

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the conclusions of the research based on its two main objectives. This chapter also proposes some recommendations to enhance future research in similar field.

6.2 Conclusions

The current study is exploratory in nature. Its main objectives are to develop and test the effect of a conflict management training module on counsellor trainees. Based on the discussions of the qualitative and quantitative findings, several conclusions are made and presented below.

First, the counsellor trainees view conflict in group counselling as more interpersonally oriented than of intrapersonally or group oriented conflicts. Some trainees are aware of the conflict at its developmental stage through members' disrespectful and resistant behaviours. Yet, some realize it when the conflict is already at its advance stage. These

differences could be the result of their previous experience with conflicts and also the lack of knowledge about the nature of conflict.

Second, in term of conflict management strategies, the trainees tend to depend on indirect rather than direct approaches to conflict management. Avoiding, third party, certain group skills, and activity become major conflict management strategies. These indirect approaches could be influenced by the Malaysia cultural context where it is more respectable and acceptable for counselors to use subtle gesture to confront the parties in conflict.

Third, in term of their attitude towards conflict, the trainees are inclined towards negative than positive view of conflict. Conflict provokes anger, anxiety, and disappointment in them. They develop negative conflict scripts that undermine themselves as a leader. As a result, they try to stop a conflict before it becomes disruptive to the group. These two elements, aversive emotions and negative cognitive scripts, will lead the trainees to behave destructively during conflicts.

Fourth, as for the utilization of the group leadership functions during conflicts, the trainees are more inclined towards the executive and the support providing functions. The use of the authority power is to stabilize and bring harmony to the group process. As for providing support during conflicts, the trainees focus more on giving cognitive rather than emotional support. This is influenced by the trainees' emotional state at that moment. It is more practical to deal with conflicts at the cognitive level. By doing that, they and the group can have time to calm down and be more rational in dealing with the conflict.

Fifth, after attending the training workshop, the trainees gain further knowledge on conflict, leadership functions, and conflict strategies. As a result, their conflict management improves and their attitude towards conflict and towards group leadership functions become more favorable. They also seem to pay more attention to their use of words and intonation during conflict management process. They are comfortable to give support and share meanings of the conflict situations with the group. These functions are congruent with their perceptions of a counsellor's roles. In term of using their power as group leaders, the trainees are still uncertain of how to constructively use it.

However, at the emotional level, the acceptance is more complex. This could be related to their past experience with conflicts. Seeing conflicts happen in the group could bring back some repressed emotions from their past. This could lead to confusion with their true feelings towards conflicts in the group.

In short, the study brings to awareness the trainees' personal struggles in dealing with challenging group events and in establishing themselves as professional counselors. With this information, hopefully, those involved in the training of group counselor will continue to provide cognitive and emotional supports to their trainees to enhance their knowledge and skills, and consequently their beliefs in themselves.

6.3 Research Recommendations

Research on group counsellor trainees and group counselling are still limited in Malaysia. More research on this area needs to be conducted to realize its high potential in helping more individuals at one time. Group counselling can be the avenue for counsellors to

optimize on their experience and knowledge in helping others. In addition, group counselling is a meaningful platform for people sharing similar and dissimilar problems to find support and motivation to make positive changes in their life. Realizing the potential benefits of group counselling, more research should focus on the group counsellor training, particularly on skills acquisition and professional development. The following are some suggestions on how the present research can be improved.

6.3.1 Recommendations to Guidance and Counselling Services

The guidance and counselling services in Malaysia have received public recognition. The services have been implemented in various settings including the academic, hospitals, rehabilitations centers, and police departments. Even though the service has been beneficial in helping hundreds of people make changes in their life, there is still space to improve the service.

The present research shows that the counsellor trainees who have completed all the counselling group courses and have undergone internship trainings are still vague about conflict, group leadership functions, and conflict management. This means, some of them may continue to be confused about group counselling, leadership functions, and management of conflict upon their graduation. For these trainees, leading group counselling can be difficult and they may be unable to conduct effective group sessions. In order to avoid psychological and emotional harm being inflicted on group members, and for the trainees to conduct group with more self-confident, several recommendations are proposed. Hopefully, with these suggestions, the guidance and counselling services offered to those in needs can be improved.

Firstly, the guidance and counselling program at the university and college levels should focus on providing more guidance to enhance the counsellor trainees' knowledge and acquisition of group skills. This can be made possible by offering two instead of one course on group works. The first course can focus on introducing the various group works to the trainees, which include the psycho-educational, training, counselling, and psychotherapy groups. This course is knowledge based and focuses on giving exposure to the characteristics of each group and its process. De-Lucia and Kalodner (2005), Mac-Nair Semands (1998), and Stockton, et al. (2004) suggest that trainees should understand how their roles and functions change with the different group objectives and group process.

The second group course should be exclusive to the training of group counselling. It should give priority to group skills acquisition, group leadership functions, and management of critical events in the group. Group skills acquisition should start from how to apply the individual counselling skills to group setting and follow with advanced group skills and leadership skills. In term of group leadership functions, the trainees should be guided to give emotional support and show care to members' welfare. As for the executive function, they can be taught to understand the effects of too much or too little use of authority power on the group. Finally, the course needs to allocate ample training time for management of critical events in the group. The counsellor educators should guide the trainees how to apply the group skills and their leadership functions to manage the critical events constructively. These events if not properly managed may negatively affect the group process and cause the group to be stuck in its development.

Secondly, guidance and counselling services introduced in Malaysia reflect the Western system of help-seeking service. Even though the spirit of helping others is already embedded in the Malaysian culture, when guidance and counselling services are introduced the help is made institutionalized. Some of the Western philosophy of help-service may not be compatible with Malaysian culture, and some trainees may be reluctant to wholeheartedly embrace the system. One example is the belief that counsellor should refrain from giving advice to the client. Advice giving has always been part of Asian culture and it is an expected action between the olds and the youngs, and between the more knowledgeable and the less knowledgeable. Counsellor educators need to pay attention to the influence of cultural values on their trainees' leadership functions; and, how these values may be compatible or incompatible with their teachings. By being flexible and not to adhere strongly to the Western philosophy of help-giving service, the counsellor educators may guide the trainees to assimilate between the Western and the Asian values. This may bring more advantage as the assimilation will better meet the needs of the local community.

Thirdly, the present research incorporates the 3-stage learning process of Skilled Group Counselling Training Model (SGCTM) by Urbani, et al. (2002) in the proposed Conflict Management Training Module. More research should be conducted to explore the effectiveness of these stages in guiding the trainees to acquire general group skills and specific intervention skills. Questions on "How the trainees learn and acquire the different skills?", "Which learning modes are more effective?", and "What are the appropriate self-reflective exercises to complement the teaching of group counseling course?" should all be carefully documented by the counsellor educators and the trainees.

These documents may serve as valuable research data on which group teaching strategies can be improvised to better serve the needs of counsellor trainees and other group workers.

Finally, there is still lack of local writings on group works in Malaysia. Counsellor educators and group practitioners need to keep records of their experience. These documents can be valuable learning aids for other group workers. Presently, the readings on group works have come mainly from the Western world, in particular the US and Britain. These readings, even though are helpful, lack the local touch. Malaysia is rich with the helping spirit and its society is known to practice this spirit in their everyday life. If counsellor educators can incorporate the Malaysia helping spirit into the Western concept of group leadership functions, they may help the trainees better internalize their roles. The trainees may feel their works are in support of the local support system. Moreover, the society also may welcome the service offered if they think it meets their expectation of help-giving service.

To conclude the recommendation to the guidance and counselling services, the present research proposes that more training be provided to counsellor trainees to enhance their knowledge and skills in specific areas of group counselling. Local spirit of helping and the existing support system should be incorporated into the Western concept of group leadership so that the service has some local touch to it. Moreover, works on group counselling and other types of group should be documented and published as learning aids for other group workers and the public in general. These readings may help others understand the challenges and benefits they could gain from group works.

6.3.2 Recommendations to Future Research

In this section, a few recommendations to improve the present research are proposed. The recommendations include the sample selection, the need for a control group, the possible topics to be explored, and the topics to enrich the module content.

First, the subjects for future research should vary to include other counseling students. The current research is conducted with the final semester graduate students from the Guidance and Counselling program at the Faculty of Educational Studies, UPM. The participants are purposively sampled among the students who have completed all their course works and are undergoing internship training at the time of the study. Other students from the program are excluded from participating in the study. Due to that, the study cannot be generalized to other counselling students in the program, or to other counselling students from other universities. If other researchers are interested to study conflicts in group counselling and group leadership functions, it is highly recommended that they include other counselling students and not to restrict the research subjects to the final year students only.

Another recommendation is for future research to include other counselling students from other universities in future study. The research can include counselling students from other local universities like UKM, UPM, UM, and USIM, to name a few. If the findings show that most of the counsellor trainees face the same obstacles in managing conflicts in group counselling, have negative attitude towards conflict and towards leadership functions, then assumption can be made about the competency level of counsellors conducting group counselling in general. In other words, the research can concede the

seriousness of the issue and immediate intervention needs to be proposed to address the specific needs of counsellor trainees in particular, and other counsellors in general.

Second, the study needs a control group to assess the effects of the intervention module. The present study does not include a control group. This is due to the exploratory nature of the study. This study is a preliminary effort to determine the needs and the intervention effects on counsellor trainees experience with conflict, conflict management strategies, and leadership functions. Thus, the generalization of the study to other counsellor trainees is not given a priority. It is strongly recommended that future research include at least one control group to test the effectiveness of the module. Even though the research findings show the module is able to increase the knowledge, the application of skills and change attitude, without a control group the findings are still questionable.

Third, there are several areas of group works which require further exploration. Currently, the research on group counselling in Malaysia needs to be expanded. So far, research has focused more on the development of various theoretically based modules and ways to implement them through group approach. Not much is known about the acquisition of group skills, intervention skills, and group leadership functions. Research on group process, in particular conflicts and other critical events, has attracted very little interest among the researchers.

Furthermore, topics related to counselor trainees' professional development are also in need of attention. Conducting counselling work with a group of people is not an easy task. Working with groups requires the trainees to be internally and externally sensitive with themselves and the group process. Group brings to awareness the trainees'

personality, unresolved conflicts, values, and pattern of communications with other people; and, at the same time compel them to pay attention to the events happening in the group and to the different ways group members are relating to each other. All these require strong self-management and self-regulation on the part of the trainees. If not, their personal life will become tangled and interfere with the group dynamics. Due to that, not all counselling students are ready or comfortable with the roles they are required to fulfill as group counsellors. Juggling between the desires to remain neutral and the need to guide a group of people towards their goals can be too taxing to some trainees. With that, more exploratory research needs to be conducted on counsellor trainees to understand (i) their source of motivation to lead group counselling, (ii) how some trainees are able to smoothly and successfully make the role transition from being a counsellor for the individual counselling to becoming a group counsellor, and (iii) the mechanisms they used to self-regulate and self-manage their personal self from muddling with their group leadership functions.

In addition, future research may want to look into cultural influence and gender role expectations on leadership functions. The researcher's experience teaching the group counselling course and supervising the practicum and internship trainees highlight the cultural influence on the counsellor trainees' perception and execution of the group leadership functions. At the cognitive level, the trainees are able to comprehend the counselling group leadership concepts as introduced by the West. However, when it comes to translating the leadership functions into actions, the trainees are caught in a dilemma. As part of Asia, Malaysia is highly influenced by its Asian cultural heritage and collectivist society. The Malays, the Chinese, and the Indians, the three major ethnic

groups in Malaysia, have slightly different expectations of their leaders. How these cultural expectations influenced leadership functions in group counselling has not been determined.

Embedded in this racial influence is the gender role expectations. Man and woman are expected to portray different leadership characteristics that become obvious when they lead the all male or all female groups. Awkwardness in behaviours and communication styles may occur when a female counsellor leads an all male group members compared to when she leads an all female group.

These two elements, translating knowledge into actions and determining the cultural influence on group leadership roles of male and female counsellors, require serious consideration from counsellor educators if they want to improve their trainees' competency. More research should be conducted to explore whether the group leadership functions are compatible with the counsellor trainees' image of their gender roles, and whether there is a need for a new leadership element to be introduced to enrich the existing leadership functions of group counsellors.

Fourth, the content of the module can be adjusted to include other topics as well. One of the possible topics is the exploration of personal conflict styles developed by Ting-Toomey, et al. (2001). Ting-Toomey, et al. (2001) describe the eight conflict styles individuals from different cultures usually resort to in dealing with conflict. Future research may study the influence of personal conflict styles on trainees' management of conflict in group counselling, leadership functions, and attitudes. Another possible topic is stress management. Rashid (2005) includes the topic in her leadership module for the

student leaders. Stress management exercise may reduce the intensity of negative emotions experienced during conflict. It may also buffer the effect of negative cognitive scripts on trainees' actions. These two topics, if incorporated into the module, may probably enhance the trainees acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and attitude.

Finally, this study has given priority to the exploration of counsellor trainees experience with conflicts and conflict management strategies, thus it is highly suggested that future research attempts to look at counsellors' conflict management strategies from the group members perspective. Since group members are directly involved in the conflict, they become the valuable resource people in evaluating whether the counsellors intervention results in constructive management of conflict or otherwise. Interview and or questionnaire can be applied to assess the intervention effects. These data can be utilized to further improve counsellors competency in leading groups.

6.4 Summary

The research focused on exploring the counsellor trainees' experience with conflict in group counselling, group leadership functions, conflict management strategies, and attitude towards conflict and towards group leadership functions. Next, a Conflict Management Training Module and a set of assessment tools were developed to test the effects of the module. Four hypotheses were tested using the one-group pretest-posttest experimental design. All the hypotheses were rejected. The results showed significant increase from the pretest to the posttest scores. The trainees reported gaining more knowledge on conflicts and group leadership functions, becoming more skillful at managing conflicts, and having more favorable attitude towards conflicts and towards

leadership functions. The research concludes with suggestions that more exploratory research to be conducted with group counsellor trainees to understand their motivation, role transition from the individual to the group counselling, the self-regulation mechanism to manage their personal self during challenging events in the group, and the cultural influence on group leadership functions. Lastly, more group training opportunities and supervision should be made available to counsellor trainees to enhance their skills and acquisition of new knowledge. Future research on group counselling calls for more exploratory works to be done on the areas of group leadership and group process. These two are still vaguely understood and grasped by the counsellor trainees. As more information is gained about group counselling as experienced by the Malaysian counsellor trainees, more efficient interventions can be introduced to meet their needs.