

# Clients' Experiences in Counselling Sessions with Counsellor Trainees

Ruhani Mat Min<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Social and Economic Development, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Malaysia

Correspondence: Ruhani Mat Min, School of Social and Economic Development, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, 21030 Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia. E-mail: ruhani@umt.edu.my

Received: April 19, 2016 Accepted: April 28, 2016 Online Published: June 21, 2016

doi:10.5539/ass.v12n7p212

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v12n7p212>

## Abstract

This qualitative study aims to explore the experiences of clients who are undergoing counselling sessions with counsellor trainees who are completing an internship. The counsellor trainees are in their final semester of counselling training, and they are required to perform the internship for a duration of 24 weeks and fulfil a required number of hours of counselling sessions with clients. The clients who engaged in the counselling sessions with counsellor trainees during the internship were selected as research participants. Data were gathered through interviews, and these interviews were carried out after the counsellor trainees completed their internship. A total of 17 clients who had been through counselling sessions with the counsellor trainees were involved in the interviews. The clients, or the research participants, were located at different counselling centres. The findings indicate that clients' experiences in counselling sessions included three themes: the clients' views of counsellor trainees, the clients' views of themselves during counselling sessions and the clients' views about the counselling process. In addition, the skills and personal characteristics of effective counsellor trainees were a major contributor to the growth experienced by the clients as a result of the counselling sessions. The implication of the findings, personal characteristics and counselling skills of counsellor trainees should be developed through training programme.

**Keywords:** counselling experience, counsellor trainee, counsellor education, qualitative research

## 1. Introduction

Counselling is a dynamic process consisting of interrelated and systemic entities of client variables, counsellor variables and what is happening between them (Henkelman & Paulson, 2006). In relation to this, client experience is important in understanding how the counselling process contributes to change (Elliott, 2008). As Grafanaki (2010) suggests, many studies on the experiences of counsellor trainees rely heavily on quantitative data, as well as often excluding the perspective of trainees in favour of external perspectives. Stefano, Mann-Feder & Gazzola (2010) conducted a qualitative study of written accounts by clients who participated in a counselling relationship. It showed that the clients saw the interpersonal qualities and skills of the counsellor as major contributions to their experiences (Stefano et al., 2010). Since each client has his or her own view of the counselling experience, it is recommended to address the client's understanding of the process and how they made sense of their counselling.

## 2. Literature Review

There are studies show that the client is a contributor to the process of change (Bohart, 2000; Duncan & Miller, 2000). Another study indicated that the client was not a passive recipient but an active contributor to actual outcomes (Rennie, 2000). Since each participant has his or her own view of the counselling relationship and process, each perspective is important to understand what is happening during these experiences. We can better understand the process if we hear directly from clients about their experiences in counselling and we can better prepare effective counsellors (Elliott & James, 1989). Furthermore, clients are decisive, self-motivated, skilled and active participants in the process of resolving their difficulties (Manthei, 2007). According to Manthei (2007), clients did not seem to expect, or want, perfection or a complete resolution of their problems; they were realistic and pragmatic in their judgements of the process, the counsellor, and their success.

Many writings, particularly from a Malaysian perspective, that focus on the effects of counselling service on clients. According to Othman Mohamed (2005), an individual seeks counselling services because he or she feels bad about him or herself and requires assistance in helping them make a change, particularly in mental,

emotional and behavioural developments. Professional counselling services are able to create a positive change in the short term and long term and they contribute to the development of a positive self (Zuria Mahmud, Noriah Mohd Ishak & Amla Salleh, 2005; Zainuddin Abu, Zuria Mahmud & Salleh Amat, 2008). The findings of that study suggested that clients develop their confidence, get insight about family relationships and gain support as well as develop more effective behaviours. According Zuria Mahmud et al. (2005), the effectiveness of the counselling process can be evaluated from behaviour, thoughts and feelings of the client throughout the session. The authors also expressed that clients understand the causes of their problems, and as result of the counselling session, they were able to develop confidence that they could to change. Another study showed that respondents who have been through a counselling experience have more positive attitudes than those who have never had a counselling experience (Rusnani Abdul Kadir, Loh Poh Fang & Asmah Ismail, 2008). A previous study also indicated that counsellors were able to win trust among clients despite their guidance programme at moderate levels (Azizi Yahaya, Anuar Rahman, Rahim Hamdan & Yusuf Boon, 2001). The study also showed that the role of counsellors was to reduce feelings of tension in their clients. The counsellors were also seen as sincere (Azizi et al, 2001).

In relation to this, Rogers (1951) states that relationships with others help individuals understand themselves, which contributes to positive self-esteem. Every individual needs positive attention and needs to be loved, liked, respected, admired and accepted by others, including family members. In real life, people do not always get the positive attention they need. They also receive negative attention that could cause tension and stress. Often individuals receive negative and positive attention at the same time. As a result of this, they are able to manage tension and stress despite the negative attention that they receive. Positive attention contributes to the formation of self-concept. Human needs for love and acceptance are natural. If these cannot be met, then the individual's self-concept will also be distorted. Relationships with others, including family members and members of the community, are very important in developing a sense of love and affection (Rogers, 1951). Referring to this research, a relationship with a counsellor may help a client to experience acceptance and love, which contribute to positive self-esteem.

In addition, Rogers (1961) suggests that humans have an internal power and the potential to make themselves successful and useful to society. According to Rogers, an individual experiencing unconditional acceptance or 'unconditional positive regard' will be more open to understanding his or her experiences. Also, potential and openness will grow if they are in a conducive environment, which will contribute to high self-esteem and can be achieved in stages. Rogers (1961) also suggests that humans are naturally good, rational, responsible and strive for self-actualisation. However, people also tend to be frustrated and distressed when unable to strive for self-actualisation as a result of not experiencing love and security. Disequilibrium occurs when there is a discrepancy between self-perception and actual self. This causes confusion and tension in individuals.

Human behaviour can also be explained with Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). According to this theory, human behaviour is the result of interaction with environmental issues and pressures. Bandura (1977) also states that individuals will behave based on the experience of seeing others who are considered role models. In relation to this, rewards can avoid delinquent behaviour and produce good behaviour (Bandura, 1977). On the other hand, individuals are not in a vacuum when dealing with environmental demands. They have the ability to choose their behaviours when they are participating in the environment (Ruhani Mat Min, 2009). This means that individuals don't only receive pressure from the environment. Individual experiences are the result of interaction between the components of self and the environment (Ruhani Mat Min, 2009).

Counsellor trainees perform their internships at various counselling centres. They complete a four-year counselling training and an internship at a counselling centre is required at the end of the training. There are tasks, such as counselling sessions, developmental activities and administrative work that need to be completed during the internship, and a certain number of required hours of counselling sessions with clients also needs to be completed. In other words, prior to the internship, the counsellor trainees have completed all the required components of the training. The counsellor trainees will have an opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills they have learnt with clients in a real environment (Ruhani Mat Min, 2009).

Baird (2016) points out that the counselling practicum provides an opportunity for the trainees to synthesise information, knowledge and skills learned during their training at the university, as well as to review what has been learned. Previously, Folkes-Skinner, Elliot, & Wheeler (2010) have indicated that training to be a counsellor is stressful and inevitably involves significant shifts in identity, self-knowledge and confidence. Most of these changes related to starting work with clients. Despite the significant shifts, counsellor trainees develop self-confidence about becoming effective helpers, and the anxiety level decreases as they go through their supervised training (Al-Darmaki, 2004). In relation to this, Grafanaki (2010) suggests that the development of

counsellor trainees is also important for clients and society at large because professional development contributes to their performance as a counsellor.

Corey (2013) discusses personal characteristics of effective counsellors during counselling sessions and argues that these characteristics may foster client growth. Despite this, Folkes-Skinner et al. (2010) found that easier clients provide counsellors with positive initial client experiences, thus giving counsellor trainees time to develop confidence and a positive professional identity, which can help them later when clients become more challenging. However, as Turner, Gibson, Bennetts & Hunt (2008) found although it might be difficult and painful for trainees to work with clients, it can also be rewarding and worthwhile. It is possible that client experiences are associated with the learning process encountered by the counsellor trainees.

### **3. Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to explore the experiences of clients who engaged in counselling sessions with counsellor trainees during their internships. Until now, there has been no study that explores this area in Malaysia. Therefore, a qualitative study was conducted based on the research question, how does a client experience counselling sessions with a counsellor trainee?

### **4. Methodology**

This study is qualitative. The qualitative method enables the study participants' experiences to be interpreted and explained in the context of a specific environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative findings are generally disclosed or shown in everyday language or words used and incorporate words of the participants in describing the psychological event, experience or phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The main focus of this research is not to search for objective facts and objective truth, but the subjective experience captured in the individual stories of clients.

The research participants consisted of clients who had undergone counselling sessions with counsellor trainees at various counselling centres or places in one state on the east coast of Malaysia. A total of 17 clients, 12 females and 5 males, ranged in age from 20 to 35, with an average age of 25 years. The participants were all of new clients at the counselling centres. The clients were selected as research participants based on purposive sampling, which requires that the individuals have engaged in counselling sessions with counsellor trainees and are willing to participate in the study.

Data were gathered using one-to-one interviews. The interviews used semi-structured interview protocol which, according to Patton (2002), is a technique that encourages researchers to ask interview questions in a systematic way and be ready to listen to the answers given by the participants in their own words and with no special structure. The focus of the interview is listening to the participants' views about their counselling experience. Furthermore, it is hoped that the interview would explore in-depth information about the participants' experiences in counselling sessions.

The interviews were conducted after the internships were completed. Since this research consisted of the clients' narrative accounts, there was no specific question about their experiences. However, the research was guided by the question: What kind of experience do the clients have after engaging in counselling sessions with the counsellor trainees? Stefano et al. (2010) also used this kind of question, with no specific question about experiences, when researching the experience of clients who worked with trainees. Referring back to this research, the consent form was reviewed at the beginning of each interview. The research participants or clients understood that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The interview took place in a room at the participants' choice of place and time. Each interview took between one to one and a half hours, which included time for warming up, the interviewing phase and time for cooling down at the end of the interview.

The data analysis was conducted as soon as the interview session was completed with each research participant. The first step of this analysis was to transcribe the interview. The interview transcripts were read repeatedly in order to obtain an overall picture of the client's experience. Then, a significant statement relating to the experience of the client was highlighted. This process, obtaining an overall picture of the client's experience and extracting a significant statement, was performed with each of the research participants' transcripts. This analysis was conducted based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within data.

### **5. Findings**

There are three main themes, namely the clients' views about the counselling process, the clients' views about themselves during the counselling session, and the clients' views of the counsellor trainee, which emerge in the participants' stories.

### 5.1 Theme 1: Clients' Views about the Counselling Process

Views of the counselling process was one of the most discussed themes that emerged from the participants' or clients' stories. Experience that related to this theme are meaningful and relieved, promote changes, and new experience.

#### 5.1.1 Meaningful and Relieved

Meaningful and relieved are the feeling most discussed by the participants. They viewed their experiences in the counselling sessions as opportunities to have another person listen to their stories. Being able to have another person listen to a story was a meaningful and relieved moment for the participants. The feeling of relief created an opportunity to better understand the experiences they had previously gone through. Stories of Ros, Yaz and Zul explain the experience of feeling meaningful and relieved.

Being involved in positive communication is a meaningful experience. As an example, Ros encountered positive communication with her husband during the counselling sessions. This positive communication provided an opportunity for her as well her husband to be aware of their weaknesses and showed them how to amend their relationship. Below are statements from Ros regarding her experience:

*'We can communicate, we take turns communicating, and there is another person (a counsellor) listening to our conversations. We are aware of our weaknesses. I realise there are many things that need to be corrected. So does my husband. He admitted his weaknesses and promised to change. The important thing, I can talk to him in those sessions. There was a communication between us.'* (Ros)

The meaning of the counselling experience changed clients' perspectives on the challenges that they have experienced. As an example, Yaz and Zul explained that the counselling experiences helped them to feel better about themselves and to realise that there are ways out of the issues they have faced. Below are statements from Yaz and Zul about their experiences:

*'It's great to see her (Ms W) and I have changed for the better now. If there is any problem now, I believe that that thing still can be solved.'* (Yaz)

*'I feel calm, feel appreciated. I feel that there are people that love me, I am satisfied with my counselling sessions with him (Mr D).'* (Zul)

#### 5.1.2 Promote Changes

Engaging in a counselling session with a counsellor trainee promotes changes in clients. It is clearly stated in the participants' statements about the changes that they had gone through after participating in the counselling sessions.

For example, Zul talked about changes in his lifestyle. In relation to this, he experienced feeling happy as well as relaxed with his changes. Another participant, Ora, said his experience in the counselling sessions made him aware of his reality. Below are statements from them:

*'I went to counselling with Mr D. There are changes in my life now, I do my prayers. I can forget about all of the drugs. What I can say is my life is now fun, more fun, more relaxed. Previously, I had never prayed. When I pray, I feel calm. Change in my perception.'* (Zul)

*'Actually Ms Z (counsellor) made me realise of my reality. After I realised that, I read more writings that were beneficial for myself. Previously, I have had depression. After being in counselling with her, I read more motivational books, to motivate me and to make me understand the situation. I am more rational now than I used to be.'* (Ora)

#### 5.1.3 New Experience

Being able to discuss their experiences during the counselling session, especially their perceptions about life, made clients better understand and make sense of their own lives. In other words, being able to engage in counselling experiences provided opportunities for participants to understand themselves in a better perspective. It is evidenced that engaging in positive experiences makes the participants perceive a positive impact of the counselling services.

One of the participants, Kin, discussed her feelings of no confidence in counselling services. However, that feeling changed as a result of her experience during counselling sessions. Below are excerpts from her interview:

*'Previously, I don't quite feel confident with the counselling service, but after I met with Ms M, I can feel the changes in myself, changes for the better in myself. I have a better understanding of myself and know how to adapt to new things and new places. I know that strength depends on me, my soul and belief. These*

*two need to be strong, then I become stronger to face all kinds of problems.'* (Kin)

Another participant, Sar, reported that her assumption about counselling was totally wrong. Her experience in counselling helped her create a new way of looking at her issues and focussing on her goal. Below is her story:

*'My assumption, previously, was that counselling is just plain talk, something that was not interesting. However, things were different, especially after the counsellor shared her experiences as a client. From there, I have a different perspective. I began to see that flaws were not meant as a failure. So, I started to feel comfortable to talk about what exactly my problem was. I began to feel my motivation for learning back in earnest. Apparently there was weakness that I was not able to overcome on my own. I began to see what my real goal here was, either friends or study. So it is clear what my objective is.'* (Sar)

## 5.2 Theme 2: Clients' Views of Self during Counselling Sessions

The clients' views of self during the counselling sessions is second most discussed themes that emerged from the participants' stories. Experiences that related to this theme are aware of responsibility and confident with changes.

### 5.2.1 Aware of Responsibility

Being aware of one's own responsibility is about understanding the issues that have been faced and the steps that need to be taken to resolve those issues. Stories from Ros, Sea, Ora and Hila mentioned how counselling sessions helped them to understand their issues and their responsibilities in searching for a way out of those issues.

According to Ros, she was more aware of the issues related to her marriage. She also discussed how the counselling sessions help her to create new experiences with her husband. Below are excerpts from her experiences:

*'After going through sessions with her, I can figure out this problem requires my awareness. I am aware that I have problems with my husband, he has another woman. My husband needs to be aware of our problem too. I need to be aware of my weakness. The most important thing now is I need to be aware of my problem and my weakness.'* (Ros)

*'I am able to talk and we take turns. The counsellor is there to hear what we are saying. Each of us is aware of our weakness. I know that I need to do things correctly. My husband too. He admitted his weakness and made a promise to change. We can discuss this during the session. For me, discussion is very important.'* (Ros)

In relation to awareness, Sea expressed how experience with the counsellor trainee made him understand his inappropriate behaviour. Sea experienced support from the counsellor trainee that he was able to make changes that allowed him to focus on his studies. Below are excerpts from his experiences:

*'During the session, the counsellor managed to make me aware of my weakness. She supported me to changes. I am very positive about my weakness. I don't want to repeat my inappropriate behaviour. My focus now is on my study.'* (Sea)

The experience of Hila is quite similar to Sea's, which means the counsellor trainee helped to create an understanding of her strengths and weaknesses. In addition to this, being able to understand herself creates a great opportunity to focus on her goal in the study.

*'During the session, I got more knowledge about my strengths and weaknesses. I can get a better picture about the way forward in my study. I know what a goal is to work now. The next thing is, I am aware of what to do in relation to my goal.'* (Hila)

Some participants reported that they experienced better understanding of themselves as a result of the counselling sessions. As an example, Ora talked about feeling of confident in herself as a result of the counselling sessions. Furthermore, she explained the experience of coming out of her depression. The most significant experience for her was being able to choose meaningful activities, such as reading motivational books, as a result of her counselling experience with the counsellor trainee.

*'After being in sessions, after two sessions, I feel more confident. I feel that I can get out from my problem. I have been in depression for some time. I feel confidence to get out from that cocoon. She, the counsellor, helped me to be aware of my reality. After that awareness, I spent my time reading books that were beneficial to me, especially books that can motivate me. I read many motivational books. I am more rational compared to my previous self.'* (Ora)

### 5.2.2 Confident with Changes

Confident with changes explained the participants' willingness to adopt changes in their lives. The research participants, Ima, Raha, Sar and Kin indicated an interest in changes that related to their behaviour. Being able to engage in positive behaviour and create changes in their confidence are the experiences shared by the participants.

Stories of the participants Ima and Sar explained how the counsellor trainees helped them with changes. Below are their stories:

*'I told her my story. She understood my situation, then she asked me what I wanted to do. I told her that I wanted to change. She helped me to change.'* (Ima)

*'As a result of my counselling session, my drive for my study increased a lot. No more feeling lazy. I felt that feeling that way put me into a disadvantaged situation.'* (Sar)

Another participant, Rah, had a different experience with the counsellor trainee and her changes. She believed that the counsellor trainee made her work on the changes. Despite that, she mentioned feeling of confident with her changes. Below are excerpt from her experiences:

*'My counsellor made me choose what I wanted to do for my changes, and I felt confident and brave to pick what I wanted in my life. I made my choice and I performed acts based on my choice. The result was very good. I felt confident with myself.'* (Rah)

Experiencing encouragement during the counselling session creates motivation for participants to share their current issues with the counsellor trainees. As reported by Kin, encouragement from the counsellor trainee promoted her trust in counselling, which made her share her life situation. Being able to speak about her challenges contributed to a better understanding of her own self. Below is her story:

*'I felt very relieved after the sessions. The counsellor encouraged me to tell everything that was being kept with me. I did that, told her my experiences and I felt very at ease. I felt that I could understand myself more. I also knew what to do at this new place, especially how to focus my study.'* (Kin)

### 5.3 Theme 3: Clients' Views of the Counsellor Trainee

The clients' views of the counsellor trainees is another theme that emerged from the participants' stories. These themes included experiences of warmth and friendliness, acceptance and respect, support, skilfulness, knowledge and trustworthiness.

#### 5.3.1 Warm and Friendly

Warm and friendly is how clients perceived the personal characteristics of the counsellor trainees towards them. The story of Zul told of how this warm and friendly attitude impacted his experience.

*'For me, the counsellor (Mr D) is a very friendly and warm person. He is the person who would say hello to us, he started to greet us before we say that to him. He showed his comfort with us. His style and character made me feel happy and feel comfortable to have sessions with him.'* (Zul)

Being able to engage in the counselling session changed Kin's perspective on sharing her story with another person. In other words, the warm and friendly attitude of the counsellor trainee created an opportunity for the client to change her perspective on counselling services.

*'I had never actually met a counsellor before this. I do not like to share my problems with other people. I was given an opportunity to be a client of Ms M. For me, she is really a good listener and she can understand me. I feel comfortable to be in the session with her. She can accept me as a client so well. She can hear my problems. She was there listening to me when I told her my problem.'* (Kin)

#### 5.3.2 Acceptance and Respect

Acceptance and respect is another significant theme that emerged from the clients' stories. Clients Hila and Ora both discussed how acceptance and respect promoted a feeling of comfort, which contributed to their trust in the counsellor. For example, Hila discussed the nonverbal behaviour of the counsellor trainee as an indicator of acceptance. Ora explained her discomfort entering into the counselling session, however, the acceptance of the counsellor trainee created a feeling of ease during that session. Below are excerpts from their experiences:

*'Every time I met with her (Ms W), I noticed that she was always smiling, she was willing to talk with us. I felt very comfortable, as if we have known each other for a long time. I am looking forward to my session with her. There was not a feeling of boredom in that session. She would try to help me, made me understand*

*the issues that I shared with her. I gained many new things and experiences with her.'* (Hila)

*'I didn't have any idea about the counsellor (Ms Z). I didn't know her. I felt very uncomfortable when I entered the counselling room. However, she tried to make me feel comfortable, and I realised that she was aware of my situation. She talked in very relaxed way.'* (Ora)

### 5.3.3 Support

This finding indicates that support from the counsellor trainee contributes to the experiences of the clients. Two participants, Fiz and Ria, explained that their changes partly related to the support that they experienced from the counsellor trainees. Fiz mentioned how support from the counsellor trainee made him willing to take responsibility for his role as a student. Ria explained her willingness and commitment to search for the way out from her issues with support from the counsellor trainee. Both of the participants indicated that support from the counsellor trainees made them feel stronger to face their current issues. Below are excerpts from their experiences:

*'The counsellor trainee helped me. She encouraged me to proceed with what I wanted to do. She made me realise my responsibility as a student teacher. I think she was right. I feel that there is someone that is supporting me. Although, it may seem a small thing, but when it was repeated, again and again, it turned into a very big issue, right. I felt happy the counsellor trainee supported me to change.'* (Fiz)

*'I told her about my problems. From that, I know there was a way out of all these problems, and I need to decide what the right way out of these problems is. I could not use my feeling as an excuse while searching for the right way. I felt relieved and relaxed when I let all those problems go. My strengths, I feel strong when Ms H supports me. When I realised Ms H was no longer with us, I felt unhappy, but then, I realised that there were people here who were willing to support me.'* (Ria)

### 5.3.4 Skilfulness

Skilfulness means how the client perceived the counsellor, and whether he or she believed that the counsellor was able to help in searching for a way out of the issues or situations that the clients have experienced. Two participants, Wia and Yaz, talked about faithfulness and a willingness to listen and understand their experiences. In addition to this, they felt that the counsellor trainees were aware and knew how to help their clients. Below are excerpts from their experiences:

*'My experience with him, I can say Mr D is faithful to listening to my situation and being able to discuss a situation that I brought in the session, and he was able to lift my spirits. Now, I feel like to have other sessions with him, I wanted him to be close to me. Even though he was no longer here, I still remember his words. What I can say right now, I'm more positive about the fate of my life.'* (Wia)

*'For me, Ms W was very good, her attending to me could not be explained. She helped me a lot, sometimes I would go to see her, and although she was quite busy, she would try to help me. She would share her knowledge and new information with me. She had many experiences, and if I asked for any kind of help, although not in the session, I knew that she would help me, or advise me on that issue. Another thing, I think Ms W knew her role very well, because she did what she was supposed to do. It was a great experience to meet with Ms W.'* (Yaz)

### 5.3.5 Knowledge

Knowledge is another theme that emerged from the participants' stories. Knowledge is how the clients perceived the counsellors' knowledge and the impact of this on their experience in the counselling sessions. Two participants, Nor and Rah, discussed their experiences that related to the counsellors' knowledge. Below are excerpts from their experiences:

*'Although Ms W was new in this role, she seems to have many experiences. In terms of knowledge, she was very good. I think she was doing something that she wanted to be doing, she was in the right field. The way she was listening to my problem, how she focused on that, how she made her suggestions and provided guidance, and her eye contact showed her maturity. Her words were excellent. I had so many things that I was not aware of, but things were different after I went to see her. I also got to know a lot of things. She shared many things with me.'* (Nor)

*'I guess my life is a bit different now. I found many positive things. Also, I have many friends now, and they can accept the way I am now. I got inspiration and strength to change from Ms M. She had a strong character; she was kind and gentle to me, but her words were firm when she spoke. She was firm but very easy to talk to and she made her words acceptable when she spoke. Her words were full of information.'*

(Rah)

### 5.3.6 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness explains the participants' belief in the counsellors' capability to help them understand as well as to search for a way out of the issues that they are experiencing. Two participants, Kin and Sar, discussed their belief in the counsellor and how this belief created their engagement in the sessions. As an example, the counsellor trainee taught Kin to engage in a breathing technique during the session. Although that activity was a new experience for Kin, she believed that the counsellor trainee and activity would help her. On the other hand, Sar engaged in the counselling session with the knowledge that the counsellor was a trainee. Despite that, she put her trust in the counsellor and believed that the trainee would be able to help her deal with her weaknesses. Below are their stories:

*'Ms M helped me to think carefully and more calmly. She taught me how to breathe in a proper way. From there, I managed to express my problems. Finally, I felt relief. She encouraged me to express what I felt. I felt like trying to do that exercise because I believed the counsellor would help me, and I knew she wanted to help me.'* (Kin)

*'For me, I knew she was a trainee and it was not important. I appreciated her, and she was a better person compared to me. I need her, I want to change, so I need her opinions and advice. She could help me. I could rectify my weaknesses and mistakes that I made previously. That experience was very interesting and her role as a trainee was not a big matter to me. She was a new person with a new spirit that helped me.'* (Sar)

## 6. Discussion

Clients' stories indicated that they viewed the counselling sessions with positive perspectives, although some clients started their counselling sessions feeling unsure of the experience. However, after engaging in the sessions they had meaningful experiences and believed that these experiences promoted changes in their lives. As stated previously, clients were able to discuss and understand themselves better as a result of their experiences. In relation to those experiences, Rogers (1951) discusses the idea of relationships with others that help individuals understand themselves. The findings showed that the relationship with the counsellor trainee fulfilled the needs of an individual for positive attention, and to be loved, liked, respected and accepted by others (Rogers, 1951). Being able to experience a positive relationship with the counsellor trainees created opportunities for the clients to view counselling experiences in a positive perspective. This finding explains further on the issue of counselling experience. It is evidenced that new clients would encounter the positive experiences with the beginning counsellors. This finding also explains the role of the client in the process of change (Bohart, 2000; Duncan & Miller, 2000), and counselling services are able to create a positive change and development of a positive self (Zuria Mahmud et al., 2005; Zainuddin Abu et al., 2008).

In relation to self, two sub themes that emerged from the clients' stories were awareness of their own responsibility and confidence with their changes. Despite that, the clients' stories showed that they started to engage in counselling sessions with uncomfortable feelings about their behaviours, thoughts and emotions. Some of the clients indicated that they were required to participate in counselling sessions. In other words, they had started their session without the intention that counselling would provide positive experiences or help them with their problems. On the other hand, being able to engage in counselling sessions provided opportunities for the clients to view the impact of the experiences on themselves. They reported awareness of their responsibility in handling issues that have been faced and steps that need to be taken to resolve those issues. Engaging in actions that related to their issues requires their willingness. The findings reported that the clients' felt confident about their changes. These findings explain the ideas forwarded by Rogers (1961), which highlighted the unconditional acceptance and openness in understanding one's own experience. Furthermore, clients are active participants in the process of resolving their difficulties (Manthei, 2007), and they have the ability to choose their behaviours when they are participating in the environment (Ruhani Mat Min, 2009).

The clients indicated that their participation in counselling sessions is related to counselling skills and personal characteristics of the counsellor trainees that were experienced during the sessions. Their stories also stated that it was personal characteristics such as warmth and friendliness, acceptance and respect, support, skilfulness, knowledge and being trustworthy that drove them to share their problems in the counselling sessions. The findings also reported that the participants' changes were related to their experiences of the counselling sessions with the counsellor trainees. They expressed their comfort with the changes that have been made. Their stories also indicated that the changes that occurred were not planned by the research participants, however, they were related to the personal characteristics of the counsellor trainees during the counselling sessions. These findings are related to ideas by Rogers (1956) & Tudor et al. (2004) that highlighted the importance of relationships with



other people in fulfilling an individual's needs. The authors (Rogers, 1956 and Tudor et al., 2004) discussed the idea that human development is an ongoing process and depends on our being in a relationship. The findings also explain the ideas that have been discussed by Corey (2013) about the personal characteristics of an effective counsellor. Characteristics of warmth, friendliness, acceptance, respect, support, skilfulness, knowledge and trustworthiness are nonverbal behaviours, and these significant components encouraged the participants or the clients to trust in the relationship with the counsellor trainees. It is indicated in this research that effect of the personal characteristics on clients' willingness to participate in the counselling session. Being able to experience a trusting relationship promotes changes and learning new experiences among the participants or the clients, as discussed in the section of the clients' views of self during the counselling session as well as the clients' views about the counselling process. Experiences of the participants or the clients are also related to an idea that has been forwarded by Turner et al. (2008), which is that it is possible that client experiences are associated with the learning process encountered by the counsellor trainees.

## 7. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide implications for counsellor training and supervision. Participants' or clients' stories indicated positive views on the counselling process, i.e. meaningful and relieved, promoting changes and new knowledge. Their stories also informed on a positive view of themselves, i.e. awareness of their responsibility and confidence with the changes. A positive view of the counselling process and themselves are related to the counsellor trainees because those sessions were performed by the trainees. This shows that personal characteristics of the counsellor trainees and their helping skills are the foundation that helps clients engage in the counselling sessions. The main factor in this study is a meaningful relationship between a client and a counsellor trainee. Being able to engage in a meaningful relationship provides opportunities for the participants or clients to focus on the positive aspect of the counselling process and the positive impact on themselves. Therefore, counsellor training programmes should provide an extra focus on promoting effective personal characteristics or nonverbal behaviours as well as helping skills among counsellor trainees.

## References

- Al-Darmaki, F. R. (2004). Counselor training, anxiety, and counseling self-efficacy: Implications for training psychology students from the United Arab Emirates University. *Social Behavior Personality*, 32(5), 429-446. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2004.32.5.429>
- Baird, B. N. (2016). *The Internship, Practicum, and Field Placement Handbook: Guide for the Helping Professions* (7th ed.). London: Routledge.
- Bandura. (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. Eaglewood Cliffs. Prentice-Hall.
- Bohart, A. C. (2000). The client is the most important common factor. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 10, 127-149. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1009444132104>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Corey, G. (2013). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy* (9th ed.). International Edition. Brooks/Cengage Learning.
- Denzin, & Lincoln. (2011). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (4th ed.). California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Duncan, B. L., & Miller S. (2000). The client's theory of change: Consulting the client in the integrative process. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 10, 169-187. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1009448200244>
- Elliot, R. (2008). Research on client experience in therapy. Introduction to the special issue. *Psychotherapy Research*, 18, 239-242. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10503300802074513>
- Elliott, R., & James, E. (1989). Varieties of client experience in psychotherapy: An Analysis of the literature. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 9, 443-467. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0272-7358\(89\)90003-2](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0272-7358(89)90003-2)
- Folkes-Skinner, J., Elliot, R., & Wheeler, S. (2010). 'A baptism of fire': A qualitative investigation of a trainee counsellor's experience at the start of training. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 10(2), 83-92. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/147331410037550509>
- Grafanaki, S. (2010). Counsellor in the making: Research on counselling training and formative experiences of trainee counsellors. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 10(2), 81-82. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14733141003751655>

- Henkelman, J., & Paulson, B. (2006). The client as expect: Researching hindering experiences in counselling. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 19(2), 139-150. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09515070600788303>
- Kadir, R. A., Fang, L. P., & Ismail, A. (2008). Hubungan pengalaman melalui kaunseling dan sikap mendapat bantuan kaunseling. *Jurnal PERKAMA*, 14, 97-106.
- Mahmud, Z., Ishak, N. M., & Salleh, A. (2005). Masalah Tingkahlaku Pelajar Dan Strategi Kaunselor Sekolah Di Malaysia. *Prosiding Seminar Pendidikan Serantau Ukm-Unri*, 2, 451-464.
- Manthei, R. J. (2007). Clients talk about their experience of the process of counselling. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 20(1), 1-26. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09515070701208359>
- Min, R. M. (2009). Budaya Sekolah: Implikasi Terhadap Proses Pembelajaran Secara Mengalami. *Jurnal KEMANUSIAAN*, 13, 63-78.
- Mohamed, O. (2005). *Prinsip Psikoterapi dan Pengurusan Dalam Kaunseling*. Serdang: Universiti Putra Malaysia.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Rennie, D. L. (2000). Aspects of the client's conscious control of the psychotherapeutic process. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 10, 151-167. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1009496116174>
- Rogers, C. (1961). *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's view of psychotherapy*. London: Constable.
- Rogers. (1951). *Client-Centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications and Theory*. London: Constable.
- Stefano, J. D., Mann-Feder, V., & Gazzola, N. (2010). A qualitative study of client experience of working with novice counselors. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 10(2), 139-146. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14733141003770713>
- Tudor, L. E., Keemar, K., Tudor, K., Valentine, J., & Worrall, M. (2004). *The Person Centred Approach. A Contemporary Introduction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Turner, S., Gibson, N., Bennetts, C., & Hunt, C. (2008). Learning from experience: Examining the impact of client work upon two trainee therapist. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 8(3), 174-181. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14733140802211085>
- Yahaya, A., Rahman, A., Hamdan, R., & Boon, Y. (2001). *Program pemulihan akhlak wanita: Sejauhmanakah keberkesanan pusat perlindungan wanita membantu proses pemulihan?* Persidangan Kebangsaan Pendidikan Moral Dalam Globalisasi di Universiti Malaya pada 23 – 25 Mei 2001.
- Zainuddin Abu, Z. M., & Amat, S. (2008). Pendekatan kaunseling, menangani masalah kebebasan dalam kalangan pelajar institusi tinggi: dua kajian kes. *Jurnal Pendidikan*, 33, 107-128.

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>)