

The Provision of Tele-Counseling in Malaysia: An In-Depth Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract: Online counseling refers to the provision of therapeutic helping services which manipulated the electronic communication technology between a professional counselor with his or her clients via devices such as telephone, e-mail, and other social media platforms. One of the services that is getting more attention right now in Malaysia is the tele-counseling which refers to the provision of counseling service via telephone. However, since the policy on its' provision is still inexistence, this new trend of providing counseling service is still not being accepted by the conventional practitioners, who are still believed in the face-to-face communication in order to establish an effective counseling relationship. The objective of this concept paper is to explore views of local counseling experts on the feasibility of tele-counseling provision. The thematic analysis from research data revealed three main themes namely, (i) acceptance towards tele-counseling; (ii) advantages of tele-counseling; and (iii) limitations of tele-counseling. The result of this initial study pointed out that tele-counseling can be considered as an alternative provision for the future. However, in Malaysia, more guiding policies and directives need to be developed so that the delivery of this services in the future will not violate the ethics of the profession which in turn will jeopardize the professionalism of the field.

Keywords: Data Analysis, tele-counseling, qualitative research, Malaysia

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Introduction

The advent of the information age or the wave of the digital world began to permeate the general public as a package that could not be separated from our lives (Mohd Nor Mamat 2000). Developments in science and technology especially in the field of information and communication technology will certainly affect our daily environment, innovation and reform style, as well as the field of counseling (Norafida & Othman 2000). Online help services that are beginning to gain recognition are known as online counseling, virtual counseling and e-counseling. Online counseling is a new method that allows

helpful communication to happen quickly and effectively through the medium of telephone, computer and internet. Online counseling or online counseling according to the American Counseling Association (1999) refers to:

"Use of electronic communications and computer technology in the counseling process in general over the internet."

The official definition given by the National Board for Certified Counselors (1997) is a professional counseling process that exists when clients and counselors are in different places and use technological facilities to communicate. Richards and Vigan'o (2012) explain that online counseling is the delivery of therapeutic interventions in cyberspace where communication between trained professional counselors and clients uses electronic communication technology such as telephone, computer, email, internet as intermediaries in separate places.

Based on these definitions, it can be concluded that counseling can not only be done face to face. It can even be conducted online and does not require clients and counselors to be present face to face. Online counseling is a counseling process that is no longer limited to a two-way meeting in a room where, the client no longer has to face the counselor, in the same room and at the same time to get counseling services. However, this definition may change or there may be additions depending on current developments. This service is not intended to replace face-to-face psychotherapy, but is useful as an alternative source for help in dealing with life's problems.

In Malaysia, online counseling services are seen to be growing and have begun to receive attention. In fact, it is considered potential as one of the new alternatives to counseling practitioners in providing helpful relationship services to the community. However, there are still conventional-minded counseling practitioners who criticize online counseling that online counseling is not a real counseling service. This is because, the use of technology in counseling services causes counseling sessions not to be done face to face like conventional counseling methods (Civin 2000; Nor Ba'ayah & Yahaya 2001; Rosenfield 2002). In fact, online counseling is considered a practice that deviates from the normal practice of counseling which ultimately tarnishes the authenticity of conventional counseling that is the practice of counselors. Counselors are also concerned that the spread of online counseling use will change the authenticity of the counseling practice approach itself. These concerns cause some counselors to be closed-minded and reluctant to accept change and reform. It may also mean trying to resist the currents of change and technological development in counseling services (Nor Ba'ayah & Yahaya 2001). This study is to explore the perceptions of experts in the field of local counseling on the feasibility of tele-counseling services in Malaysia.

Method

This study is a qualitative research design using a case study approach that involves in-depth interviews using flexible semi-structured interview instruments. The selection of case study approach for this study is to obtain clear, detailed and in-depth information as well as produce a more accurate description of the study (Creswell & Yin 2014). The sample used for this study is considered as an expert in the field of counseling in Malaysia. Among the sample criteria are: (i) Registered Counselors, (ii) Top Members of the Malaysian Board of Counselors (LKM) and the Malaysian Counseling Association (PERKAMA) and (iii) involved in the formulation of counselors' policies and acts in Malaysia. In-depth interviews with five respondents for this study were selected based on the sample criteria.

The analysis of this study is done through the process of data preparation up to interpretation. Data were categorized into related themes used to interpret data to obtain information based on the objectives of this study. The process of analyzing this data was carried out using Nvivo 12 software, which corresponds to the views of Glasne and Peshkin (1992), computer software can help researchers use qualitative methods to organize, analyze and store data effectively. Similarly, this program can help researchers to work systematically.

This study emphasizes the systematic steps in analyzing data code independently and depending on the mode (Early 2016; Glaser & Strauss 1967). Therefore, certain themes and codes were given to all relevant information and analyzed based on the data collected to answer the objectives of the study. Finally, the analysis of the study conducted based on the theme of the interview from the objective of the study, which is to explore the perceptions of experts in the field of counseling on tele-counseling services in Malaysia. All the themes selected in this study are the best and can be interpreted using a narrative approach from all the issues stated (Suriati & Colonius 2008).

Result and Discussion

Based on the results of data analysis of the study conducted there are three themes produced from the objectives of this study namely; (i) Acceptance of tele-counseling services, (ii) Advantages of tele-counseling services and (iii) Limitations of tele-counseling services.

Acceptance of Tele-Counseling Services

Findings of the study on the perception of experts on the feasibility of tele-counseling services in Malaysia from the aspect of acceptance that is the average respondent stated that tele-counseling is not real counseling subject to the original purpose of counseling that counseling is a face-to-face helping process get literate. R4 states that actual counseling is a counseling session that needs to be conducted face-to-face between the counselor and the client in one place,

"To me, real counseling is face-to-face. So, when going on phone, is not a real counseling. Why? Because when you run a session over the phone this will not happen term face to face right? Back to the original meaning of counseling. To me it does not mean counseling. Ok, like I said to u, this counseling when going through the process face to face. Otherwise it is not counseling. Of course, on me, I refused. I'm not agree with tele-counseling. That true there is no denying that technology is a necessity, but in counseling if it still adheres to the original purpose of counseling that is face to face it is relevant. Ok, can be applied if it is like a video call, ok then the counselor and the client can see each other. Ok it can be practiced but for me just hearing that for me is not counseling. And I still prefer if the video can see the whole body of counselor and client. So, it can be practiced. Ok, for me through this phone I can see if it is just a client who wants to make an appointment or at the initial stage." (R4)

This acceptance is also in line with the acceptance of R2 towards tele-counseling by stating that tele-counseling is a helpful process at an early stage and it is more to the intervention and consultation needed by the client such as to make an appointment and seek advice.

"I am based on what is in the deed, what and so on. This is traditionally in definition even if we look at counseling is face to face right but the technology and so on, they use it as an intervention. This is distance, just because there is nothing ok, he can accept for the first stage, its still a helpful process but not real counseling because even in the deed there is no concept of charge, you can not want to charge your client for tele-counseling because he has no charge and the fee approved by the law even if there is no charge for using tele-counseling. Haa... the charge is must be counseling, so the definition of counseling is a process that we say is face to face yang ni la kan. That is basically the tai I do not oppose and that we can not help individuals thru other mediums, it can help but this is not what we call the real counseling per say lah Yes, we really know he has this but even if the counselor does, but for me the counselor can do that but we are not claiming to do counseling, ermm because in this counseling service he is like one of us doing counseling that is really counseling. One you can do the consultation, psychology consultation, another we may say the psychological intervention. But this is the technique we use is like intervention, we share all kinds of advice, all kinds of opinions." (R2)

Similarly, the acceptance of R3 says that the tele-counseling service is an intermediary between the counselor and the client to make an appointment to conduct the face-to-face session and for the counselor to obtain the client's initial information before the face-to-face session is conducted.

"As close to the psychology department itself, there is e-counseling offered via email, but more to the summary of the issues he wants to raise. People say more to what this intro is. and usually the client will tell you a little bit about the issues he is facing, and we will contact him asking to come and conduct the session face to face according to the suitability of the time he and we have. That is if there is even more by phone to the first guidance or the first session to attract that client to come to the counselor to conduct a counseling session near here. To me this counseling we adhere to the original meaning of what counseling is. The process of helping face to face between the counselor and the client to achieve common sense. I stick to the term "face to face". That is counseling to me. But I don't know how other people... even in their own department as I said earlier, we only use the phone more for appointments and intro or just get preliminary information related to client problems, but the real session we will run face to face." (R3)

Acceptance of R4, on the other hand, says that the effectiveness of the use of technology as an intermediary between counselors and clients in conducting counseling sessions is less than conventional sessions face-to-face. The presence of non-verbal communication is very important in counseling and face-to-face counseling is better because the counselor can see the client face to face and can monitor the client's

non-verbal communication and it is an important aspect of the counseling process. Similarly, the client can feel the presence of a counselor in helping if the counseling session is conducted face to face,

"Oversea I was not very exposed to tele-counseling, because I said there, I think they still believe in face to face counseling. If tele-counseling through the internet, skype to what I think I'm not gonna do it. Like I said earlier, I am more face to face counseling because I feel that when I do counseling first thing I want to see client, I want client to see me as well and observation is very important. Is one of the very important skills, I want to see him have a non-verbal reaction, I want to hear his tone of voice, I want to know what my effect is on him, yes, my pressure there. If through skype to through what is this, I feel like is not 100%. It can be done but personally I will not do it." (R4)

Overall, the respondents' acceptance of the tele-counseling service is that the average respondent stated that the tele-counseling service is not real counseling and it is only as an intermediary between the counselor and the client for the first stage helping process and the average respondent still adheres to the original concept of counseling. where counselors and clients face to face in helpful relationships. This statement is in line with Boy and Pine (1968) explaining that counseling is a face-to-face relationship in which a client seeks help from a counselor. These relationships have characteristics such as effective communication, mutual respect, genuine acceptance of the client by the counselor and concentration given to the needs, problems and feelings of the client.

Advantages of Tele-Counseling Services

Based on the needs, the average respondent agreed that technology is an importance nowadays, as well as the use of telephones today is a necessity. R1 states that the use of technology can be applied if it still adheres to the original purpose of counseling that is face to face such as the use of video calls that are still counselors and clients can see each other. But the use of the phone can still be used if the client wants to make an appointment and the process helps the initial stage to help the client who needs immediate help in relieving the problems faced. However, for the next session the counselor needs to play a role in attracting the client to conduct the face-to-face session,

"That true there is no denying that technology is a necessity, but in counseling if it still adheres to the original purpose of counseling that is face to face it is relevant. Ok, can be applied if it is like a video call, ok then the counselor and the client can see each other. Ok it can be practiced but for me just hearing that on me its not counseling. And again, prefer if the video can see the whole of body counselor and client. So, it can be practiced. Ok, for me through this phone I can see if it is just a client who wants to make an appointment or at the initial stage Ok, there is no denying that a phone is a necessity. So, as I told you, if the counseling session for a start may be possible because when an individual has this problem, he will think he wants to solve it on the spot and he can not think of another, so, he can use the phone to relieve his mind clients who are in a hurry and need help at that time as a start session and to make an appointment. So, as a professional counselor you have to be good at attracting clients to come face to face for the next session. For the first session it is possible for the counselor to listen to relieve his problems but it is also necessary face to face so that u can see non-verbal communication as learned in counseling skills." (R1)

Similarly, R2 stated that the telephone is a necessity for the intervention crisis, that is, as a first aid distance assistance in building rapport with clients who need immediate help in relieving issues that bother clients at the time, such as depressed clients. However, for further help still requires the client to come face to face.

"So, there are individuals who need help or depress and so he calls, he skype and so on, so, ok but the next level is he came to meet, is to build the first rapport and so on before he met. This is more to crisis intervention ok. If a depressed individual wants to run away from home and so on issues he calls, he releases first and he goes for real counseling. Yes, for example for distance initial stage, instead of not helping, we can help, that's it. Yes, on the spot you can call, skype and as of course impact him I see there from no help." (R2)

The opinion is supported by R3 stating that it is an advantage to individuals who can not face due to obstacles such as long distances, individuals who are ashamed to talk about sensitive issues,

"Maybe an advantage for clients who can not want to face to face, can not afford to come to see a counselor because of the distance constraints of long distances, living in remote areas. There are also those who are kind of ashamed to talk about issues that are too personal, maybe sensitive cases involving dignity such as rape cases, incest cases, cases that can be embarrassing, that may give them an advantage. But for me it can be practiced if the counselor is capable and experienced in conducting tele-counseling. Why, if the

client has a relatively complex issue that requires high skills to solve, it takes a long time I advise it is not suitable to be resolved by phone. (R3)

The findings are in line with Poh Li, Rafidah and Haslee (2013), online counseling has the potential to help clients who have problems to get counseling services for clients who are in remote areas. Furthermore, telephone counseling can help in some cases and it gives an advantage to individuals who are shy to share sensitive issues and want to protect their identity from being identified as stated by R4,

"It can be over the phone. Like before I got a call, it can be said that help, this girl always listens to me on the radio, she knows I was the director of JKM in Johor at that time and always came out on the radio that time. This is a case involving incest, I know his name but I have never met him but I do not know how he can get my home phone number. He told me that he was raped by his own brother, he was stressed thinking he was not a virgin anymore and needed someone to help but did not want people to know who he was. I just remembered that maybe some case can be done thru on phone." (R4)

Ramsden (2011), the use of online counseling services helps greatly to benefit clients who want a safe environment to express emotionally related issues to counselors. In other words, clients feel more secure and comfortable (Ramsden 2011; Leibert et al. 2006; Young 2005) to share with counselors about personal issues involving emotions without having to face each other. This is in line with Hanley (2009), online counseling is where counselors and clients find a more comfortable environment in the process of counseling sessions without face-to-face between counselors and clients.

Based on the method of conducting online sessions that do not require visual self-disclosure (Poh Li, Rafidah & Haslee Sharil Abdullah 2013; Pelling 2009), sufficient online-only sessions can provide a very comfortable sharing space for clients to share. Not to mention for very sensitive issues such as adultery, incest, pedophilia, victims of abuse, lesbians, homosexuals, drug addicts, drug trafficking or even stuck with issues involving crime and the like.

Tele-Counseling Service Limitations

The use of telephone technology nowadays is becoming more widespread and is a necessity in all areas including in counseling services. There is no denying that the presence of various telephone technology applications can help and facilitate a counselor to conduct counseling sessions more effectively. However, there are limitations and limitations in the implementation of this 'online' counseling covering aspects of confidentiality, non-verbal communication, professionalism practices, and cross-cultural. Based on the statements from the respondents, there are concerns about the use of telephones in counseling services, which is the aspect of professionalism where the issue of confidentiality is a major concern among respondents.

R1 expressed concern over unethical counselors if recording session conversations without asking permission and consent from the client and disseminating the month. In addition, the use of places during the ongoing counseling process is also highly emphasized so that the issue of confidentiality is maintained. Despite using tele-counseling services, respondents suggested that a therapeutic place is needed during the counseling session process that requires a special room such as face-to-face counseling so that the session runs without interruption and can maintain confidentiality,

"For example, it is the same in terms of confidentiality even if face to face, even if the counselor is not ethical, it still happens. If in terms of tele-counseling the counselor needs to explain in detail, permission from the client to record the conversation needs to ask for permission, if the client does not want but the record counselor is ethically wrong as a professional counselor. Who knows about cases like this, then spread it to others. So, the professionalism of the counselor is very necessary. Second, is in terms of place. Like today, we talk on the phone, everyone can hear it. Even video calls can be viewed by others, that is one of the issues from the aspect of client confidentiality and security. Even if they are on the phone, they need therapeutic places such as face-to-face counseling sessions, we have one place or one room to run sessions that are only counselors and without any interference from others." (R1)

Intrusion from irresponsible parties is also a concern of respondents towards tele-counseling services to maintain the issue of confidentiality and safety of clients,

"The issue of confidentiality may also be due to the possibility of confidentiality can not be maintained if there are irresponsible parties intruding on the conversation between the counselor and the client, in addition to the type who make sessions everywhere, yes when the phone is possible the client calls the counselor. any place but if the type of ethical counselor is ok, he will refuse to ask for a call later to run the session at the appropriate place, as well as the client side, where does he call the counselor." (R3)

The element of confidentiality is very important in a counseling session to ensure that client information is well preserved and secured. Confidentiality is the foundation of building trust in the relationship between counselor and client (Corey 2013). With the sophistication of today's technology, others can intrude and can access all the activities that have been done (Tyler & Sabela 2004). The probability that such information is misused by a third party will threaten the well-being or safety of the client.

In addition, the willingness of counselors to play an important role in providing helpful services to clients. Counselors need to have a professional attitude that should be ready from all aspects in providing services to help clients, especially providing services over the phone so as not to affect the welfare of clients. As stated by R1 as stated below,

"Similarly, from the aspect of the counselor's readiness itself. For u, right, while busy with work, suddenly u can call to hear the problems of people who want help u, are u ready or not to listen and help? For me, it's not because I'm busy with my work, when clients need help, I can't focus 100% right? Maybe there is also a counselor who while doing his work while answering client calls. To me it is very unethical but that will probably happen especially clients who are kind of walk in. That's why as I said before, counseling needs to be face-to-face so as not to affect the welfare of the client." (R1)

The statement is supported by R1 stating that the aspect of professionalism should be present in the counselor in helping the client. The readiness of the counselor in conducting tele-counseling services is very important to determine the effectiveness of the session,

"So, that's tele-counseling, not that I want to say I like it but I have to serve because when you are needed, you need to listen. But I do not have much experience with tele-counseling. But even then, I was tired he wanted to serve, people knew my home phone number, I was busy, tired of having to take care of one Johor at that time, so people called me I had to serve. That too I think the weakness of tele-counseling its because we have to serve in inappropriate times and circumstances right. Yes, we are tired, that is not the right time. I wish many counselors now have the intention to help because counseling is a helping profession." (R1)

Furthermore, non-verbal communication is also one of the issues that potentially exists from tele-counseling services. It is a shortcoming that can affect the welfare of clients who need the help of counselors because through tele-counseling services R1 states there is a possibility of misunderstanding in making conclusions due to the absence of oral month communication and only listening by phone,

"There are still many shortcomings and limitations, let alone want to run a session by just listening without face to face. It's a bit complicated for me. As I mentioned various possibilities that will happen and one of them is a misunderstanding in making a conclusion by just listening without face to face to see non-verbal communication. If I myself do not know how to draw a conclusion by just listening." (R1)

Misinterpretation is also a limitation that is a concern of respondents in operating tele-counseling services as a result of the use of language and age level between counselors and clients,

"If the client has a relatively complex issue that requires high skills to be resolved, it takes a long time I advise it is not suitable to be resolved by telephone. Because it requires a rather critical process because we do not want to give an effect to the client, the client has asked us to help him, with the trust of the client he thinks kit ani is able to help him but if we are not fully skilled it will not have an effect on the session That, maybe we can misinterpret because we just listen and can not monitor the client's non-verbal communication. It is possible to misinterpret, further aggravate the situation, may lose the client's trust in us and perhaps the client will be reluctant to get counseling services. " (R3)

The issue of the effectiveness of online counseling will occur when the counselor conducts an online counseling session with the client. The absence of emotional indicators such as the absence of physical presence of counselors and clients will result in the absence of emotional indicators such as tone of voice, facial expressions and body language. This results in weakness in expressing the right emotions. Even misinterpretations may occur. This is because a counselor is unable to identify and assess the client's body language in counseling online (Kim & de Dear, 2013). Murphy et al. (1998) stated that the absence of these elements of non-verbal communication will make counselors lack resources in interpreting clients. In fact, the possibility for a counselor to misinterpret or misunderstand the meaning of an issue that the client is trying to share can result in the client losing trust in the counselor to help him.

Statements related to ethical issues expressed by the average respondent in line with the procedures issued by the American Psychological Association (1997) and the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) (1997) which recommend that all counselors interested in performing online services should emphasize 13 issues as a guide to take into account all legal and ethical codes, inform clients of encryption measures, inform clients of data retention period, take steps to win web intruders (impostors), get guardian permission for underage clients, take appropriate steps in restrict the dissemination of client information,

state the boundaries of counselors online to clients, provide a network to licensed web bodies that practice counseling, state counselors' credentials to clients, provide alternative web / line addresses for clients to contact if counselors are off-line, state types- kind of problem which is not appropriate to deal with online, inform clients of technical disruption limitations and provide protocols that can be used to resolve misunderstandings.

Conclusion

Overall, based on this study, it is found that the perception of counseling experts on tele-counseling services in Malaysia shows that there are advantages and limitations in the implementation of these services. It can be implemented and can be used as one of the alternatives in counseling services. However, in addition to the advantages possessed, counselors who intend to offer this service should also examine the limitations that could potentially arise in its implementation. Next, it is the counselor's responsibility to ensure that the client can be optimally assisted without any violation of the professionalism ethics outlined.

The era of technology has opened the boundaries of online communication widely, and this also provides space for the improvement of the provision of counseling services to the community. Taking into account the limitations and aspects that need to be emphasized, practitioners of the counseling profession today need to take the opportunity to adapt this potential of online service delivery as an alternative to conventional methods of face-to-face service implementation.

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