

Challenges of Graduate Counseling Students Undergoing Internship During the Pandemic Covid-19 Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the challenges of graduate counseling students undergoing internship during the pandemic Covid-19 Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia. The method used in this study is qualitative with a case study design. A total of six participants among graduate counseling students were selected as sample in the study. Data were obtained using semi structured interviews. The data from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis methods. The results indicate that there are three main findings related to the challenges of counseling graduate students undergoing practicum during the covid 19 pandemic, which are adaptation to changes and new needs, management of counseling sessions, and personal emotional well-being. The implication of this study is for graduate counseling students to understand the coping strategies in facing challenges during crises. This study proposes for future studies to conduct this research quantitatively.

Keywords: Challenges, Graduate Counseling Students, Practicum, Pandemic Covid-19

Introduction

In late December 2019, an outbreak of Corona groups such as SARS and MARS was discovered in Wuhan province, China. The virus has spread so rapidly that it causes death among a group of infected individuals (Ma et al., 2020). The existence of this epidemic has been named as Corona Virus 2019 (Covid-19), become a huge catastrophe for communities around the world. Statistic of death has increased daily around the world until the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic.

In Malaysia, the spread of Covid-19 epidemic in Malaysia began on 5 January 2020 with a record of 22 import cases that have been successfully detected by the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH) (Su-Lyn, 2020). Although the number of cases is increasing day by day

until it recorded 651 cases, it has definitely caused anxiety and fear and fear among the people. Therefore, with the increase in cases of infection of increasing concern the government has taken decisive steps by introducing the Movement Control Order (MCO) which started on 18 March 2020 (Salim et al., 2020). According to a study conducted by Brooks (2020), he has found that the effects of this pandemic on people are symptoms of psychological disorders such as emotional stress, stress, insomnia and extreme anxiety. Mental instability with severe fatigue, fear and anxiety can result in the individual not being able to go through life perfectly and it is difficult to make rational decisions. Fofana et al (2020), also explained that the situation during the Covid 19 pandemic brought about various psychological effects and impacts on society. In the middle of 2020, the Malaysian Psychological Well -Being Index Report (IKPM) has recorded a moderate figure with a range of 7.1 (IKPM Report, 2020). However, the findings of a survey conducted by the Ministry of Health Malaysia have found that the value of the increase pattern is twice as high and it is also accompanied by mental health issues in Malaysia (Ibrahim et al., 2022).

Literature Review

According to McKenzie et al (2011), counseling can also be described as a process of counselors giving guidance and guidance in the form of advice to clients to explore solutions to a problem or issue that is faced by the client beyond the client's ability. In this era, counseling services in Malaysia are increasingly well received, not only by agencies but also by the community, who are increasingly aware of the importance of the services (Kottler, 2022). Therefore, with the progress and development of this service profession, it has begun to gain recognition of standing and equal to other high professions. Long-distance interaction and communication among counselor and client is not a new concept in the world counseling profession. It started as early as 1982 with a group of helping services that appeared over the internet.

Furthermore, it can be seen that online counseling is an innovation that can help provide comfort, especially to clients who wish to obtain counseling services and interventions quickly, but are hindered by the Covid-19 pandemic situation, critical timing, and various other obstacles (Feijt et al., 2020). This online counseling is done without having a face-to-face session as used during conventional counseling techniques. The online counseling function is seen as a counseling service that can be offered to clients quickly without having to communicate face to face.

As early as 1977, Malaysia began offering virtual counseling services, and these services are growing and increasing year by year. With the diversity of developments in several sectors in Malaysia, such as the education, health and state government sectors, counseling services are not only offered in government agencies but also to private agencies, individuals and privacy. The variety of counseling approaches used previously became an obstacle, especially when face-to-face meetings with clients were not allowed due to the control of movement and transmission of Covid-19 virus infection throughout this pandemic. Therefore, online counseling is an alternative to continuing the service as emotional support is needed by the community in times of crisis (Khan et al., 2022). Online counseling is a new idea and practice in the process of helping relationships between counselors and clients with internet facilities (Khan et al., 2022).

All matters relating to the enforcement of the Counselors Act 1998 (Act 580) are the responsibility of the Malaysian Board of Counselors (LKM). It is a mechanism for the implementation of matters primarily related to the act as a measure to control and develop the level of professionalism of counselors and counseling services in Malaysia. Among the roles of LKM is to supervise the provision of counseling services and assess the need for counseling services in the country. Apart from that, LKM also regulates the training of counselors and determines the type and level of counseling that will be held in Malaysia. LKM is also a body that determines the qualifications that qualify a person to be registered under this act, which is to determine the standards of counseling training programs and so on.

LKM also serves as an organization involved in the accreditation of counseling programs in institutes of higher learning in Malaysia. Based on the guidelines issued by LKM, one of the requirements for counseling students at the university is to undergo a practicum and a practicum in the final year of study. Each student must meet the requirements for session hours face to-face with the client, namely 96 session hours for practicum students and 192 session hours for internship students as prescribed under LKM.

The practicum is a core course designed to expose and provide training for trainee counselors to the real world of work. Trainee counselors are also expected to gain knowledge, experience, and skills, and receive guidance and guidance from the relevant academic supervisors and lecturers. The Pre-Practicum is also meant as an experience for an individual trainee counselor who is able to conduct things like counseling sessions with real clients. According to Amla et al (2009), the importance of pre-practicum in counseling training can be used as an opportunity that allows trainees to apply the knowledge and skills learned in the lecture room to real clients under the guidance of lecturers who teach.

Therefore, in this pandemic situation, the approach of using the internet, known as e-counseling, is no stranger and has become a necessity when looking at the current state of society (Barker & Barker, 2022). Although not many people support this service being offered, there is still another party that provides support because, simultaneously with the technological boom, counselors must take advantage of every space and opportunity available to further expand their services (Alleman, 2002; Hanley, 2006). Online counseling is also known as telepsychology because this online counseling service can be done in four situations, namely through web therapy, phone therapy, text therapy, or online therapy (American Psychological Association, 2017). It is also known as web-counseling, cyber-counseling and e-therapy (Manhal-Baugus, 2001; Awang, 2007; Kadir & Mahamood, 2001; Nor & Yusuf, 2018; Barker & barker, 2022; Khan et al., 2022).

Therefore, with the availability of online counseling services, of course, undergraduate students in guidance and counseling can follow pre-Practicum courses in a more orderly manner and as soon as the challenges can be overcome easily. Each study participant was a trainee counselor who was required to conduct a total of 96 hours of sessions with the client. Each study participant stated that throughout the course they felt there were challenges they had to face. This is so that these challenges can be overcome in obtaining effective counseling sessions and, in turn, can help improve the existing help services. This is intended to explore the challenges of counseling undergraduate students in following the pre-Practicum course during CMCO as well as exploring the emotional management of students during the period

of attending the course. Therefore, the objective of this study is to explore the challenges experienced by students in the field of counseling who need to undergo a practicum during the period of the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO).

Methodology

The method used in this study is qualitative with a case study design. Six study participants from among undergraduate students were selected as the study sample and divided equally in number according to gender, and all of them were undergraduate students of guidance and counseling. All the study participants were in their respective states, namely in Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Perak and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. This is because all of them are not allowed to be in the institution. The selected study participants were from varied university backgrounds.

To achieve the objectives of this study, a qualitative method has been used through an interview process that will be conducted on guidance and counseling undergraduate students who are taking pre-practicum courses this semester. Researchers obtained data through semi-structured interviews. The results of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis methods in stages, namely descriptive coding, topic coding, analytical coding and theme. In producing this study, the authors used data collection methods through interviews, observations, participatory observations, and document analysis. Before conducting the study, the researcher will inform those involved, either from the government or the individual concerned, through correspondence or contact them to make an appointment. This is so that study participants can be prepared with the necessary information.

Creswell (2005) said that in order to conduct an in-depth survey of a phenomenon, the researcher must select study participants purposefully. Accordingly, this study applies a sampling method aimed at selecting participants who can provide descriptive-rich data to describe the phenomena studied. Letters of consent to be voluntary participants in this study were signed by all 6 study participants. Another method that will also be used is through observation and participatory observation of the obstacles and challenges that are being faced during the period of the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO). In addition, document analysis will also be collected based on the data used, such as journals, articles, and others, according to the suitability of the research as secondary data related to this study.

In-depth Interviews

This study uses an interview technique. This technique is a method that can be said to be important and has high validity. This is because the researcher obtains information and information directly from the study participants of the study. Among the study participants who were interviewed were 6 undergraduate students, consisting of 3 female students and 3 male students. This method was used when reviewing the travel patterns of study participants while attending the Pre-Practicum course. The researcher first prepares the questions that will be used for the interview session. This is to ensure that the questions that will be asked can be answered well by the study participants. In addition, the information desired by the researcher can be obtained through the questions provided by the researcher in the interview session. Then, this information will be used as data to be included in the study by researchers. If seen, the interview instrument has its own distinct and valid advantages. This method

facilitates the researcher to provide an explanation if there are vague questions compared to the questionnaire technique. Study participants were also able to provide further information on important questions. The researchers conducted interviews to answer the objectives of the study. Some interview questions were asked by exploring their views on the current situation, the challenges they faced through unstructured interviews (FGD) conducted on them.

Participatory Observations

This method is carried out directly to ensure that the area studied meets the characteristics desired by the researcher. Apart from interviews, researchers also use observation methods to obtain information and sources of information. The observation used to measure research variables. Observation is also an alternative available for gathering information or data collection, in addition to questionnaires and interviews. Through observation, researchers can observe a subject's behavior based on the variables that have been identified. Through this study, the researcher is an observer because he is one of the master's students in guidance and counseling at a public university in Malaysia.

Through this method, this study is able to gather information and participate in activities carried out by undergraduate students in guidance and counseling. This study uses the observation method and observe the samples for a certain period of time, which is for four to six weeks of observation period. This method of observation is widely used in the field of pure science, which conducts studies in science laboratories and social sciences. Usually, the features to be observed are very subtle and detailed, which in turn makes the decision making more accurate.

Document Analysis

Next, this study also analyzed the documents. This document analysis is a form of analysis of materials such as printed materials, namely print media, books, books, written reports, articles, emails, the internet, and so on. This method serves to provide information about the research being studied. It also helps to provide additional information to cover some of the study findings. The researcher can also identify developments and changes that have taken place in the information in the document. The data obtained will be processed into ideas that will meet the objectives and research questions of the researcher.

Findings and Discussion

This study aims to identify the challenges faced by students during the counseling practicum. A total of six students are public university students. The background of the study participants consisted of three males and three females, aged from 24 years to 31 years. The status of the participant is two are part-time and four are full time students. All of the study participants are Malays. All study participants had counseling experience of not more than one year and had just taken up counseling at the master's level.

Table 1.0

Study participants Background

| Bil | Gender | Age | Race | Education Status | Experience |
|-------------|---------------|------------|-------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| PK 1 | Female | 28 | Malay | Full Time | 0-1 |
| PK 2 | Male | 28 | Malay | Full Time | 0-1 |
| PK 3 | Female | 31 | Malay | Part Time | 0-1 |
| PK 4 | Male | 24 | Malay | Full Time | 0-1 |
| PK 5 | Male | 28 | Malay | Part Time | 0-1 |
| PK 6 | Female | 26 | Malay | Full Time | 0-1 |

Furthermore, the findings of the study show that there are three main themes that are based on the research questions, namely i) challenges of undergoing counseling practicum, ii) Adaptation toward changes, needs and management of counseling sessions, iii) Personal emotional well-being

Challenges of Undergoing Counseling Practicum**Method of Implementation**

In order to conduct a counseling session, study participants need to be keen to determine how to conduct the session. The method applied in the session and how the session was conducted was a concern to the study participants. The method of implementation that needs to be followed is face to-face, even though what is often requested by clients is to do e-counseling. According to the study participants, one of the main challenges in practicum course was the medium of implementation. The students need to conduct face to face counseling sessions during MCO. There were obstacles and constraints were identified through this study including the problem of time constraints, space or distance and physical presence which are seen to have interfered with the smooth running of this counseling service (Barker & Barke, 2022; Chui et al., 2021)

"Implementation medium that is difficult to identify its effectiveness at this time"
(PK1,101)

"... Some parents ask for a session but want to use Google Meet, zoom in... We also understand the client wants a session with a new medium..."
(PK4, 67-70)

"I want to do a session and think about what the current situation is like... we have to look at security... not only us but the client..."
(PK6, 40-43)

Limited Face-To-Face Clients

The second challenge was reported by the study participants was the difficulty of receiving clients because of the ongoing issues with MCO and Covid-19. People also experienced fear of meetings and worried about meeting clients. This caused the study participants experienced difficulty of getting clients.

"face to face client.. it is very difficult because of the pandemic..."
(PK2,89)

"The challenge for me is to find client during the covid-19 and CMCO issue"
(PK4,201)

"It's hard to meeting clients, I can say yes to the current situation..."
(PK5,122)

"it is very challenging to have face-to-face counseling sessions in the Covid-19 pandemic"

(PK6,200)

Use of Technology

The final challenge reported by study participants in conducting counseling sessions, most clients prefer online but requested using phone call instead of video call. However, the clients were not skilled in using technology. Study participants should be given guidance on how to use it before it is conducted. In addition, according to Dores et al., (2020), the function of online counseling is to provide convenience and comfort to clients who are interested in conducting counseling sessions and interventions at an immediate rate but have obstacles due to pandemics, space, and various other obstacles. This cannot be done as the hours can't be counted as a counseling session when using phone call. Study participants need to explain this to the client. Some of them understand, but some of them refused and rejected the session to be conducted.

"Clients who find it difficult to cooperate, especially those who are not knowledgeable about IT"

(PK3,94)

"... clients like to talk through the phone...especially housewife or client who are not working"

(PK4,93-96)

"People have different views... I have clients who are afraid to meet people... and also they refuse to use technology effectively. They prefer voice call only"

(PK6,123-

126)

Adaptation toward Changes and Management of Counseling Sessions

Compulsory Course Requirements Practicum

This practicum course is taken by the study participants to meet their requirements to graduate and also to obtain a counselor's license when all the hours completed under the Malaysian Board of Counselors.

" this course requirements is for graduate requirements "

(PK4,85)

"... No matter what, we have to complete it, if it's not in vain, it's hard to wait, we have to finish this course... "

(PK6, 184-188)

Mediums and Skills

The need for appropriate medium and skills to be applied in this Covid-19 condition. The changes and need during covid is unfamiliar to a trainee counselor. This is to facilitate both parties to assist in conducting effective counseling sessions. Similarly, the theoretical skills of the study participants need to be better prepared for dealing with various types of clients at this time. This will also affect the counseling sessions conducted.

" due to the limited resources from the aspect of clients & therapeutic place for services provided"

(PK1, 40)

"What important is the skill, because even theory still needs to be mastered..."

(PK2, 119-124)

"... I want my line ok, sitting in the rural area so it's hard to do that session..."

(PK5, 181-185)

"Continuous learning theory skills so that the techniques used can be improved"

(PK6,83)

Personal Emotional Well-Being

There is an importance as well as a need for trainee counselors to control their emotions as they handle challenging situations in the process of completing practicum requirements. This is to ensure that each trainee counselor has the readiness in mental and physical aspects before conducting counseling sessions with clients. Good mental health is needed to produce effectiveness when performing counseling sessions. The ability to handle emotions can help a session run smoothly. According to a study by Chui et al., (2021) on mental health in Malaysia as a result of the effects of this epidemic, physical distance causes individuals to have to stay at home for a relatively long period of time. They will face stress and lack of emotional stability if the situation and atmosphere in the house has a crisis.

Support System

Study participants stated that classmates and families were important in providing support to each other. Relationships with classmates can create a collaborative aspect to ensure the accuracy of the practicum process. Study participants also stated that when they experience difficulties, they will contact their friends not to be left behind in the study. Such a support system helps control emotions. To some extent, the level of two-way interaction between family members is able to provide comfort and importance for an individual's psycho-emotional development (American Institute of Stress, 2019).

"If I'm stressed, I will have a discussion with my fellow trainee counselors"

(PK1,122)

"... Some also have a chat with the family, sometimes people want to hear and their words to calm us down right..."

(PK4, 155-160)

Physical Activity

Healthy social interactions are needed to ensure mental well-being. According to Tajuddin (2007), health also leads to a concept that emphasizes the existence of a perfect individual in terms of physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual as well as not just focused on no disease. When taking the initiative to go out to a quiet place, this will allow them to be stronger and more positive for the next few days. Outdoor activities such as leisure allow a person to be healthier not only mentally but also physically. In addition, there is no denying that vacationing and meeting close people can also solve their problems. Thus, individuals with good mental health can overcome various challenges faced by being rational and prudent.

" Socialize with friends, go out to eat, go on vacation, shop and relax"

(PK3, 132)

"I will go out for leisure every evening after the session"

(PK4, 231)

" Sometimes I would go for a walk with my wife in the park... I could feel the airy and peaceful environment. ..."

(PK5, 147-148)

According to Fox (1999), a Cambridge University Press study has stated that physical activity not only contributes to limb fitness, but it also contributes significantly to an increase in self-esteem, self-image, and self-confidence, indirectly giving an increase in qualities in the way an individual is rational as well as able to stabilize emotions.

Mind Resting

An individual needs enough rest to function properly the next day. This should also be emphasized by the trainee counselor. In other words, it helps control the mind well. Indirectly counseling sessions can also be conducted well. Study participants also stated that they would take time to relax their minds. At the same time this can ensure that they can deal with emotions when under stress.

" Sit for a while to relax my mind ... every time the session is over, I will find time to relax my mind ..."

(PK3, 167-170)

"Rest for yourself to think rationally"

(PK5,201)

"I will take a break and turn negative thoughts into opportunities and challenges to be more successful in the future."

(PK6,256)

Table 2.0 below describes a summary of the themes and subthemes of this study based on the research questions.

Table 2.0
Summary of Study Themes and Subtheme

| Theme | Sub-Theme | Number of Respondent |
|---|---|----------------------|
| Challenges of undergoing counseling a practicum | 1. Method of Implementation | 2 |
| | 2. Limited face -to -face clients | 2 |
| | 3. Use of Technology | 2 |
| Adaptation toward changes and management of counseling sessions | 1. Compulsory Course Requirements Practicum | 2 |
| | 2. Medium and Skills | 4 |
| Personal emotional well-being | 1. Physical Activity | 3 |
| | 2. Support system | 2 |
| | 3. Resting Mind | 3 |

Discussion

Pre-Practicum is a New Experience

Experience is something valuable and meaningful. The experience of undergoing a counseling practicum provides an opportunity to increase competence in the practice of counseling. Competent counselors can contribute to the effectiveness of counseling sessions conducted to clients. Clients who show good change in the session are able to use positive words in helping them realize the good things they should do in the future. Not only that, when the client gains mental literacy, it also becomes a satisfaction and a good value to the Trainee counselors. Society is also becoming more aware by becoming more concerned about mental health. Acceptance of online counseling is also growing. This suggests that professional counseling services are increasingly accepted when they are faced with existing conflicts or issues (Dores, 2020). Trainee counselors learned something that could change themselves as a result of the togetherness of counseling sessions with clients. Trainee counselors also stated being able to learn skills and being able to share information or views with peers and lecturers. Trainee counselors have made thorough preparations to ensure that counseling services are in a satisfactory condition. Trainee counselors can also get feedback from clients at the end of each session as a process of learning and improvement in practice. With continuous practice and supervision, the counseling services provided are quality and acceptable.

By undergoing the practicum process, the efficiency of handling counseling cases is increased. In addition, trainee counselors are also exposed to managing time and emotions well so that conflicts can be resolved effectively. Self-potential is also extensively polished when faced with stress. This is because it provides many benefits and gives the trainee counselor the opportunity to feel the real atmosphere in a career as a counselor. Indirectly, the skills possessed by trainee counselors can help them when faced with various problems. Therefore, trainee counselors need to build experiences that can help and support clients in need.

Suggestions and Expectations

Conducting counseling sessions during the pandemic is indeed challenging. This study has identified the difficulty of conducting online counseling sessions especially to clients who live inland or who face internet network problems. This situation has a negative impact on the counseling process for both the counselor and the client. Verbal and non-verbal communication is also limited. However, online counseling is much needed especially in crises and has limited mobility. The difficulties to conduct counseling sessions during pandemic, can be overcome with alternatives that are different from the norm. This process requires the trainee counselor to be more flexible and able to act according to the situation faced. In crisis situations as well, trainee counselors can take time to calm down and think of appropriate alternative measures until things get better.

Trainee counselors become more mature in acting and helping individuals in need of support especially clients as well as family members. They also hope to complete the practicum with distinction. The experience of undergoing practicum during a crisis prepares them to deal with the real situation of society. Trainee counselors also hope to be better prepared for internships and beyond in their careers.

The counseling sessions conducted by the trainee counselors during the MCO period are very encouraging because they can help others gain mental literacy and feel that there is still hope as well as being able to do face-to-face sessions with clients. They are also aware of many more improvements that can be made and implemented. According to Emily et al., (2020), an individual's level of mental health will worsen when influenced by feelings of loneliness, boredom, as well as anger. Therefore, every individual and society needs to be sensitive to the surrounding mental health conditions especially oneself and family members. Trainee counselors are also satisfied because they try their best in dealing with difficulties when dealing with clients. However, some trainee counselors feel less satisfied because their skills are still weak and need to be sharpened further.

The experience of undergoing a practicum during the Covid-19 pandemic can form a competent counselor and benefit the community. Online counseling not only allows the community to access services, but also provides an opportunity to obtain consultation, guidance, support, and feedback from counselors (Pedroso et al., 2022). Trainee counselors are expected to be better prepared to face the challenges of dealing with a wide range of problematic issues. This is intended to maintain the ethical authenticity and integrity of the information presented by the client to the counselor.

Conclusion

In general, each challenge of conducting a counseling session during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, contributed to the development of the field of counseling. Technology has been introduced in the profession and enhanced the competencies of trainee counselors in particular. Trainee counselors today are experts in the field of the future. Their ability to deal with all currents of change and development, aspects of thinking as well as positive emotional stability, such as calmness, rationality, and happiness, as drivers of self-well-being to be achieved. Therefore, every trainee counselor should take the experience as a lesson from every situation they have encountered while handling counseling cases, especially during this epidemic. Various activities and jobs have been affected including counseling services. Social services and counseling are interrelated. Various approaches are used to provide support to the community.

The results found that there are themes and sub-themes and themes that have been obtained from data collection. Study participants were also selected based on the criteria that have been set that is a trainee counselor who is undergoing a practicum. The practicum serves as a form of training to enable and ensure that all students are proficient with the theory and application of skills to be used in counseling sessions. During the practicum and also when already in the workplace, counseling sessions certainly require the emotional stability of the counselor to handle the counseling process. The objective of this study was to identify the challenges in conducting practicum. Thus, it can also be seen how the trainee counselors, the participants of this study, overcome every challenge that exists during the period of the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO).

Each trainee counselor also strives to appreciate and ensure aspects of action, emotion, thought, action and spirituality with the whole way of life in a stable and good state to make a more positive impact in providing counseling services. The community has gone through a difficult phase in combating this epidemic systematically. Indirectly able to form

trainee counselors who are more rational -minded, have high self -esteem, dynamic adaptability, and strong internal and external resilience especially with each change that occurs.

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