

Ph.D.: Research Project

Thesis Title: Bridging the counselling experiences of international students: Towards a new approach.

Introduction

Current processes of globalisation have profound effects on educational institutions. International student numbers predominately from SouthEast Asia have increased dramatically in tertiary institutions in the last ten years. Not only has this influx brought its own challenges to the institutions, it is also re-shaping the context in which counsellors and other helping practitioners work.

My observations and experience as a student counsellor and initial research exploration have led me to believe that international students underutilise counselling services. Moreover, often these students seeking help terminate counselling significantly earlier than mainstream students.

One of the central questions of my research continues to be: if indeed there is such an underutilisation, can this be credited to barriers such as language; culture bound attitudes, or students' perceptions of counsellors or counselling services? Or could this be attributed to counsellors' personal value orientation and biases and the way culture is defined and understood within counselling discourses? This is being investigated

The aim of this paper is to provide you with a brief overview of the research project and to draw on some notable points from my fieldwork as examples of the types of information emanating from interviews conducted with several students and counsellors. At this stage I am unable to present a summary of the findings, as this is a work in progress paper.

1 Brief overview of the study:

METHOD:

The participants of this study comprised of two groups

From three different institutions

I have chosen these sites because of the diverse cultural groups that are enrolled. Students are predominantly from South East Asia from (Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and India) and are currently enrolled in Medicine, Engineering, Business and Information Technology.

Participants were recruited through a number of ways: The first being a mail out which was organised by the Counselling Services of two sites to current and former students of the service. The mail out package included a pre-paid envelope, a cover letter by Head of Counselling outlining the aim and benefits of the research, the researcher explanatory letter and a pre-interview questionnaire with a consent form.

The second method was through situating myself in the international student lounge and talking informally to students over lunch breaks and extending to them an invitation to

participate if they wished. The aim of this was to draw on perspective of students who have not utilised counselling services.

The final method used for recruitment was through networking with students who had already participated in the project.

Both under and post graduates students, men and women were encouraged to participate in order to bring gender balance to the study.

Twelve counsellors from the three sites were also involved.

The data was collected through two means: firstly the students completed the pre-interview questionnaire and returned it to me via a prepaid envelope. Secondly a follow up interview was organised between my self and the individual participants.

In all, I formulated open-ended questions derived from the questionnaire in order to stimulate exchange and discussion amongst respondents. The same format was followed for the counsellors. I am unable to discuss all the interview questions here today due to time constraints, however I will focus on couple of questions from several interviews with students and counsellors.

1 Fieldwork: Notable points from student's transcripts.

The two questions that I explored are:

1. The type of socio-psychological problems /difficulties students may encounter whilst studying abroad.
2. Barriers that may hinder students from seeking counselling.

Other questions explored in the interview that I am unable to discuss here due to time restraints are:

- Student's perceptions regarding counselling and counselling services.
- Personal outcomes of counselling experience.

Under question one, the type of socio-psychological problems/difficulties students may encounter; the participants identified a host of negative factors associated with arrival and with their stay in Australia. Issues of isolations, culture shock, loneliness, anxiety, lack of support and depression featured heavily in the personal comments made by students. For example this is what an MBA student from one the universities had to say:

I have been here now for nine months and I still have no friends. How can that be explained? I have plenty of non-Australian friends but no Australian friends.

Let me stress that individual disposition undoubtedly plays a large part in each student's response to the arrival experience.

It also appears that social interaction is problematic for international students due to little contact between local students. The following is a comment made by a postgraduate student regarding social interaction:

I have never been inside an Australian home. I don't know how they live. All I know is that they go to the beach, have B.B.Q., and read the newspaper. I have never seen it or experienced it.

In relation to the academic difficulties students' encounter, participants outlined their perceptions on aspects of the study time they found to be challenging in Australia. These ranged from inability to express ideas, language problems (written) different study methods, and poor time management skills.

While there are overlapping themes amongst groups such as those discussed above, many of the articulated difficulties varied in nature and severity from person to person. For example while a number of students referred to the issues of having to perform well in their studies, some participants seemed overly pressured by this expectation than others. This is what a Singaporean female student had to say in reference to pressure:

Because there is so much money invested on your education, you really feel you have to be extra good to justify the amount that has been spent on you. So, you constantly remind yourself of it.

The second interview question explored the barriers that hinder students from fully utilising counselling services and whether these barriers can be attributed to language, culture bound attitudes or students' perceptions of counsellors and counselling services? Or could forces outside the student's control create these barriers such as the way culture is defined and understood within Australian counselling discourses?

Participants provided a reflective perspective on the barriers that hinder them from seeking professional counselling when often they desperately needed it. Fear of the unknown, counsellors perceived as strangers, confidentiality, and the expectation to be able to assist one self featured high as the most prominent barriers. The following is a remark by an under graduate female science student:

I guess it is not knowing how they (i.e. counsellors) are going to view me and what they would think of the way I have handled the situation I am in, because they might go about it in a different way, due to the fact that we both have different value and belief system.

In reference to students' perception of 'counsellors are strangers' the following is a comment made by another student:

I am not comfortable with people I don't know. It is the sharing of the concern that is the problem. I know that the counsellor is a professional, but still there is that comfort issue: I just don't feel comfortable telling a stranger.

When I asked one of the participants to reflect on whether the expectation to be able to assist oneself was a personal or cultural expectation, her response was this:

It comes from me. But I think generally I would be safe to say that Asian cultures are like that. The need to be strong and be able to solve your problems and not seek help from anybody else. It's a very prominent feature in Asian cultures.

Linked to all the above barriers is also the perceived stigma and invasion of privacy attached to counselling in the culture of many international students. As pointed out by some of the

participants, going to see a counsellor (whose role is often mistaken for that of psychiatrist) is a sign of mental illness and not an honorable thing to do.

2 Fieldwork: Notable points from transcripts (Counsellors)

Among the many questions that I examined in the interview with the counsellors, the two that I would like to focus on today are:

1 Barriers which limit the effectiveness of counselling international students on part of the counsellor.

2 Factors which may affect the counselling process/outcome for international students.

In discussing the counsellor's barriers that may affect counselling with international students, communication issues seem to be a great concern to many counsellors. The inability sometimes to understand /grasp fully the problem the student is presenting can be very challenging when language skills are limited. Here is a comment made by a counselling psychologist from one of the institutions:

Communication issues are perhaps more difficult when I am speaking with some one who does not speak English. I find that anxiety builds up because I am trying very hard to listen...Just sheer language barrier and the fact that I do not speak that persons language can be quite a barrier.

Some counsellors have also argued that personal value orientation can act as a major barrier in cross-cultural counselling. Because as human beings we are often embedded within a cultural framework with a specific set of values and beliefs, counsellors too are likely to bring these values into the counselling relationship. The following is a comment by a counsellor:

The concept of keeping face, the fact that the student would rather kill him/her self than go home as failed. I have a problem with the depth of that because it contradicts my values and convictions. That creates a big barrier for me.

However there were a number of counsellors who felt very genuine that their personal value orientation was not a barrier. This is largely due to English being their second language and their own migration experiences over the years as temporary and permanent sojourners.

Besides personal value orientation another barrier such as limited contact time with international students

features heavily in the personal comments made by other counsellors. This often hinders practitioners building /extending their experience and cultural knowledge. Thus as one counsellor puts it, "this limits the development of higher level of cultural sophistication for me".

The aim of the second question was to explore what are some of the factors that may affect the counselling process with international students.

One of the main factors which affects the counselling process according to a number of counsellors is the counselling style/approach used by the counsellors.

Currently there is a number of counselling styles/ models which counsellors are trained in and use. These are Psychoanalytic school which emphasis's early psychosexual and psychosocial development; Cognitive model which is a highly didactic, cognitive, action-oriented model of therapy; and the Existential and Person-Centered approach where both emphasises the client/counsellor relationship as the major factor that leads to constructive personal change.

Multicultural Counselling and Therapy (MCT) can now be considered as the fourth force in counselling which aims at not to dismissing the existing traditional methods of helping I have just mentioned, but rather add to those by employing a culturally meaningful and culturally sensitive approach in working with the client.

Historically counselling has focused on values of individualism, rationalism and self-determination.

Counsellors have pointed out that many international students enter counselling with the notion that the counsellor is going to solve their problem. So when a student encounters a practitioner whose counselling orientation is Person-Centered, they become disillusioned with the process and drop out because the approach conflicts with their needs and wants Hence counselling outcomes are not achieved. This is a comment made by counsellor

Students come to me at first for the answer. "Tell me what to do" they say. My reply is "I am not going to do that, but I will look at the options and work with you to take up any of the options".

However, whilst some counsellors feel uncomfortable in modifying their counselling styles to suit students, a number of others expressed the need for flexibility in order to derive at positive outcomes. For example this counsellor provided an encouraging perspective in reference to her counselling approach. This is what she has to say:

Humanistic is my style: Listening to the person's story: affirming, confirming and normalising with what's happening. But I will switch if this style is not working. Its always the case of what kind of response I am getting from the student and if that is not working I will turn to a more problem solving approach.

Conclusion:

I would like to conclude with some questions that these findings rise for me.

- Given some of the cultural barriers and inhibitions about seeking counselling, how and what creative means can counselling services and institutions develop to overcome or minimise this?
- When considering the variations between cultures how do counsellors and counselling services inform their understanding of cultural differences? (For example how useful are categories such as Hofstede's Model? and why might such knowledge be problematic?
- Given that culture can be bridged, is the preference of one counselling approach/style over another necessary in counselling international students? (Universalism /etic verses relativism/emic).

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