provided to the community in Malaysia will be more effective when spiritual and religious aspects are integrated in counseling practice. Undeniably these issues faced in a more holistic and a shift towards a more positive development in the lives of clients themselves. It is also expected to help counselors to be more confident in integrating spirituality and religion in their counseling practice as well as to provide exposure to the related advanced professional training and consultation.

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