

Role of Disclosing Psychological Distress and Intention to Seek Counseling in the Relationship between Attitude, Stigma and Working Alliance: A Conceptual Paper

Peranan Pendedahan Kesusahan Psikologi dan Keinginan Mendapatkan Kaunseling dalam Hubungan antara Sikap, Stigma dan Pakatan Kerja: Kertas Konseptual

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Various psychotherapeutic approaches have acknowledged the crucial component of working alliance in the helping relationship. Utilization of counseling service by university students is very low despite easy accessibility with minimal or no fees. Avoidance of counseling, even when a student may benefit from it, may lead to unattended psychological problems that are likely to affect their academic achievement. If a student does enter counseling, the counselor has an important role to ensure a strong working alliance in the relationship. The working alliance component is fundamental in the helping process to facilitate better life outcomes for clients. Ruptures in the working alliance may lead to reduced motivation to return to counseling. While attitude and stigma are known factors associated with counseling avoidance among university students in the Malaysian context, the three working alliance components based on Bordin's (1979) working alliance conceptualization have not been adequately examined. The three components to the working alliance concept are as follows: (i) Goal; (ii) Task; and (iii) Bond. This conceptual paper discusses the working alliance and the role of distress disclosure and intention to seek counseling in the relationship between attitude and stigma amongst university students seeking professional psychological help in Malaysia. The Theory of Reasoned Action is the main theoretical framework referred in guiding the discussion of this conceptual paper.

Keywords: working alliance, intention to seek counseling, attitude, stigma, distress disclosure.

Pelbagai pendekatan psikoterapi telah lama menyokong peranan penting pakatan kerja terapeutik dalam proses perhubungan menolong. Penggunaan khidmat kaunseling di kampus oleh pelajar universiti masih sangat rendah walaupun perkhidmatan itu tersedia di kampus tanpa bayaran atau dengan bayaran yang sangat rendah. Mengelak daripada menggunakan khidmat kaunseling yang boleh membawa manfaat mungkin boleh menyebabkan masalah psikologi menjadi lebih teruk seterusnya berkemungkinan mengganggu pencapaian akademik pelajar. Sekiranya pelajar mula menggunakan khidmat kaunseling, kaunselor berperanan untuk memastikan pakatan kerja yang kuat terbina dalam hubungan kaunseling bersama pelajar. Komponen pakatan kerja adalah penting dalam proses pertolongan untuk memudahkan hasil kehidupan yang lebih baik untuk pelanggan. Kemusnahan pakatan kerja dalam hubungan kaunseling mungkin boleh mengurangkan motivasi pelajar untuk kembali menggunakan khidmat kaunseling. Sikap dan stigma terhadap kaunseling telah dikenalpasti sebagai punca rendahnya keinginan menggunakan khidmat kaunseling di kalangan pelajar universiti di Malaysia. Namun, konsep pakatan kerja oleh Bordin (1979) kurang diberi perhatian dalam kajian-kajian terdahulu di Malaysia. Tiga komponen pakatan kerja tersebut adalah: (i) Matlamat; (ii) Tugasan dan (iii) Pertalian. Kertas konseptual ini membincangkan tentang pakatan kerja dan peranan pendedahan kesusahan serta keinginan mendapatkan kaunseling dalam hubungan antara sikap dan stigma di kalangan pelajar universiti di Malaysia. Teori Tindakan Beralasan (Theory of Reasoned Action) merupakan panduan utama dalam membincangkan kertas konseptual ini.

Kata kunci: pakatan kerja, keinginan mendapatkan kaunseling, sikap, stigma, pendedahan kesusahan.

Counseling service offered by professionally trained counselors located in a university campus aims to provide emotional support that is easily accessible to students. The counseling process should involve a two-way communication between the counselor and student, in which during this process counselors are trained not just to provide emotional support but also to identify other resources that may be needed by the student to increase their wellbeing. The counseling process emphasizes the

importance of the relationship between the counselor and the student because this process involves sharing personal information and struggles that may be perceived as an embarrassment from student's point of view. Therefore, a positive relationship that is developed during the counseling process is known to drive good communication and collaboration between the two parties, thus gaining sufficient information needed to help the student emotionally and further support the student's wellbeing.

The relationship that should occur in the counseling process between the counselor and their client has been conceptualized as ‘working alliance’. The working alliance concept in the helping profession has its foundation in psychotherapy approaches. It has been proposed by Bordin (1955) that the working alliance is a general concept which should exist in any type of relationship that involves a collaborative process. If it is important in all contexts of a collaborative relationships, therefore, the working alliance concept should be included in all approaches of counseling.

The working alliance concept in the counseling relationship has gained interest in the counseling field due to its clear operational definition outlined by Bordin (1979), and the development of psychometric measures derived from Bordin’s definition (e.g. Fuertes, J. N. et al., 2013; Tracey & Kokotovic, 1989). Bordin proposed three components that make up the working alliance concept. They are: i) Goal; ii) Task; iii) Bond. A psychometric measure known as the Working Alliance Inventory (WAI) was developed by Horvath and Greenberg to provide a scientific stance to the components proposed by Bordin (Tracey & Kokotovic, 1989). The segregation of components in the working alliance concept serves as a guideline to counselors in tracking how well the session is perceived as going, as it can be used to measure working alliance over several sessions.

So far, Malaysian literature has only sparsely examined the components of working alliance and its usefulness in counseling. University counselors should also aspire, not just to spread awareness about seeking professional counseling help if in distress, but also to work on strengthening the working alliance during the process because past literatures have given evidence of its usefulness in the counseling relationship.

Counseling Service in University

The offering of counseling service in universities is important to ensure that students can access help from a professionally trained counselor. Student’s prior intention to seek counseling may be influenced by their own knowledge, awareness, family or friends, or they may have been asked by the faculty to attend counseling. In any case, an instance of a student utilizing counseling reflects an actual behaviour of seeking professional psychological help.

Students who used counseling help are known to feel more supported than those who do not. Vescovelli et al. (2017), reported that students reported less psychological distress and higher levels of wellbeing at the end of a counseling session regardless of the type of treatment received from a counselor. Utilization of counseling service in campus by university students may have a positive impact towards a student’s social adjustment as well as academic performance. Kearney (2005) demonstrated evidence of decreased distress amongst undergraduates across different races who attended counseling session. This implies students from all backgrounds may be positively impacted from utilizing counseling service. Lesser distress means students are able to relate more with their faculty’s activities and can focus more on academic achievement. As noted by Abdelmadjid Benraghda et al. (2018) this is possibly due to a reduced need to attend to personal problems, so students are able to fully participate in beneficial social events.

When a student enters counseling, it is imperative for them to experience a therapeutic working alliance with their counselor in each counseling session. The counseling process to achieve the goals or objectives should be agreed jointly together.

Goal Component

‘Goal’ component in the working alliance concept directs the outcome of counseling. Bordin (1983) explained that the goal component relates to any changes that the client strives to achieve whether it is in the form of feelings, thoughts, actions or a combination of these. He used the term ‘mutual agreement’ to describe the collaborative effort between client and counselor in setting the direction of the counseling work. Hill (2010) explained that ruptures in counseling may occur when the goal of counseling is not clear. The working alliance’s component of goal examines client’s agreement whether they feel the counselor has adequately discussed the counseling goal or if some understanding of changes has been laid as a groundwork for counseling.

Task Component

‘Task’ component in the working alliance concept is the work or activities required in each of the mutually agreed elements of the goal. These tasks are usually assigned by the therapist or counselor (Bordin, 1979), and it is important for the client to understand the relevance of each task in achieving the counseling goal. These tasks may differ in each therapy and in terms of how the counselor assigns them. They do not always involve concrete work such as behavior change. Some counseling work may require the process of self-disclosure, or emphatic understanding, or by means of interpretation to put all the pieces together (Bordin, 1979). This means techniques used by a counselor in counseling sessions are considered as task component.

In the context of this study, the task component will examine a client’s level of agreement on the clarity that they gain from the counseling process and if they feel the counseling process brings them closer to their goal.

Bond Component

‘Bond’ component in the working alliance concept relates to the feeling of liking, trusting and respect between the counselor and client. The strength of bond is what makes a working alliance therapeutic. A minimal level of trust may appear in all relationship that is collaborative in nature, it is not exclusive only to the counseling relationship. But in some therapies that requires more self-disclosure, a stronger bond is needed (Bordin, 1979). The bond component may seem separate, but it is actually closely linked to the collaborative nature of goal and task. Bordin (1979) explained that if two people like and trust each other, the counseling work is more meaningful to the client, and assignments may be taken up without reservation. Indirectly, this will allow progress towards the achievement of the goal that has been set up in the early phase of counseling. This study will examine client’s agreement towards the level of respect, trust, liking and caring that they feel were extended to them from the counselor.

Intention to Seek Counseling and Working Alliance

Intention to seek counseling is described by Wade et al. (2011) as the likelihood of a person to seek counseling for an issue. The issues may vary in terms of their severity and context. Encouraging students to talk to their university counselor when facing emotional problems, experiencing difficulties in academic work or facing a substance abuse problem are all still a challenge in Malaysia. Benjamin Chan Yin-Fah et al. (2016) reported that Malaysian undergraduate students continue to avoid counseling even though the service is free and is available within campus. This may imply that the intention to seek counselling amongst university students is low even when they are facing problems.

Where positive and desirable changes have been achieved and where experience of counseling has been happy and beneficial, this may help to reduce possible feelings of stigma towards seeking professional psychological help, which in turn influences attitude towards seeking professional psychological help.

Before the official counseling session is initiated, student and counselor may have already met at some point, whereby the counselor usually explains the process of counseling, the confidentiality contract and the setting of goals. The forming of first impression and some degree of bond towards the counselor may have already been developed at this point. Morgan et al. (1982) suggested an assessment at the third session to collect views from clients on the strength of the working alliance. Kokotovic and Tracey (1990), however, presented evidence that the working alliance can already be measured after the first session, in a study where students were asked to rate their view of the initial alliance and were able to confirm the strength of the alliance after the first session. Although there is a contrast between these two views, there is merit to suggest that working alliance will begin to develop in the first session and evolve over time.

Poor working alliance at the beginning of a counseling process is predictive of early drop-out or early termination of a client from their counseling contract (Kokotovic & Tracey, 1990). This indicates the importance of a therapeutic working alliance in encouraging the utilization of the service through increasing students' intention of usage. Working alliance is not just predictive of early drop-out from counseling, but also predictive of counseling outcomes. Positive outcome from counseling may relate to achieving the counseling goal that was decided in the initial session, or it may manifest as positive changes that may not relate to the initial agreed goal. A positive outcome may be linked to a client's ability to undertake assigned tasks that facilitate a desirable outcome, and to not drop out early. Following counseling, Lai et al. (2020) for example, reported reduced symptoms of distress felt by students following counseling; while Venegas-Muggli et al. (2019) reported an increased intention to stay enrolled in university; Sanberk and Akbas (2015) explained that a positive and confident outcome can be demonstrated at the completion of a counseling relationship.

These positive changes were all aimed to benefit the students at completion of the counseling relationship. All the literature outlined above asserts that the working alliance may be a strong factor for students to complete

their counseling treatment. This may be because the experience affected student's attitude (Kearney et al., 2005) towards seeking professional help for emotional-related problems. In summary, students experiencing therapeutic working alliance possess higher intent to seek help from a professional psychological practitioner (Seyfi et al., 2013).

Working Alliance in the Counseling Relationship in the Malaysian Context

Although cross-sectional studies exist that examine the working alliance and counseling avoidance factors amongst undergraduates, most of the studies involves large samples of Caucasians (Vogel et al., 2007) and Americans of European origin (Wade et al., 2011). In fact, there are limited studies on counseling and its usage outside the United States of America (Topkaya et al., 2017). Diversity sampling should be addressed (Vogel et al., 2007) and studies need to be undertaken that involve various cultural backgrounds, in order to have an in-depth understanding of counseling avoidance factors. There may be differences in findings between different cultures (Wade et al., 2011).

It is self-evident that Malaysians tend to hold different cultural values compared to westerners. Thus, some results from previous western literature may not necessarily be suitable to generate conclusions for the Malaysian community. For example, cultural factors are reflected in an individual's personal preference in disclosing distressful information to non-professionals (friends or family) before turning to professional help. Agnis et al. (2012) reports that unity, loyalty and respect for the elderly is important in Malaysian culture because Malaysians tend to view family as a place that one receives shelter and that can be guaranteed for both emotional and financial support. University students' problems may arise from family issues, and meeting a counselor means the need for them to highlight problems that may be happening within the family. Therefore, disclosing one's family problems to others outside the family circle is considered not ideal.

There is a growing interest in measurement of working alliance amongst counselors and educators in Malaysia. Amongst recent literature reporting study of the working alliance in the Malaysian context, Nor Mazlina Ghazali et al. (2016), for example, show that there is evidence that working alliance is a significant predictor in the helping relationship and reflects helpers' competence. But that study differs in terms of focus groups and component-specific to mutual trust of bond, which does not address the focus of this study.

Research to include the Malaysian population relating to the counseling field continues to expand and be undertaken by researchers, including graduate researchers, in Malaysia. However, these areas of focus mostly gravitate towards intention, attitude and stigma (Aslina Ahmad et al., 2019; Tay Lay Pheng, 2019; Benjamin Chan Yin-Fah et al., 2016; Rafidah Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2013; Suradi Salim, 2010; Ming Sing Chai, 2000) or using respondents from schools rather than universities. For example, Aslina Ahmad et al. (2017) reported that students conducting research in the counseling field often lean towards issues amongst school students and mainly focus on academic related issues.

There is a clear need to bridge the gap of literature scarcity of working alliance discussion in counseling literature in the Malaysian context.

Concept of Attitude Towards Counseling Utilization

Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) define 'attitude' as a person's own judgement of doing something - what they say they will do, plan to do or would do. The concept of 'attitude' in the context of counseling utilization is also described as the extent of one's belief that engaging with a counselor can solve a client's problems. In other words, attitude reflects the belief that they can find relief from therapy including beliefs on what would happen if they do meet and talk to a counselor. The term 'attitude' is widely used to describe a psychological state that motivates a person to act favourably or unfavourably to an event or a situation (Al-Rowaie, 2001). It is known that potential clients hold various views of counseling before they actually seek help (Bordin, 1995). Once they use counseling, the experience may determine their future intent to utilize counseling service. Benjamin Chan Yin Fah et al. (2016) found that Malaysian students who have experienced positive counseling have a better attitude towards counseling service and were more likely to engage with counseling service in the future if needed.

Hence, allowing current clients and potential future clients to experience therapeutic working alliance in counseling may potentially help in reducing negative attitude towards counseling utilization.

Concept of Stigma Towards Counseling Utilization

'Stigma' is a culturally recognized attribute that is used to differentiate and discredit a person (Corrigan, 2004). This cultural attribute is described referring to what was introduced by the ancient Greeks to refer to unusual bodily signs to signify something bad about the bearer (Erving Goffman, 1986, as cited in Corrigan, 2004). The term 'stigma' since then evolved to be more than just a marking on bodies and the term continues to be used in society to mark something that is considered negative and out of the normal behaviour. According to Corrigan (2004), there are two types of stigmas linked to utilization of mental health service: public stigma and self-stigma.

1) Public stigma

Public stigma is defined as a collective view towards a person which is usually negative (Corrigan, 2000). The concept of public stigma in the context of counseling utilization refers to how students think other people will react towards them and what others will think of them because they sought for counseling help.

2) Self-Stigma

The definition for self-stigma is defined as an internalization of public stigma (Corrigan, 2000). Further defined, it is the reduction in a person's self-esteem or sense of self-worth due to a self-generated perception that they are socially unacceptable (Corrigan, 2004). The concept of self-stigma in counseling utilization refers to how students think about the impact of seeking counseling towards their own self-worth, their self-esteem and their self-ability to solve problems based on their initial view about how people will think of them. Thus, self-stigma is a public stigma that has been internalized by the individual.

Examining stigma in the context of counseling is necessary, as stigma was reported to be very evident in counseling amongst the clients (Vogel et al., 2007). This may be associated with bad perceptions and limited knowledge about counseling. A study amongst Malaysian university students by Tan Lay Pheng et al., (2019) indicated that the higher stigma (both public stigma and self-stigma) one has, the less likely the person will decide to seek professional help.

According to Ajzen & Fishbein (1980), different people have different levels of motivation to act on a behavior based on how they perceive the thinking of their significant others.

Disclosing Psychological Distress

Distress disclosure is the act of disclosing psychological distress. 'Distress disclosure' is one's tendency to disclose personally distressing information (Kahn & Hessling, 2001). Counseling in general involves clients sharing problems with the counselor. One's tendency to conceal – rather than disclose - information is considered a barrier in psychological help-seeking decisions (Vogel & Wester, 2003; Cepeda-Benito & Short, 1998), because disclosing distress in counseling involves an active process for clients to discuss personal problems with the counselor (Kahn et al., 2012).

Distress disclosure differs from self-disclosure in that the latter, as suggested by Kahn and Hessling (2001), may not necessarily involve disclosing personal negative information. Distress disclosure specifically reflects a willingness to share negative information about oneself.

Psychological distress disclosure in the context of this paper reflects a student's preference towards sharing their problems with others, and the type of individual with whom they choose to share their problems. Students who prefer to share their problems with family or friends are predicted to have low level of preference to share personal problems with the counselor. Students who prefer to not disclose (share) at all, are predicted to keep the problem to themselves.

Doherty and Kartalova-O'Doherty (2010) reported that distress disclosure tendency appears to be highly linked not just to attitude towards seeking professional help but also towards intentions of seeking any psychological help. Vogel and Wester (2003) also found that, among a general sample of college students, higher level of willingness to disclose distressing information relates to positive attitudes toward seeking help.

Furthermore, not sharing problem (concealing distress) is closely linked to Asian values, whereby Asians tend to emphasize on keeping problems within the family in order to maintain social harmony and by restraining emotions to avoiding loss of face (Kim & Park, 2009). Asians and Asian Americans in general both have a lower level of disclosure comfort (Kahn et al., 2012; Tsega, 2014; Kearney et al., 2005). It is useful to examine distress disclosure preference because the act of disclosing psychological distress has been reported to influence support seeking behavior (Shen, 2015). Students should be encouraged to share distressing thoughts or personal problems to others especially to their campus counselors who could provide them with professional mental health service.

Theory

Theory of Reasoned Action and Theory of Working Alliance facilitates a better understanding of the role of working alliance towards students' utilization of counseling.

Based on the theory of Reasoned Action and Theory of Working Alliance, therapeutic working alliance in counseling sessions may influence clients' belief towards the benefit of counseling. This belief may in turn influence future intention to use counseling service. The positive effect of an increased intention to seek counseling based on experiencing prior counseling was reported to be similar across genders (Seyfi et al., 2013). In addition, university and college students who have had prior counseling experience were reported to have a more positive attitude towards the counseling service (Kearney et al., 2005).

In summary, the conceptual framework for this study will be based on these foundations:

- (i) Theory of Reasoned Action
- (ii) Theory of Working Alliance

Theory of Reasoned Action

Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) discusses factors that influence a human to act on certain types of behaviour and intention as a precursor to an actual behaviour. This theory was developed by Icek Ajzen and Martin Fishbein and introduced in 1967 in an effort to describe how people generally engage in conscious thinking of the implications of a behavior before carrying out the behavior.

TRA is useful to understand a student's decision making in deciding to attend counseling. TRA has been applied in research predicting help-seeking behaviour among higher education students (Vogel et al., 2007). The TRA framework explains that 'intention' is a function towards action on carrying out a specific behaviour, which is influenced by attitude and stigma towards the behaviour concerned.

Theory of Working Alliance

The Theory of Working Alliance is a pan-theoretical conceptualisation on the cognitive and conative (cognitive-affective) dimension in the working alliance fostered by three identified components of working alliance, namely goal, task and bond. Bordin believed and strongly suggested that neither cognitive nor affective components exist in isolation. The conceptual framework for Bordin's working alliance theory was suggested to derive from previous alliance concepts, such as from Zetzel and Greenson (Messer & Wolitzky, 2010). Zetzel's alliance work mostly focused on the relationship between patient and therapist whereas Greenson's formulation was based solely on the work that needed to be done in therapy (Messer & Wolitzky, 2010). Bordin (1955) working alliance theory emphasised that the helping work is purposive, and the main characteristic of a purposive action is that it demands focus towards methods of achieving goals. The goals are achieved through the usage of knowledge, motor skills, conceptual tools or any resources available towards the attainment of the goal.

Bordin (1979) theorized that: (i) every psychotherapy that requires change involves working alliance, but each case may need a different kind of working alliance to be effective; (ii) it is the strength of the working alliance that matters to function as an effective change agent; (iii) difference in psychotherapy approaches exist due to different focus in fulfillment; (iv) the strength of working alliance serves as a function of fit between the specific kind of working alliance needed in the therapy with different personalities of both patient and therapist. Note that Bordin's proposals lean towards the usage of psychotherapy because his work was strongly influenced by previous psychotherapy work. However, Bordin further proposes that the working alliance is universal in its application. It exists in all relationship (Bordin, 1979) that involves working together in achieving certain objectives.

Thus, in summary, to understand the client completely is to understand as fully as possible both the cognitive and conative aspects of the client communication, towards a therapeutic working relationship (Bordin 1955).

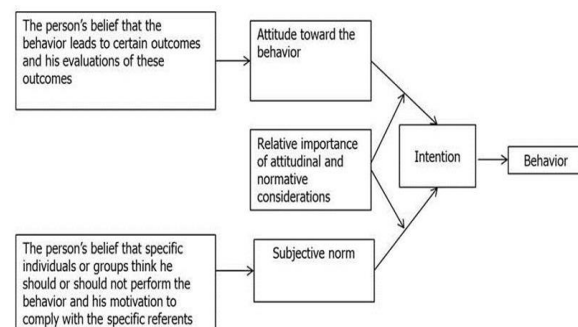
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is to represent a merged framework from both TRA and Theory of Working Alliance.

As seen in Figure 1, the Theory of Reasoned Action facilitates understanding of how working alliance may impact student's intention to seek counseling with their university's counselor.

Figure 1

Theory of Reasoned Action. Adapted from "Attitudes, Personality and Behavior", by Ajzen, I., 1988.



Strong working alliance in the counseling relationship predicts intention to seek counseling. This in turn predicts a correlation between attitude and intention to seek counseling, stigma and intention to seek counseling, and intention to seek counseling towards behaviour of utilizing counseling.

Discussion and Implication

The working alliance is said to be the construct of a collaborative relationship. From this understanding, counselors can use that as a marker to achieve therapeutic relationship with their client.

Earlier recommendations from Malaysian professionals in counseling and help seeking behaviour were to carry out more research in the counseling seeking behaviour amongst Malaysian undergraduates (Ching Mey See & Kok Mun Ng, 2010; Suradi Salim, 2010). This recommendation for more research in the Malaysian context motivates this study to be undertaken to provide in-depth understanding on how Malaysian university students perceive their problems and their preference towards help seeking.

This study will contribute to the information-base about the working alliance subject in the counseling relationship which can be referred to by Malaysian mental health professionals in general and Malaysian university counselors specifically, thus helping to address the concerns expressed in the sparse empirical findings of Ching Mey See and Kok-Mun Ng (2010); Suradi Salim (2010). More generally, this study will contribute to improving the professionalism of counseling service in Malaysia.

Further to this, the study helps to address the under-representation of Asian undergraduates in studies done to date, particularly in the Malaysian context. This is important because, as noted by Wade et al. (2011), wider diversity in sampling may lead to differences in findings, and diversity should always be considered (Vogel, 2007).

The results of this study would be able to serve as guidance to government and non-governmental organisations in designing specific training programs. For example: 'supportive-expressive' technique applied in counseling by counselors is a skill that has been shown to increase perception of bond with the counselor (Shateri & Lavasani, 2018). The professionalism of the counseling service can be strengthened where skill-specific training programs can be offered to counselors to further expand their professional capability to form stronger working alliance with their clients.

Evidently, the scarcity of working alliance literature and lack of Malaysian representation need to be addressed in order to contribute to the counseling literature that may be useful for reference by mental health professionals in Malaysia and counselors in Malaysian universities. By understanding the influence of working alliance in counseling, steps to achieve therapeutic working alliance in the counseling relationship can be taken appropriately by counselors.

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