

Counseling in Malaysia: History, Current Status, and Future Trends

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This article presents an overview of the history of counseling in Malaysia, provides an update of its current status, and discusses some anticipated future trends for the profession in light of recent developments in the country. Counseling in Malaysia began with school guidance in the 1960s and has now achieved recognition as a profession in school and community settings. Counseling in Malaysia continues to encounter challenges in training, service, and professional identity and development.

Malaysia, a former British colony, achieved independence in 1957. The country has since grown manifold in terms of population, economy, and international recognition. Counseling in Malaysia has also grown through the course of time. Crucial groundwork and major milestones for professional counseling have since been laid. Currently, professional counseling in Malaysia is poised to transition into its pubescence. Several authors (Lloyd, 1987; Ng & Stevens, 2001; Pope, Musa, Singaravelu, Bringaze, & Russell, 2002; Scorzelli, 1987) have reported on the history and development and trends of counseling in Malaysia in the past. It is the purpose of this article to give a brief overview of the history of counseling in Malaysia, provide an update of its current status, and highlight some anticipated future trends for the counseling profession in light of recent developments in the country.

Malaysia: The Country

Malaysia is located in Southeast Asia and consists of a federation of 13 states. Its government is a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament. Malaysia is a multicultural society. The Department of Statistics Malaysia (2009) showed a population of 28.31 million, and according to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's (2009) estimation, there were 50.4% Malays, who are Muslims by birth; 23.7% Chinese, who are mainly Buddhists and Taoists, with some Christians; 11% indigenous peoples, who are mainly animists; 7.1% Indians, who are mainly Hindus; and 7.8% others. Bahasa Melayu is the official language. English is widely used in business and commerce, whereas various Chinese dialects, Indian languages, and indigenous languages are also spoken.

As one of the fastest growing Southeast Asian countries, Malaysia has become a destination for many legal and illegal migrant workers from neighboring countries since the 1990s. Recently, private higher education institutions have mushroomed and attracted many international students from developing and underdeveloped countries that are looking for a less expensive alternative compared with those in Western

countries. As such, the social makeup in most major cities in Malaysia is very different compared with a decade ago.

The Malaysian economy has not fully recovered from the effects of the 1997–1998 financial crisis in Southeast and Northeast Asia. Globalization and competition from China have resulted in much economic insecurity (Shari, 2003). The Malaysian society is also experiencing many social changes and challenges, such as increased urban migration, aging of the population, rising divorce rate, family structure transformation, and illegal immigration (Phua, n.d.; Pope et al., 2002).

Historical Overview and Current Status of Counseling

The guidance and counseling movement reached Malaysia through the work and leadership of the counseling profession in the United States (Lloyd, 1987) as it did in most of the world (Pope, 2000). In 1963, the Malaysian Ministry of Education accepted the importance of school guidance in its schools (Amir & Latiff, 1984). Guidance became an integral part of education aimed at promoting or stimulating the gradual development of the ability to make decisions independently without undue influence from others. However, because of the lack of financial and human resources, the guidance plans went awry.

These plans were revived in the 1980s as the drug problem among youth in Malaysia escalated and the Ministry of Education announced the need for guidance and counseling teachers in the schools. This led the secondary schools to reorganize their priorities to include guidance and counseling activities through the appointment of guidance and counseling teachers. These teachers received a reduced teaching load. They played the dual roles of teacher and counselor until 1996 when the Ministry of Education implemented the position of full-time school counselors. By 2000, every secondary school had at least one full-time counselor.

In the 1980s, universities and teacher training institutions started to offer guidance and counseling courses for preservice

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and in-service teachers. The number of counseling programs grew as the number of institutions increased. Currently, there are seven public universities and one private university offering graduate-level counseling programs. Five of the public universities also offer bachelor's-level counseling degrees, and four of them offer postgraduate counseling degrees. New Era College offers a counseling twinning program with four universities in Taiwan. Two private institutions of higher education have recently begun to offer master's degrees in counseling.

Government-sponsored drug counseling in-service training began in the 1980s as well. However, trainees were personnel from the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the Department of Prisons (Scorzelli, 1987). Drug counseling was provided to persons who abused drugs and were in governmental rehabilitation programs, aftercare programs, as well as nonprofit agencies. However, counseling in these facilities was minimal, and the counselors working in these facilities were often recovering persons who had abused drugs and lacked formal counseling training (Scorzelli, 1987).

In 1982, the development of counseling in Malaysia reached its first professional milestone with the establishment of the Malaysian Counseling Association, known as PERKAMA (Persatuan Kaunseling Malaysia). It currently has more than 200 members and regularly organizes counseling training workshops and conferences.

In 1996, the Ministry of Education provided specific guidelines that outlined duties and functions for this new profession in the school systems. By the late 1990s, counseling services also grew in other government departments, industry and business corporations, religious institutions, rehabilitation centers, nongovernment organizations, and the community at large. Within 3 decades of its formal introduction in Malaysia, counseling has become a household word and is frequently being mentioned in the media.

In 1996, the first Malaysian Chinese Counseling Conference was organized (Koh, 2004). The conference brought approximately 30 professionals and lay counselors from among agencies that targeted mental health needs in the Chinese-speaking community. Since the first conference, one has been held biannually, and the number of participants has increased through the years.

In 1998, counseling in Malaysia reached its first major milestone toward professionalization and gained legitimacy when the parliament enacted the Counsellors Act 1998 (Act 580; Commissioner of Law Revision and Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Bhd, 2006) to regulate the practice of professional counseling. In December 2005, there were 362 registered counselors with the Board of Counselors, and 225 of them were licensed counselors (See, 2004). By July 2009, there were 1,749 registered counselors with the Board of Counselors, and 1,219 of them were licensed counselors. With an estimate of about 4,000 secondary school counselors, only approximately 826 of them (about 20.7%) are registered with the Board of Counselors. Possible reasons why most school counselors do

not register with the board are (a) the registration and licensure make no difference to their appointment, (b) the process incurs financial expenses, and (c) the school counselors lack the board-stipulated requirements.

In the last 10 years, the development of counseling in Malaysia has experienced a tremendous growth spurt. This is evidenced by (a) an increased number of counselor education programs that include doctoral training in public universities and master's-level counseling programs in local private schools and foreign offshore campuses; (b) greater attention given to mental health and counseling in print and electronic media; (c) increased number of counseling-related workshops, seminars, and conferences (e.g., hypnotherapy, neurolinguistic programming, family therapy, play therapy); and (d) instituting licensure for counseling.

In 2001, Ng and Stevens concluded that the counseling profession in Malaysia was still in its infancy stage. However, much has happened in recent years, and we believe that the profession in Malaysia is poised toward transitioning into its pubescence, although the road ahead remains challenging.

School Counseling: Paradigm and Future Trends

In the early years, the major duties of the guidance teachers revolved around vocational and academic guidance. One-on-one counseling was difficult to maintain in large schools with discipline problems because counselors were too busy with their teaching loads. In addition, these school counselors were often inadequately trained. Furthermore, other than general guidelines, the roles and functions of school counseling were not clearly defined. In 1996, a directive from the Ministry of Education clarified the roles and functions of school counselors. It emphasized three main areas: (a) academic-related issues, (b) career guidance and development issues, and (c) psychosocial and mental-health-related issues. Currently, there are no appointments of elementary school counselors, although elementary school guidance and counseling is generally done by teachers.

Up until the mid-1990s, school principals formerly appointed teachers to the role of the school counselor. In the 1960s, they were called the "guidance teacher" or the "guidance and counseling teacher." Later, they were referred to as "school counselors." They played the dual role of teacher and counselor until 1996, when the Ministry of Education implemented the position of full-time school counselors. By 2000, every secondary school had at least one full-time counselor, also called "guidance and counseling officer." These counselors now need to keep office hours (8 a.m. to 4 p.m.) and provide guidance and counseling services to students from both the morning and afternoon sessions. (Most schools in Malaysia run two sessions a day.)

The future of school counseling in Malaysia seems to be dependent on three identifiable avenues that require major improvement to stimulate growth. They are as follows:

1. *Theoretical orientations.* Currently, there is a lack of a coherent theoretical framework for the practice of school counseling. For future growth to take place, school counselors need to incorporate various therapeutic approaches into their practice techniques, for example, family therapy, developmental approaches, and multicultural approaches.

The role of testing and assessment for school counselors needs further clarification and delineation for counselors to effectively incorporate them into their functions. The schools are as culturally diverse as the Malaysian society. However, multicultural counseling competence training in most counseling training programs is lacking. Furthermore, students' presenting issues are increasingly more severe and complex for example, incest, teenage pregnancy, sexual orientation, and Internet addiction. Therefore, school counselors and counselor educators need to gain theoretical and treatment competencies in these areas that are culturally relevant, responsive, and effective.

2. *Research.* More research is needed to help school counseling further define and refine its purpose and directions, theory and practice, and training framework. Empirical findings are needed to improve the professionalism and professionalization of school counseling. School counseling professionals and researchers need to work toward shaping the future of school counseling and not rely on the government to dictate what is and what will be school counseling.

3. *Clinical discoveries made through direct practice.* Because school counseling, as a profession independent from teaching, is still rather new in Malaysia, the practice of school counseling remains reliant on counselors who are on the job to figure it out. Therefore, practicing school counselors are in a unique position of having to discover for themselves what school counseling is, including clinical management and service.

Community Counseling: Current Practice and Future Trends

Community counseling services began in Malaysia through a variety of nonprofit organizations that were often faith-based, for example, The Befrienders, Agape Counseling Center, Buddhist Gem Fellowship, and PT Foundation (previously known as Pink Triangle). Most of these agencies first began offering telephone counseling services. Currently, some of these agencies have some licensed counselors as service providers. The number of fee-for-service private counseling agencies and practitioners has increased in major cities as a result of an increased number of counseling and applied psychology graduates.

Currently, the focus of community agencies appears to be on providing child and adult mental health needs and marketing wellness and social skills training. There is a demand for educational psychologists, child psychologists, play therapists, and music therapists to work with various stakeholders on issues related to

children. There is also an increased need for community counselors to provide or be involved in gifted children management, intellectual ability development, social and emotional learning of children, and psychological testing and assessment.

Given that counseling is a young profession, counselors have to focus a considerable amount of their time and effort in marketing their services and creating awareness for mental health services in the media. As a result, the public has come to perceive marketing and public relations skills to be under the umbrella of counseling and psychology. Thus, counselors are expected to provide training in skills such as parenting, relationship management, and stress management.

The types of community counseling services currently available in Malaysia are telephone counseling, face-to-face counseling, and support groups. Telephone counseling is managed often by lay volunteers and focuses on crisis counseling. Counseling agencies in Malaysia tend to be characterized by language and religion. Government-linked agencies offer their services mainly in Bahasa Melayu, and their clients are mainly the Malays who are Muslims. Most agencies established by the Chinese Malaysian community run their programs and services in Chinese languages, and their clients are mainly Chinese. These Chinese-based agencies can be further divided into faith-based (Christian or Buddhist) or politics-based (financially supported by Chinese political parties).

Agencies that are targeting clients whose primary language is English or who are conversant in English are another category of agencies. These agencies tend to be fielded by lay counselors or licensed professionals who are conversant in English. These agencies may also be distinguished according to religion (e.g., Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu). Although there is a large population of Tamil-speaking Indian Malaysians in the country, there are comparatively fewer agencies and services targeting their needs. Traditionally, there is not a lot of crossing over or collaboration among the various types of agencies. With regard to private practice, the language versatility of the practitioners determines their clientele. Therefore, counseling services in Malaysia seem to reflect the low degree of cultural and social integration in the larger Malaysian society.

Currently, despite increased family and relationship problems in the country, there remains a serious lack of practitioners in family, couples, and marital counseling and substance abuse/addiction counseling in the community settings (Ng, 2003; Ng & Stevens, 2001). This seems to reflect the lack of curricular emphasis in these areas in existing training programs. There is, therefore, a need for counselor education programs to respond to these needs.

Supervision continues to be an issue both in school counseling and in community counseling. The profession seems to have realized the need for greater quality counseling supervision for counselors-in-training as well as for newly licensed counselors. This is evidenced by the demand for training workshops in supervision as well as the effort put forth by the Malaysian Board of Counselors to provide supervision

training for existing licensed counselors in order to increase the number of eligible supervisors. To ensure the quality of supervision training, the Malaysian Board of Counselors should consider developing guidelines that define the standards and scope of training and practice of supervision. Along with the need for more supervisors, there is also a grave need for quality training sites.

The Future

As noted by earlier writers (Lloyd, 1987; Ng, 2003; Ng & Stevens, 2001; Scorzelli, 1987), the need for systematic quality training in counseling continues to exist despite the strides made thus far. With the increased number of counseling programs in the local universities and foreign offshore programs, we expect to see an increased number of quality training programs resulting from (a) competition, (b) market demand because of increased awareness of counseling and related services in the society, (c) clarification and tightening of licensure requirements (e.g., only master's-level holders are licensable as opposed to the current standards that allow for bachelor's-level holders to be licensed), (d) the demand for increased professionalism and competence from the public as well as from within the Malaysian counseling profession because of an increased number of homegrown and overseas-trained master's-level and doctoral practitioners, and (e) influence from the internationalization movement of the counseling profession.

As the number of training programs continues to grow in the country, including doctoral-level training, more foreign counselor educators will be needed to teach in these programs. This will provide a great opportunity for cross-fertilization of teaching and practice of counseling and supervision and will further enhance the process of internationalization of the counseling profession.

With the increased number of doctoral programs, greater emphasis on research will take place, thus resulting in a greater amount of research on Malaysian mental health issues and counseling practices. As such, there will be increased research literature and publications authored by Malaysians and foreign researchers and writers.

With the rise in professionalism in counseling, there will be a greater emphasis on professional ethics and delivery of services. Currently, the Malaysian Board of Counselors and the Malaysian Counseling Association follow an adaptation of the American Counseling Association (ACA; 2005) *ACA Code of Ethics*. It is anticipated that counseling professionals and the board will work together to develop a code of ethics that is contextualized and culturally relevant to Malaysia.

Despite being a multicultural society, counseling programs in Malaysia have not given due attention to multicultural counseling training and practice (Ng & Stevens, 2001). However, on the basis of what we know that has been proposed and discussed in conferences in Malaysia, we expect that

multicultural counseling training will assume a greater focus in Malaysia. There will also be an increased development of family, couples, marital, and addictions counseling because these areas of training have been largely neglected, although the need has been increasing (Ng & Stevens, 2001).

With the increased number of locally trained master's and doctoral graduates, it is expected that an increased number of Malaysian students will go overseas for doctoral or postdoctoral learning. It is hoped that counselor education programs in the United States will see this as an opportunity to contribute to the global growth of the counseling profession by recruiting more Malaysian students into their doctoral programs, as well as develop postdoctoral opportunities for these students. American counseling programs will benefit from having these individuals as students in their doctoral programs or as part of their faculty as visiting scholars.

Currently, the first author has a part-time private counseling practice in Malaysia and has noted an increased number of clients. With awareness on mental health and well-being and related counseling services increasing in the country, there will be an increased number of people seeking counseling services in Malaysia.

It is further expected that there will be a continued rise of counseling agencies in the country in the years to come. It is anticipated that there will be more licensed counselors, and many of them will enter private practice. Private practice opportunities will also be created by an increased awareness and offering of employee assistance programs in the country. However, private practice is still a new and uncertain enterprise in Malaysia. Because of the lack of professional and legal guidelines on private practice, counselors need to be aware of the following:

1. Personal challenges, such as readiness in skills and experience and strength to cope with the needs and expectations of a new profession.
2. Professional challenges, such as considering oneself to be a helping professional and a businessperson concurrently. To the best of our knowledge, no counseling program in Malaysia has offered training on how to start and maintain a counseling private practice. Also, counseling remains new and foreign to Malaysians. Hence, there remains much to be learned about how to educate clients about the process of counseling with private practitioners and their rights as consumers.

With regard to trends in professional development, the following will probably take place in Malaysia:

1. Even though the Counsellors Act 1998 (Act 580; Commissioner of Law Revision and Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Bhd, 2006) is meant to regulate counselors, there are psychologists who have applied for registration and licensure because they do not have their own Act. As such, it is expected that there will be an increased number of registered and licensed counselors.

2. There will be strengthened collaboration among the Malaysian Counseling Association, the Malaysian Psychology Association, and mental-health- and counseling-related bodies. Because the country is relatively small, as is the number of mental health practitioners, we expect to see earnest efforts among counselors, psychologists, and other mental health workers to collaborate for the benefits of clients. We also hope to see mental health professionals reaching across the aisle and bridging race, religion, language, and professional turf differences.

3. There will be an increased professional standing and recognition coming from the public as a result of (a) increased visibility of professional counselors, (b) improved standard of service delivery, and (c) increased level of professionalism. However, because there is a trend of having more individuals claiming to practice some form of therapy because they have been to some training workshops or programs, there will be an increased number of individuals setting up office as service providers. There is nothing to prevent them from using the title *therapist*.

4. There will be an increased emphasis given to supervision training in the near future as a next step of growth for the profession. There will be local training programs to develop systematic supervision training as well as overseas trainers coming to Malaysia to offer supervision training.

5. Currently, most counseling practitioners and agencies are located in major cities. Access to counseling services in small towns and rural areas is very limited. Therefore, it is likely that Internet counseling will increase in time to meet this need.

Conclusion

Counseling in Malaysia has come a long way, although the growth has been slow. Some crucial groundwork and important milestones have been laid for the profession to transition from infancy to pubescence, but many challenges remain. Yet, opportunities abound. For the next few years, efforts must be made to ensure that counselors have the competencies to provide effective counseling services leading to specialization, such as drugs/HIV counseling, sexual minority counseling, mental health counseling, and marriage and family counseling. Malaysia is a relatively small country, and there are not many mental health professionals. We urge counselors and other mental health professionals to continue their collaborative efforts to advocate for mental health access for all Malaysians as well as for mental health professionals across disciplines. Continued collaboration among mental health professionals in Malaysia coupled with assistance from overseas professionals will be needed to help meet the challenges and maximize the opportunities.

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