

## Perceptions on Trainee Counselors of Emotional Intelligence

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i6/14206>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i6/14206

*Published Date:* 16 June 2022

### Abstract

This study aims to explore the understanding, awareness of the importance of emotional intelligence and management strategies among trainee counselors. This study is qualitative which the case study involving four students of Master of Guidance and Counseling in Higher Education Institute in Malaysia. All four participants were in the practicum phase in their respective organizations. The results of the semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analyzed which were initiated using was an open-ended coding, category coding, themes and sub-themes. There are several themes that trainee counselors understand the meaning of emotional intelligence is a way of self-managing emotions well. Next, study participants have stated some of the importance of emotional intelligence to self and management strategies of improving emotional intelligence to help improve quality as a better quality counselor. The findings of the study show that emotional intelligence is important to trainee counselors in helping to improve the quality of being a professional counselor and providing services in helping clients and improving the counseling profession itself.

**Keywords:** Emotional Intelligence, Trainee Counselor, Understanding, Importance, Management Strategy

### Introduction

By 2020, the government is targeting 11,000 professional counselors to address the increase in cases of social symptoms among Malaysians (Husni, 2018). This poses a great challenge to public and private institutions of higher learning to produce quality counseling graduates. In fact, efforts to produce more professional counselors need to take into account the quality of psychological well-being of prospective counselors in line with the goals of the post-vision 2020 plan, National Transformation 2050 (TN50). The main goal is to produce a balanced human capital from the emotional, physical, spiritual, social and psychological aspects in each field of the profession.

The counseling profession is a professional helper relationship service and involves the rules and ethics of counseling that must be adhered (Kaplan et al., 2017). According to the code of ethics of the Malaysian Board of Counselors (2011), emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual well-being are important to enhance the self development of counselors in order to provide good counseling services to clients. Therefore, in order to produce a professional and quality counselor, one of the main elements needed is the emotional intelligence of the counselor. A study by Ghazali et al (2017) stated that emotional intelligence among trainee counselors is important so that the roles and responsibilities of helping clients' well-being can be addressed well. This is because, if a counselor is able to control the emotional capacity, then it will influence the client to control and manage the emotions faced. In fact, Md (2011) in her study also supports this by stating that the emotional mastery of counselors influences the way of thinking and the way of determining actions in helping clients. Therefore, emotional intelligence among trainee counselors is important to be assessed during the training period before entering the counseling profession seriously.

According to Ghazali et al (2017), emotional intelligence is an important factor in assisting counselors in making perceptions of their own emotions and those of clients. There are many studies that look at the level and influence of emotional intelligence of counselors and trainee counselors, but awareness of the readiness and understanding of trainee counselors themselves is important to help them improve their quality as professional counselors. In fact, according to Junainah (2009), a counselor who functions effectively and efficiently needs to have a high level of self-love or emotional intelligence.

In addition, there are various challenges faced in the counseling profession, including those that involve the emotions of the counselor himself. According to a study by Bali-Mahomed et al (2022), counseling teachers face challenges involving issues of workplace environment, administration, parenting and self-deprivation. This affects the counselor's emotions and leads to a decline in the quality-of-service delivery. Therefore, the role of emotional intelligence is important which should be evaluated during the training of trainee counselors to produce high quality counselors.

Overall, emotional intelligence is important in influencing the well-being of the trainee counselor as well as the client himself. Therefore, this study aims to explore the understanding and awareness of the importance of emotional intelligence of trainee counselors in empowering counselors as professional individuals, high quality and should be viewed seriously so that it provides awareness for the preparation of trainee counselors to enter the counseling profession.

**Objective**

1. Explore trainee counselors' understanding the meaning of emotional intelligence
2. Explore trainee counselors' awareness of the importance of emotional intelligence.
3. Explore management strategies to improve the emotional intelligence of trainee counselors.

**Literature Research**

There are various definitions of emotional intelligence (EQ). Among them, according to Mayer and Geher (1996), emotional intelligence is the ability to control own emotions and others and also be able to distinguish between the two as a guide in determining an action. Moreover, according to Goleman (1999), emotional intelligence involves the ability to self-identify and manage the emotions of one-self and others. In fact, it can help individuals to act wisely in resolving a situation. There are five main elements of emotional intelligence, namely self-awareness, self-motivation, self-control, empathy and social skills.

According to the study by Mustafa et al (2013), who studied the level of intelligence and competence of secondary school counseling teachers and found that it creates a significant relationship. The study involved a total of 52 teachers and the relationship between the study variables showed moderate significance. This study was limited in that it only looked at the relationship between the variables and the level of each variable.

In addition, Md's (2011) study, which examined the influence of emotional intelligence and psychological well-being on the personal development of trainee counselors, involved a total of 128 respondents, consisted of trainee counselors at public universities in Malaysia. Each variable has a significant relationship with each other. However, the findings of this study show that psychological well-being has a greater influence on the self-development of trainee counselors than emotional intelligence. This study was conducted through qualitative methods and focused on the relationship between variables and the level of influence of intelligence on self-development.

Next, according to the study by Parveen and Shafiq (2014), this involves the study of theoretical and empirical perspectives which look at the importance of emotional intelligence in the counseling and psychotherapy professions in India. The results of the study show that emotional intelligence influences self-development in producing a quality and effective counselor. Thus, the study found the need to create special training for trainee counselors to ensure the quality of the counseling profession in the future.

Ghazali et al (2017), who conducted a study on the influence of well-being, emotional and spiritual intelligence, as well as self-efficacy on the self-development of trainee counselors, to identify in detail what factors influence the self-development of trainee counselors. This study uses a correlation method and there are several hypotheses constructed among which there is a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and the self-development of trainee counselors. The study involved undergraduates counseling students at five public universities. Therefore, this study is important because it can help institutions plan programs, training, or interventions to improve the quality of professional counselors (Gómez-Leal, 2022).

Overall, many studies have shown the importance of emotional intelligence to self-development and the quality of the counseling profession. Therefore, this issue should be taken seriously by many parties, especially institutions of higher learning, lecturers, and the counseling board to improve the quality of counseling and the quality of counselors themselves.

### Research Methodology

This study is a qualitative study, using a case study design through the interview method. This study was conducted on trainee counselors with the aim of exploring their understanding and awareness of the importance of emotional intelligence. Data collection through interviews is the main focus of this study to enable researchers to obtain more detailed information. The qualitative design was chosen because the researcher was able to obtain more in-depth information from the study participants to understand the issues related to emotional intelligence management.

The sampling of this study involved trainee counselors based on two criteria that were set by the researcher, namely, counseling students at the master's level and currently undergoing an internship at a public university. The study participants involved were four people who were undergoing an internship and were Masters students at a public university. Next, the interview sessions are recorded and will be transcribed verbatim, which will be analyzed in stages to elicit themes and perform an open coding process. As a result, the researchers extracted three themes and several subthemes from the data from the thematic process analysis.

### Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study show that there are three main discussions based on the research questions, which are i) Understanding of emotional intelligence, ii) Awareness of the importance of emotional intelligence, and iii) Emotional management strategies.

#### ***Understanding of Emotional Intelligence***

Emotional intelligence, according to study participants, is a way of managing emotions well as well as being aware of what emotions are present and how to express them in the right way. There were three findings identified as a result of the interviews, namely emotional stability, good emotional control and the impact on mental health.

#### **i. Emotional Stability**

Study participants demonstrated an understanding that emotional stability is a branch of emotional intelligence. The following are the statements of study participants related to emotional stability.

*"Emotional intelligence is a stable emotion, good and diverse, but it can be expressed or shown well. Being angry is not a fight, but you know how to express it well. "*

*(PK1/23-24)*

*"Counselors face a lot of client problems, so counselors need to stabilize emotions and control methods are important because they will influence one's behavior."*

*(PK2/25-26)*

#### **ii. Good Emotional Control**

The next understanding of the meaning of emotional intelligence is good emotional control. According to the statements of the study participants, emotional control is an important element in emotional intelligence because it influences a person's actions.

*"If I am angry, I must look for therapy to heal myself. Compared to before, there are a lot of emotions that are involved that disturb other people's emotions. When we can control our emotions, we can control our actions with the people around us. "*

*(PK2/35-37)*

*"How does the person manage emotions and feelings well."*

*(PK2/22)*

### **iii. Effects on Mental Health**

Next, study participants demonstrated an understanding of emotional intelligence and its impact on mental health. This is because study participants stated that the way of thinking affects emotions and the level of mental well-being.

*"Emotional intelligence involves, in terms of mental health, the way we think and express our emotions ..."*

*(PK4/22-23)*

### **The Awareness of the Importance of Emotional Intelligence**

There are several interests expressed by the study participants in the importance of emotional intelligence, which are, managing own stress, managing emotions and the client professionally during the sessions, and improving skills in handling client cases.

#### **i. Managing Own Stress**

According to study participants, the main importance of perceived emotional intelligence is that individuals will be able to manage stress on their own. This is because every individual will experience and face stress in various forms. Thus, emotional intelligence will help individuals manage stress well.

*"His interest is in, ermm, how we can control our emotions and be mature, intelligent, and able to understand others well. Before learning counseling, I was not good at managing emotions, but now I am more patient and wiser at acting."*

*(PK1/32-33)*

*"Emotional intelligence is an important element for every individual in the way they manage emotions and feelings. When we are good at controlling our emotions, we will be more rational in many things. "*

*(PK3/34 -35)*

*"The importance of mental health. If you do not take care of your emotions, it will affect your level of stress. For example, if there is a problem, you tend to bottle up the feelings because you are not good at managing emotions "*

*(PK4/40-41)*

#### **ii. Managing Emotions and the Client Professionally during the Session**

The second importance of emotional intelligence seen by study participants is to be able to conduct counseling sessions professionally by managing emotions and the client. This is because every client is different and has diverse issues. Therefore, emotional intelligence is important to help professional trainee counselors handle clients in the session well.

*"During undergoing the practical, there will be different kinds of clients. Some of which are weird because they like telling stories about mystical things or fantasies. We must feel like we don't know whether to believe them or not, but because we have learned counseling, we have to be good at controlling our emotions so we can understand why our clients act like this."*

*(PK1/60-63)*

*"There is a client, every session he becomes stressed because his parents force the client to attend the session, while the client has moved on with the problems. I didn't even notice the session before this, the client didn't like the session, but I put aside the feeling of guilt and thought about how to help the client. In the next session, I see the client's progress. The client looks happier to meet me when I don't follow my emotions too much during the session. "*

*(PK2/86-90)*

*"We have to balance between our personal life and the client's life. It is concerned if we include our story in the client's story and vice versa. When there is balance, we will give a lot in accordance with the current situation. "*

*(PK3/53-54)*

*"There are clients who are rude in the sessions. It is very challenging for my patience, but we still control it because we try to understand why the client acted like that. "*

*(PK4/77-78)*

### **iii. Improve Skills in Handling Client Cases**

The last important thing that can be seen by the study participants is that emotional intelligence can help improve the skills of trainee counselors in handling client cases. Every issue brought up by the client has challenges in handling it. So, if you understand emotional intelligence, it will help improve the counseling skills of the individual.

*"Like one of the clients' cases, family counseling, the child and the mother had different sides of the story. Then the mother cried, but the child denied it. What happened made us learn to remain calm to face the clients. "*

*(PK1/121-122)*

*"I always get clients who are difficult to share in the beginning, clients who only answer a few words. The experience was frustrating, but because we are used to it, we already know how to deal with the same client in the future. "*

*(PK2/105-106)*

*"There is one experience where there are clients who bring up marriage issues, but we are not married yet and clients look down on us. In the session, the client demanded the solution, but we really couldn't solve it. The feeling was like a failure at that time, feeling like I didn't want to do a marriage issues session. But we realize and overcome that experience helps us to be better. "*

*(PK3/92-94)*

*"Client cases improve our skills a lot and make us want to help again. The issues help us a lot to handle our future clients and our other clients. "*

*(PK4/115-116)*

### **Management Strategies to Improve the Emotional Intelligence of Trainee Counselors**

Emotional intelligence not only affects the individual's personality but affects the quality of the trainee counselor in committing to the responsibility of helping the client. So, strategy is important in improving emotional intelligence. According to the study participants, there are

three sub-themes, namely making self-assessment, considering client feedback, and referring supervisors.

### **i. Making Self-Assessment**

Among the management strategies for improving emotional intelligence, according to the study participants, is to make an assessment of themselves through assessments obtained from supervisors or experience conducting counseling sessions with clients.

*"I like to challenge myself to accept all kinds of client issues, even if they are difficult and challenging, because from client issues I learn a lot to improve myself and my counseling skills."*

(PK2/120-121)

*"Sometimes we will be praised, sometimes we will be reviled. Sometimes we feel it's the best, sometimes we feel the client feels dissatisfied. At one point, we need criticism from people and things to teach us to upgrade ourselves and realize things are OK. "*

(PK3/106-107)

*"The clients' issues help us to improve our skills. At the same time, we can know our level as a counselor, meaning in terms of our ability to what extent, and at the same time, we can feel our level of satisfaction in helping clients."*

(PK4/120-121)

### **ii. Considering client feedback**

The second strategy, according to the study participants, is to take consideration of client feedback. This is because the study participants want to see the extent to which the counseling session services conducted affect the client, and the feedback gives an indication of the level of counseling skills of the study participants.

*"Based on my experience, a client called to tell me that he had succeeded in entering university, and the client said, because of you, I am successful now. When I heard the client's response like that, I was relieved and happy to feel excited about helping people again. "*

(PK1/145-144)

*"Feedback from one of the children said it was great fun. When I get feedback that it's really fun, I think it's the best, so I'm really excited about doing the next session with them. "*

(PK3/111-112)

### **iii. Refer to the Supervisor**

The third strategy for improving the emotional intelligence that could be seen by the study participants was a supervisor referral session. Referring supervisors was an important element for study participants in increasing confidence and encouraging them to conduct counseling sessions effectively.

*"If there is a problem related to counseling, I will ask the supervisor because it is very helpful when we are confused about what to do or anything else. "*

(PK1/150)

*"For me, my friends and seniors will consult about problems related to counseling because it is very helpful."*

(PK2/130)

*"I have my own circle of friends and lecturers in the field of counseling. If there is a problem, they will help a lot. "*

*(PK3/127-128)*

*"I will always look for someone, either a friend or a lecturer, for me to express problems and share in finding solutions."*

*(PK4/137)*

As a trainee counselor, it is becoming a necessity to understand and be aware of the importance of emotional intelligence to oneself as a counselor. Based on the researcher's study, participants were able to understand emotional intelligence through the experience they had in conducting counseling sessions. An understanding of emotional intelligence helps trainee counselors have the ability to express and manage the emotions of themselves and others (Cary, 2011). In fact, emotional intelligence will increase the trainee counselor's awareness of their own emotions. According to a study by Md (2011), individuals with a high level of emotional intelligence will be more aware of the surrounding situation, happier, healthier, and successful in their respective fields.

Additionally, through Gutierrez and Mullen (2016) study, which looked at the relationship between emotional intelligence and counselors' stress levels and their impact on mental health. The results showed the higher the counselor's level of intelligence, the lower their stress levels. This study proves that an understanding of emotional intelligence is important for every counselor to be able to control and manage emotions well. In fact, Edgerton & Palmer (2022) study found that the stress experienced by counselors, if not managed well, will influence counselors to conduct counseling sessions with clients professionally.

According to the American Counseling Association (2014), for a counseling code of ethics to be established, counselors should be responsible for stress management, emotions, and skills so that they will not influence the handling of the client's case. Thus, counselors need to be responsible for adhering to the ethics of counseling in order to preserve and manage their emotions in order to provide services effectively. This suggests that emotional management is one of the branches of emotional intelligence that needs to be addressed to improve quality as a professional counselor (Venart et al., 2007).

According to Johar (2009), the element of empathy in emotional intelligence is important for individuals who are engaged in the social world because it helps them to communicate with others without any problems. Thus, emotional intelligence management strategies are important for improving quality as a professional counselor.

However, there are not many studies that focus on strategies to increase emotional intelligence. Among the studies conducted were to suggest creating training or interventions for trainee counselors on the topic of emotional management using various approaches (Nelis et al., 2011). In fact, the study showed a positive effect on the improvement of emotional intelligence of the study participants who participated in the study intervention.

Moreover, through the study of Kurtyilmaz, (2015), referring and evaluation of supervisors greatly helps trainee counselors to be able to manage counseling sessions effectively. The relationship between the trainee counselor and the supervisor is important

to help motivate the client in dealing with problems in handling diverse client cases. Moreover, the study by Thériault et al (2009) found that trainee counselors would ask for an evaluation of client feedback after a session as an indicator of the effective impact of the counseling session conducted. Evaluation from the examiner and the client is important because it can increase positive emotions, confidence and encouragement to the trainee counselor, increasing emotional intelligence and lowering the effects of stress.

Thus, emotional intelligence is important for trainee counselors to be emphasized in this professional career because if they cannot manage it well, it will affect their credibility as a quality and good counselor. However, emotional intelligence is an element that needs to be enhanced by the efforts of the individual himself through the experience and field of counseling itself.

Theme	Subtheme	Response	Example of Statements
<b>Understanding</b>	1. Emotional Stability	2	Stable emotions to face the client
	2. Emotional control	2	Emotional control can control actions.
	3. Mental health effects	1	The way of thinking affects mental health.
<b>Importance</b>	1. Manage stress	3	Able to control his own emotions.
	2. Manage the client's emotions during the session	4	Balancing emotions can help clients well.
	3. Improve skills	4	Experience in handling client issues enhances skills for the future.
<b>Management Strategy</b>	1. Self-assessment	3	Diverse client issues help improve counseling skills.
	2. Client feedback	2	Client feedback has a positive effect on emotions.
	3. Refer to supervisor	4	When there is a problem, the supervisor is the person to be referred to.

Figure 1: Summary of the Themes and Subtheme Research Discussion

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study illustrates that trainee counselors understand the meaning and importance of emotional intelligence. In fact, experience in the process of conducting counseling sessions helps trainee counselors to manage emotions, improving the quality of being a successful counselor. Elements of self-awareness, ability to manage self-emotions, motivation, empathy, and social skills are essential for every trainee counselor in helping clients. If it is not focused by an individual, then it will affect the trainee counselor's ability to help deal with various client issues. In fact, this counselor career is a challenging one because it involves emotions, thoughts, and behaviors to influence and help others. The findings of this study can be used as a guide for counseling practitioners or those involved with social work. In addition, future studies could make improvements with more extensive studies.

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