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## Person-centered counseling with Malay clients: spirituality as an indicator of personal growth

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### Abstract

A qualitative study was carried out to explore the inner experiences and personal growth of one male and three female Malay university student clients undergoing twelve sessions of person-centered counseling. Data analysis was based on the verbatim accounts of the counseling sessions, Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) interviews, clients' journal entries and their non-verbal expressions throughout the sessions. The findings manifest that in the non-directive, egalitarian and person-centered counseling relationship, constructive changes were experienced by the Malay clients in the study, including getting in touch with their religious realization.

*Keywords:* Person-centered approach; egalitarian counselor-client relationship; counselor's personal qualities; spirituality.

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### 1. Introduction

The person-centered approach to counseling was developed by Carl Rogers (1902-1987) in the United States and was based on the principles of humanistic psychology. Decades after Rogers's work, the person-centered approach remains one of the major counseling orientations throughout the world. Humanistic psychology emphasizes the present experience and the essential worth of the whole person, promotes creativity, free choice, and spontaneity, and fosters the belief that people can solve their own problems. As the proponent of the humanistic tradition, the person-centered approach stresses the unique capacities of each individual to self-realization and personal growth. As a result, the approach focuses more on human creativity, authenticity, and internal locus of evaluation with a belief in the uniquely human aspects of experience, including personal choices, interpersonal relationships, intentions, purposes, and transcendental or spiritual experiences, instead of environmental control on individual personality and behavior, as well as the role of the expert therapist in answering the individual's problems (Rogers, 1986).

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The person-centered approach to counseling has been well-recognized and is firmly established in the counseling arena. Yet the issue of its applicability to non-Western clients or in contexts different from the United States or Europe is under debate (Corey, 1996; Sue & Sue, 1999). It is argued that it is difficult to apply person-centered therapy, i.e. a traditional Western approach, to clients from the eastern, third world nations owing to certain inherent values or cultural differences. The person-centered approach originates from the USA, where assertiveness, open expression of emotion, individual decision-making and personal freedom are greatly valued in society (Sue & Sue, 1999). In many Eastern countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Nigeria, Puerto Rico and the Arab states, however, traditional and authoritarian values such as privacy with regard to family matters, respect for authorities and the elderly, little expression of emotion and group decision-making (Nassar-McMillan & Hakim-Larson, 2003; Henkin, 1985; Idowu, 1985; Pederson, 1987; Yeo, 1993) are still dominant. In relation to this, several writings have been produced regarding the applicability of the person-centered approach in the non-Western context (e.g. Poyrazli, 2003; Spangenberg, 2003). It appears that there is no uniformity in findings. The approach is perceived as appropriate with particular groups of clients (Kenyan and post-apartheid South Africa), but inappropriate with others (Turkish, Chinese and Asian Americans). Factors which suggest the unsuitability of the person-centered approach for these groups of clients include a lack of direction and the practical problem-solving techniques provided by the approach, as well as over-emphasis on the expression of feelings (Yeo, 1993; Poyrazli, 2003; Leong, 1987; Wu & Cheng, 1993).

In the context of Malaysia, which is a culturally and religiously diverse country of about twenty-three million people consisting of 59 percent Malays and other ethnic groups, 32 percent Chinese, and 9 percent Indians and others, efforts are still being made by many counselor educators to find a counseling approach that matches the characteristics of the Malaysian community. Each ethnic group in Malaysia strongly adheres to its religious and cultural belief. Most Malays are Muslims, most Chinese are Buddhists, and most Indians are Hindus. A minority of the Indians, Chinese and Eurasians are Christians. The Malay language is the official language, yet the English language is also widely used. Many Malaysians have travelled widely and have been educated overseas, but most still hold on to cultural traditions and beliefs (Azhar & Varma, 2000). The Malays are generally soft-spoken and shy, though that has changed recently. They are still referred to as group-oriented (collectivistic), interdependent, simple, traditional, third world and respectful of older people (Pope, 1999). There is strong extended family decision-making in the Malay community (Pope, 1999). For most Malays, Islam is a very important guide to all of their decisions throughout their lives (Ismail & Muhammad, 2000).

## **2.0 The needs for empirical research**

As in many other countries, many counselor educators in Malaysia are questioning whether there is a need to modify the counseling process that they have learnt abroad in order to be consistent with Malaysia's cultural and religious issues (Salim & Jaladin, 2005). Owing to the country's religious and racial diversities, it is not easy to develop a "Malaysian" cultural approach. It is believed that counselors trained in a foreign country must learn to apply their skills and techniques to their own social and cultural milieu (Othman & Bakar, 1993). Hence, counselor educators in Malaysia are constantly trying to incorporate other forms of counseling or therapeutic treatments into traditional and religious values (Ng, 2003). On the other hand, the influence of the person-centered approach in the field of guidance and counseling in Malaysia cannot be overlooked. The approach has become a guideline for counseling relationships in counselor education programs in Malaysia. Its principles form the major part of the basic counseling skills module in the higher learning institutions.

Consequently, empirical studies on the existing counseling theories in the context of Malaysian clients have been recommended (Ahmad, 1986; Othman, 2007; Salim & Jaladin, 2005). The main concerns about using the person-centered approach in the Malaysian context are the lack of direction in its egalitarian counselor-client relationship style, and its dependence on the counselor's personal qualities of genuineness, unconditional positive regard and empathy in facilitating the client's process of personal growth. The approach is essentially characterized by an equal relationship between counselor and client, which rejects the imposition of power upon the client

(Rogers, 1961). According to the approach, the counselor is neither an expert nor someone with special knowledge in the counseling relationship. It is through the genuineness, unconditional positive regard and empathic qualities of the counselor that clients experience the process of personal growth.

In Malaysia, however, the counselor is perceived as an expert, an authority figure expected to provide structure and direction for clients in coping with their problems (Pope, Musa, Singaravelu, Bringaze & Russell, 2002). Malay clients are traditionally accustomed to indirect communication. Personal feelings or private matters are rarely discussed with outsiders (Scorzelli, 1987). In the non-directive, egalitarian person-centered counselor-client relationship that also requires the counselor to be genuine and unconditionally accepting, little is known about what Malays would feel, perceive or expect as clients. It is also not known whether, given the counselor's personal qualities of genuineness, unconditional positive regard and empathy, they would feel more comfortable about disclosing personal or private matters or not. In addition to that, there is also a need to know whether the person-centered approach could help Malay clients to achieve personal growth.

This study was an attempt to examine the inner experiences and personal growth of Malay clients in relation to the person-centered non-directive, egalitarian relationship approach and counselors' personal qualities of genuineness, unconditional positive regard and empathy. It had four objectives but the paper focuses on the third objective only: that is, clients' self-exploration in the person-centered non-directive, egalitarian relationship in describing the indicators of their experience of personal growth as recipients of person-centered counseling.

### **3.0 Methodology**

In the attempt to explore Malay clients' indicators of personal growth with person-centered counseling, a qualitative case study method was employed. The qualitative approach is more appropriate for the study because it is an open-ended type of study that attempts to understand the applicability of the person-centered counseling approach, which is of Western origin, by making sense of Malay clients' phenomenological world and subjective frame of reference (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, qualitative counseling and therapy research tend to lead in the direction of questioning basic assumptions and accepted practices. The application of qualitative methods to topics within counseling and psychotherapy inevitably leads in the direction of the deconstruction and reconstruction of therapy theory and practice (McLeod, 2001).

Employing the practitioner cum researcher approach, the study attempts to achieve an insight into the person-centered approach to counseling from the perspective of several Malay clients (McLeod, 2001). Before carrying out the study, the researcher took part in sixty hours of practicum training and thirty hours of individual supervision by a person-centered counselor practitioner. During the supervision, each counseling session was discussed in detail in the light of the audio-visually recorded counseling sessions. The training and supervision helped her in developing and mastering the understanding and practice of person-centered counseling. At the end of the training process, the researcher's qualifications and skills as a person-centered counselor were evaluated by three observer judges. The researcher's personal qualities of genuineness, unconditional positive regard and empathy as well as her non-directive style were assessed. The judges wrote a written report of their evaluation. After receiving positive feedback and affirmation regarding her competence and qualities as a person-centered counselor the researcher began to conduct the study.

As the study aimed to explore the inner experiences of clients attending person-centered counseling sessions and not to generalize to the general population, only four participants (three females and one male) participated in the study. Data were collected from twelve sessions over four months by the following techniques: counseling sessions, Interpersonal Process Recall interviews, clients' journal entries and audio-visually recorded observation. The aim was to insure the comprehensiveness of the data collection. that is, that it had adequate breadth and depth to generate meaningful descriptions. In other words, although the study involved few participants, the observation made of each participant was extensive (Ventres, Nichter, Reed & Frankel, 1993).

#### 4.0 Findings

From the thematic analysis of the counseling sessions verbatim, it was discovered that as the clients underwent person-centered counseling, constructive personal growth or changes were experienced by the clients. Personal growth is a process whereby clients get in touch with their inner or real self. The indicators of personal growth as experienced by most of the clients in the study are flow of emotion; awareness of self, others and experience; personal changes; self-directed behavior; and, spirituality.

##### 4.1 Spirituality

As one of the indicators of personal growth that emerged in the current study, the term “spirituality” is defined as the client's learning of goodness or spiritual insight from their personal concerns and experiences. Though it was not formally addressed, in the last description of his therapeutic encounter, Rogers (1986) acknowledged the importance of the spiritual dimension of the individual. As previously mentioned, the person-centered counselor's qualities of genuineness, unconditional acceptance and empathy gave the clients room to reflect upon themselves and their experiences. The researcher found that as the clients continued with the person-centered counseling, they tended to come up with insights which were in accordance with their spiritual, cultural and moral values. For example, as Ifa had seen so much of her mother's suffering, and was very close to her, she could not help feeling helpless and sad. Nevertheless, her religious faith helped her to feel stronger in the face of difficulties. She stated:

....emm I remember the verse of the Qur'an that God will not test His servant with hardship unless he or she (the servant) can endure or can stand with it. So when I remember this verse, it means maybe my mother and me can bear this test especially my mother, her test is much heavier. What she went through for so long until now. When I think that way, I can be calm .... (Session 11)

Ifa refers to the verse of the Qur'an which says that God will not test a person beyond their strength. She also acknowledges that the awareness helped her to feel better. Another client (Sham), was reflecting upon her past difficulties with family and college, and looking at her current personal well-being, she became grateful to God. This is evidenced in the following excerpts:

..... before this I got many problems and all that. Now actually there is a blessing in disguise. There is a blessing in disguise, so I am grateful. (Session 7)

I feel so fortunate because I still have a father. (Session 6)

The above appreciative feelings were expressed when she was talking about her achievements. She was happy to be selected as one of the squash players for the university. She was very happy with her current life. When she realized how lucky she was to be brought up by her aunt, she became more grateful. She also felt fortunate because she still had a father and she promised herself she would provide love and care for them, despite what happened during her childhood. Despite all that she went through, she believed that it was a blessing in disguise.

##### 4.1.1 Religious behavior

The third client in the study (Yati) felt perplexed and helpless when she came to counseling for the first time. She was so distressed about her experiences that she skipped her daily prayers for more than a month. Though she was brought up in a religious family, she could not see the benefit of prayer. To her, it was just the same whether she prayed or not because she still felt empty. She was not satisfied with the explanation given by her religious teacher when she was in school. She wanted an answer that could help her to understand the Islamic teachings better. Nevertheless, in the middle of the counseling process, she began to perform daily prayers again. She also expressed her intention to learn more about Islamic teachings, as follows:

emmm that day after the counseling session (emmm) I went home (emmm) went home, then I thought and thought about all those things (emmm) I still did not pray (emmm) I did not have a chance (there was no chance) haa no chance yet, it was like.. never mind.. emmm I came back here emmm suddenly it was like

emmm I don't know, it came naturally.. like (emmm) it used to become our routine isn't it (emmm) so when I did not do it I felt awkward (emmm) but after some time we do it we feel good (ehmemm) . Therefore when I reflect upon myself, it is like a loss (emmm) then that morning when I woke up at 5.30, I performed my prayers again (emhemm)..... (Yati session 7, turn no. 72)

#### 4.1.2 Virtue

The only male participant in the study (Sabri) learned the virtue of hard work. He learned that success depends a lot on an individual's effort. The following are excerpts from Sabri's transcription.

.....I did not put much effort all these while ... (Session 10)  
 .... If we want this amount, we work this amount. ahaha.. these much, we must work harder .. (emmm) aaa it is like that. I believe. (Session 10)  
 Don't be lazy .. that's it... (session 12)

As a "super senior" student, Sabri was struggling with boredom and lack of motivation. His past history of involvement in substance abuse had an impact on his self-esteem. Although he had kicked the habit, he was not very confident that he would succeed and lead a meaningful life like other individuals. Through the safe, empathic and egalitarian counseling relationship, he developed a sense of trust in his own capacity. He made more efforts than ever to improve himself. When he did well, he took pride in his achievement, and evaluated the experience. He learned about the virtues of commitment, hard work and success. Most importantly, he learned that he could be successful in life if he really put in the effort.

## 5.0 Discussion

The person-centered counselor's personal qualities of genuineness, unconditional positive regard and empathy gave clients ample room to reflect upon themselves and their experiences. Relating to clients in person-centered counseling, the counselor did not attempt to change the clients, teach any values or impose on them what she believed was right or wrong. Although the counselor is a Muslim like the clients, she was not in a position to preach or teach Islamic principles. She tried to understand the clients' inner world by looking at them as individuals who had feelings, thoughts and personal background that made them what they are. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that towards the end of the counseling relationship, clients had experienced some spiritual or moral insights which were in accordance with their religious and moral values.

The aforementioned examples manifest that the clients in the current study reflected their personal experiences or concerns in terms of their relationship with God. For example, "God will not test us with something that we cannot endure" (Ifa, session 11). Her reflection on this Qur'anic verse gave her strength to cope with her problem. Sham reflected her childhood experiences and said that she felt grateful to God for what she went through, and that it was "a blessing in disguise" (Sham, session 7). Yati observed that she continued to observe her duties as a Muslim and learn more about Islamic teachings (Yati, session 7). Sabri, on the other hand, learned about the virtue of hard work and a good life.

Even though spirituality is not formally addressed or recognized in the person-centered theory (Barrineau, 1990), it is not alien to it. One recalls the strict religious family in which Rogers was raised and his close affiliation to Christianity when he was young, although he abandoned his training for the ministry and later completely rejected any overt belief in Christianity (Thorne, 1992). Thorne stated that Rogers's experience as a therapist and psychologist led him increasingly to the conviction that human beings are essentially constructive organisms drawn to the fulfillment of their potential and to the pursuit of truth and social responsiveness. Such a conviction stood in contradiction to the negative, guilt-inducing view of human nature preserved as the doctrine of Original Sin which characterized the theology of the Rogers' family (Thorne, 1992). In the final part of his life, however, in a therapeutic relationship with a client he began to reconsider the possibility of some kind of life after death and to deepen his interest in certain aspects of eastern religious experience (Thorne, 1992). He acknowledged that one's experiences involve the transcendent, indescribable and spiritual. He also admitted that he had underestimated the importance of the spiritual dimension of the individual (Rogers, 1986).

Thus, the spiritual and moral aspects of the self revealed by clients in the current study indicated that people essentially have the potential to be positive, forward moving, constructive, realistic and trustworthy, as suggested by Kirschenbaum and Henderson (1989). The good nature of human beings is enhanced by the spiritual and moral values that are learned in childhood and ingrained as part of their personality (Bastaman, 1995). Furthermore, the spiritual aspect of the person leads him/her to yearn for spiritual fulfillment and strength in coping with the journey of life.

## 6.0 Conclusion

Despite criticism that person-centered therapy does not deal with or confront the evil or destructive tendencies in clients (May, 1982) and its philosophy is against the Christian doctrine of original sin, Rogers was consistent in his view that every individual has the capacity for evil behavior. The client's open expression of feelings and the empathic, accepting attitude of the counselor, however, are followed by insight, cognitive clarification and the client's capacity to act upon his/her insight (Thorne, 1992). The findings of this study seem to be in line with Rogers's viewpoint. As the Malay clients in the study were treated empathically by the counselor, who focused on both negative and positive feelings and experiences, they tended to achieve spiritual insights when they turned to their religious values and constructive self-tendencies. Therefore, if the counseling relationship is based on the counselor's personal qualities, there is a strong possibility that the client will show improvement and become a more sensible and responsible individual. This study provides some insight into the benefit of attending person-centered counseling, at least in the Malay context.

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