

# The Catalyst Factors of Counselor's Competencies in Handling Gay and Lesbian Clients

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## Abstract

Contributing factors in counselor's competency are fundamental in handling gay and lesbian cases. This study is conducted to achieve the main objective which is to explore the influence factors of counselor's competency in handling gay and lesbian clients in Malaysia. In handling gay and lesbian cases, counselors should be equipped with proper training and programs executed to improve self-competency. Therefore, in order to obtain information regarding this, researcher used in-depth interviews through purposive sampling technique. This research involved 15 research participants consist of registered counselors experienced in conducting counseling sessions with gay and lesbian clients. Data were analyzed by examining the interview recording thoroughly and identifying the themes that emerged based on the objectives of the study with the help of n'vivo 11 program. Generally, this interview analysis showed three main themes which specify the type of training in gay and lesbian counseling service. Those are (i) involvement with non-governmental organizations (ngo), (ii) socializing with gay and lesbian community, (iii) specialist opinions, (iv) case discussion with colleagues and (v) attending seminar. Hence, it is no doubt that these factors have influenced counselors to become more proficient in handling the session with gay and lesbian clients. The implication of this research will increase counselor's level of awareness and knowledge when providing counseling services to gay and lesbian clients. Apart from that, findings are expected to aid educators in counseling field so that the trained counselors will be more competent in handling gay and lesbian issue.

**Keywords:** Catalyst, Factors, Competency, Counselor, Gay and Lesbian

## Introduction

The Ethics Code, as presented by the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2005) and American School Association Counselors (ASCA, 2010) stated that counselors should be competent and capable. Being competent in serving clients consisting those of various backgrounds and avoiding discrimination based on age, culture, loss of ability, racial identity, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, status or marital status, choice of language or socioeconomic status. The three components in multi-cultural counseling are knowledge, skills and awareness in empowering gay and lesbian people (Green et al., 2008).

Therefore, counselor's competency consists of sexuality counseling skills aspect, general knowledge of sexuality, values and ethics that the counselor needs to have in handling counseling session with clients with sexuality issue (Caldwell et al., 2009; Constantine Ladany 2001). Sexuality counseling should also be emphasized by counselor as the counselor needs to earn client's full trust in handling the counseling session. A counselor should also not have prejudice towards the client. A counselor will also be considered as unethical if practicing counseling service beyond his or her competence as contained in ACA Ethics Code (2005) under professional responsibility section (c.2.a).

Counselors are required to provide counseling service to various populations including to those of gay and lesbian group (American Counseling Association, 2005; Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue et al., 1992). In recent years, the field of counseling to deal with lesbian, gay and bisexual and transgender clients (LGBT) has been established by few researchers (ALGBTIC 2009; Logan & Barret, 2005; Israel & Seldvidge, 2003). Adequate preparation for gay and lesbian clients has been issued by ethics and accreditation of counseling profession (ACA, 2005; CACREP, 2009). However, it is uncertain whether or not counselors received sufficient training and got involved in professional discourse to the level where they are able to perceive themselves as competent counselors to handle counseling session with gay and lesbian clients.

According to past researches, gay and lesbian counseling competency has been created among counselors. Various programs conducted were related to gay and lesbian issues in the existing co-curriculum in order to increase competencies towards gay and lesbian clients (CACREP, 2009; Arredondo et al., 1996). This competency element is parallel with cross-cultural competency consisted of awareness, knowledge and skills elements (Bidell 2005; Israel et al., 2003). Hence, counselor should be able to provide more efficient service for the client from various backgrounds in a nondiscriminatory manner pertaining to age, culture, racial identity, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender and others.

Therefore, the most vital requirement in dealing with gay and lesbian clients is related to training and program concerning sexuality issue. According to Stephanie (2009), specific training, program and course pertaining to gay and lesbian is said to be diminishing. She also mentioned about the lack of research of training or course content for counseling students on sexual orientation as information and anecdotal report of graduate level often involved attitude exploration and encouraging the dissemination of appropriate knowledge to the LGB community (Phillips, 2000; Israel & Hackett, 2004; Israel et al., 2003). Although LGBT issues have been included in cross-cultural counseling course; this preparation is insufficient in effort to deal with gay and lesbian clients (Stephanie, 2009). It is fundamental for counselors and training directors to review their training curriculum and include specific topics for individual LGB counseling as it is crystal clear that training program is responsible in aiding trainee to establish competency in working with LGB clients (APA, 2000; CACREP, 2001).

### **Research Objective**

The study focuses on the main question of the study which is to explore factors that can aid counselors in increasing counselor's competency in handling counseling sessions with gay and lesbian clients.

### **Methodology**

The study used qualitative design research involving semi-structured in-depth interview. The selection of research participants in this study involved purposive sampling method on

counselors who were experienced in handling counseling session with gay and lesbian clients. Patton (2002) explained that purposive sampling helped the researcher to understand better. This is because the research participants involved are more informative and parallel with the purpose of the study (Sabitha, 2005). Thus, 15 research participants were selected to involve voluntarily in this research. The number of research participants ergo is adequate to obtain a lot of information for qualitative research (Hill et al., 1997; Yin 2015; Creswell 2012). The name of research participants were not mentioned but were replaced with Research Participant 1 (PK), Research Participant 2 (PK2) and so forth in order to maintain research ethics that require research participants, as subjects of research to be protected from being recognized for the avoidance of harassment, threats and misinterpretations against them (Cresswell, 2012).

For data analyzing procedure, the researcher has chosen three stages of data analysis approach by Miles & Huberman (1994) which are data filtering, data display and conclusion drawing or verification. Next, research analysis used is transforming verbatim into. As data were collected from various sources such as through interview and document analysis, hence in order to grasp better understanding on the large volume and unorganized data, a data management system was designed. The system included clearing the data, understanding the data and producing analytical categories and concepts with the help of N'VIVO software program version 11.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Analysis of the interview data shows that there are three main themes that determine the type of training in gay and lesbian counseling services. The three main themes are (i) involvement in aiding the targeted groups, (ii) expertise standpoints, and (iii) training and program. It is indisputable that these factors have great influence on counselors in becoming more efficient and competent in handling counseling session with gay and lesbian clients. These factors will be further elaborated and detailed in the subtopics below.

#### **Involvement with NGO and organizations**

The purpose of counselors' involvement in these activities is to have better understanding on these individuals by the way of entering their world through these activities as well as socializing with them more closely. This approach indirectly will assist the counselors to understand them better emotionally and physically. Through this medium, counselors are able to communicate in person with the targeted group apart from obtaining more accurate and reliable information.

According to PK5, they have over 18 years of experience in the counseling field. They also received a lot of cases involving sexuality which included gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender cases. Therefore, they have managed a special non-government organization (NGO) body to assist these individuals who are willing to change. This effort indirectly helped their own selves to deal with gay and lesbian clients. PK5 through their statement have proven that this initiative is quite effective in bringing the gay and lesbian individuals back to their own root as most of them have the desire to change. On that account, throughout the establishment of this kind of NGO, they have direction and guide to change for the better through training and approaches prepared by the NGO. It is also easier for them to assist these clients through the establishment of the NGO as these bodies have become gathering places for them indirectly. Hence, as they require counselors to help them, this is the time

and place where the counselors can play their role in handling these clients. Below is the statement of PK5 regarding the matter :

Apart from that, I tried to approach the group of people [gay & lesbian] by sitting in their circle in order to improve my competency. It is certainly not for the purpose of becoming who they are but on the other hand to have better understanding of their way of life and so forth. So, I was invited by Negeri Sembilan Islamic Council (MINS) to sit together with the transgender and gay groups and I was invited to join one body to help them have better understanding in the context of the normal life they need to go through as ordinary human beings and slowly change themselves and leave unhealthy practices and activities (PK5/B333/341/10)

Next, the collaboration of organizations for instance Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) that collaborates with Pink Triangle association also contributed a lot in helping these LGBT individuals who are willing to change themselves for better. According to PK1, they used to work together with JAKIM through programs organized to help these gay and lesbian individuals other than sex workers and HIV patients. They worked together along with a few volunteers who consisted of religious experts, psychologists, clinical personnel and many more. They were given special briefings on how to handle the program smoothly. Then, they went to limelight locations to run the program with these groups of individuals. The programs like this are able to directly assist those who want to repent and walk out of the dark world. The counselors' involvement in these activities has proven the openness in accepting and willingness to help their clients who came from this type of group. Details related to this statement can be perceived through the following quotes:

During that time, I was one of the participants involved in handling a collaboration program and project between all the universities with JAKIM to assist those LGBT individuals who have repented. There were three categories, as the first one is for gay and lesbian, second for sex worker and the third were those with HIV. Before the project commenced, we were given two days of training with training of trainers (TOT) specification included to handle the program. The program was done periodically for three months. Once a week, we were required to be present at Lorong Haji Taib for the program. JAKIM owns a building near Lorong Haji Taib that has put these three groups together. The group of people was named as Pink Triangle and this was the group that assisted the others who want to repent. There were also volunteers consisted of religious members, counselors, psychotherapists and clinical members (PK1/322-333/11)

Apart from that, counselors are also involved as volunteers at these gay and lesbian centers. PK7 stated that the reason they become one of the volunteers is to give moral and physical support especially to HIV patients who suffer from the disease due to same sex intimate relationship. This is because although they have repented but their past mistakes have shackled them emotionally and mentally causing them to suffer more. Therefore, the role of counselors as volunteers there are as motivation for these individuals to keep on being positive and peacefully continue their life daily. Other than that, the involvement in these activities will further increase counselors' experiences in facing and dealing with these individuals, at once augmenting knowledge related to psychology and other diseases caused by same sex intimacy to be applied during counseling session with these gay and lesbian groups of people. The statement can be seen below:

Counselors should attend seminars or workshops regarding this sexuality issue or else become volunteers at the specific centers or associations like Pink Triangle and go to the NGOs' that are willingly responsible in helping these individuals. The people of these groups there mostly suffer from HIV and AIDS due to same sex intimate relationship. Like me myself who became a volunteer in doing a few sessions with them at the centers. However, I would need to keep the association's name secret for confidentiality purpose as I have also established good relationship with them there (PK7/143-147/4)

Based on the findings above, it can be explained that in order to increase competencies, counselors need to socialize and get along with the gay and lesbian individuals other than getting involved with NGO so that they are able to enhance their knowledge and skills in sexuality issues (Stephanie, 2009; Laura, 2012; Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Hewstone 2003). This matter will benefit the development of competency counseling with gay and lesbian clients. Furthermore, this is an interesting discovery as the questions rather involved personal experiences and not simply professional experiences or education based knowledge. The findings are parallel with Flores et al., (1995) who found that positive relationship established between counselors with gay and lesbian clients will replenish counselors' self-efficacy other than promoting therapeutic relationships between the two sides.

### **Engaging with gay and lesbian individuals**

Based on research findings, it was also recommended by most of the counselors to increase knowledge regarding gay and lesbian issue. It is necessary to the counselors to engage with these individuals from gay and lesbian community in order to help them. This approach was proven to be useful in assisting counselors in making overtures to them and knowing how they really feel deep inside their heart. Truthfully, most of them wanted to change into better individuals, however they did not know the right way of doing it. Besides, counselors are also able to obtain more clear and concise information about their background and other details about them from their own selves through this approach. Which means that it is already unnecessary for counselors to gain information through middle man who did not know about the real truth of their situation especially those information from social media that is uncertain of its authenticity. Furthermore, through this approach counselors will not only able to see with their own eyes of these people's attitudes and behaviors but also their physical, emotion and mental states. It is also stated in the below quote :

To be able to curb this problem, we cannot only see and read about the information on these people through social media but we also need to be friends with them so that we can obtain detailed information about the situation they are in and the root of the problem. This is because through our reading, we can only know from the surface but engaging with them closely will allow us to obtain more precise information on them as they themselves will provide the information and not by us asking directly. So, when we have close engagement with these individuals it is more precise and what I meant by it is that we will be able to figure out about their real world through this direct information and also compare on the authenticity of the information that we have gained during the seminars attended with the information through close engagement. Truth to be told, I am and not the type who will only listen but I will get close to what I heard as I am the type who likes to make comparison (PK13/102-109/3)

Based on the past research, establishing good relationship is proven to lessen prejudice and discrimination of counselors towards gay and lesbian clients (Allport 1954, as quoted in Herek & Capitanio 1996; Hewstone, 2003). In addition, before education research, counselors have found out that self-efficacy of counselor with LGB clients is positive with positive clinical experience with LGB clients (Flores et al., 1995). This shows that identifying whether a person is gay or lesbian will lessen the discomfort and enhance the counselor's empathy (Putnam, 2007). Putnam explained that the phenomenon is as follows: when we engaged more with people who are not like us, we will overcome our early hesitation and ignorance then come to trust them more than we did" (ms 14).

### **Experts' views on gay and lesbian related cases.**

Most counselors stated that experts references consisted of various fields such as psychology clinical and sexuality experts. Hence, PK1 expressed that commonly, after handling counseling session, they will refer to psychology experts for further clinical advice pertaining the problem told by their clients as they are less knowledgeable in psychology. Therefore, they require advice from real experts in related field. Additionally, they also seek for other stances from other colleagues who may have different sights to be applied and summarized so that client's real problem can be completely solved. It is stated as the quote below :

I have some contacts at the campus of PPUKM who have basic knowledge in psychology and clinical psychology. So after completing the counseling session with the client, I have several times asked their views on this issue. In my point of view, to address this issue, it is better to work together with other counselors who have more experiences on gay and lesbian issue. Therefore, there was several times where I have used the approach because sometimes we do not know the situations we are facing from clinical aspects of psychology (PK1/B679-687/23)

Similar experience was shared by PK13 pertaining this issue. they have obtained the detailed information regarding infected diseases caused by same sex intimate relationship. According to them, these information will then be used during their counseling session with clients. They will explain about the effects and diseases that will be faced through same sex intimate relationship. However, PK13 will only expose the information at the end of the counseling session after gaining full trust from clients. Hence, it is clear that counselor's competency in other fields than counseling may also able to give confidence to the particular counselor himself to handle these gay and lesbian clients. The findings were explained through the transcript passage below :

Another thing is I have friends who are doctors in hospital to facilitate me with the information regarding the diseases that will be dealt by individuals who establish same sex intimate relationship and the detailed information will be provided to me at the end of the day. The purpose of doing that is so that the next time of the counseling session, I will be more prepared as at the same time, I have to inform them in the next session regarding the effects of this kind of relationship and to what stage is the relationship has become. However, it will be done at the end of the session after counselors have gained full trust from the clients and not during the early session (PK13/B229-234/6)



Based on the above findings, by referring to experts and by submitting cases to more experienced and skillful individuals, it is a training for the counselors to enhance their competencies in terms of skills in handling the session. The reason is that counselors lack training and expertise in that case. Hence, this is parallel to counseling ethics which outline the responsibility of counselors towards profession, clients' rights and principle. Based on research participants' statements that emphasize on second contributing factor which is the importance of obtaining psychology, clinical and sexuality experts outlooks. It is proven that knowledge gained from these experiences and the opportunity to be involved in the activities may contribute to efficiency in working with LGB clients. Counselors should be encouraged to attend seminars and workshops that provides information which is more extensive than what have been taught in the program (APA, 2000b). Apart from that, by bringing in sexuality experts and certified professionals to do internal training session, it is possible for the training program to benefit from this was as it ought to be more cheaper and affordable for students and the effects can be widespread (Stephanie 2009).

Therefore, counselors are able to enhance their skills in clinical practice with LGB clients and researches related to LGB issues (Philips 2000). Even though multicultural training content has been identified, empirical support for the effectiveness of specific training model is difficult to be found for both culture and LGB issues (Israel, 1998; Ponterotto, 1996). ethical code held (Capuzzi & Gross 2012, Gibson & Gross 2018).

### **Case Discussion with Colleagues**

The discussion among counselor's colleagues were done in private and still aware of confidentiality ethics where they did not mention the client's name and identity. The issues discussed will often revolve on how to handle the cases and the use of suitable theories or techniques to be applied during the session held. The discussions of this case are usually conceptualized by mentors and mentee specifically for junior counselors who require service and advice in handling sexuality cases. This statement is supported by PK2 as mentioned below :

Besides, just like us in the office, we have private discussion. We did have discussion on cases but still adhere to ethics and all of us did not ask about the clients' background. We only discuss on how to handle the session and if they have problem in attending to cases, they will ask. It is similar to sharing session with colleagues among counselors but no matter what it is, we have to maintain our own ethics by concealing each client's identity due to the ethical duty of confidentiality (PK2/B245-250/4)

Pertaining to this, PK3 has also shared their experiences in mutual discussion with the other colleagues which also participated by sexuality experts as guests in the discussion. However, these LGBT cases are less likely to be addressed because they are not many counselors who have received these kind of cases. Nevertheless, counselors also need to be prepared to deal with any client who is present for advice. Hence, the superiors have brought the experts to give early exposure to counselors regarding this. Although it was only general discussion as a whole, but the knowledge obtained may be applied as an aid in these gay and lesbian cases. The findings are explained through below quote :

Like us in the counseling section, there are cases conference among counselors. This is the time where we are going to have discussion among counselors. If during that time the topic is about suicide, we will call for the experts in the way of handling suicidal clients. As for LGBT case, so far we did not have any case conference yet as not many counselors in UPM who received any gay or lesbian client here. Only one or two counselors who have ever received client with this problem. (PK3/B148-154/4)

Therefore, research participants stated that the collaboration between counselors and professional associates to be one of the fundamental elements in enhancing counselor's competency. Data analysis found that counselors have collaborated with other counselors and professional associates such as clinical psychologist, doctors and sexuality experts. This collaboration is done to assist counselors who have clients with sexuality problem, mental problem and others. The counseling knowledge for them is dynamic and the learning is throughout the time and does not strictly bound to what have been taught during university level. The research findings are parallel to cross-cultural competence which states the acquisition of the learning outcome from others to achieve awareness and knowledge of the various cultures and backgrounds of clients (Midgette & Meggert 1991, Dini Farhana, 2016). Professional partnership with other professionals can help counselors deal with gay and lesbian with various issues.

The findings supported Brown et al., (2001) who stated that collaboration is a process executed by two or more individuals who are involved directly in assisting process. It is also parallel with suggestion by Gerstein & Aegisdottir (2007) for the focus of counseling to be developed outside of counseling field consisting of political science field, linguistics and international issues. This collaboration is important in increasing the benefit obtained by clients due to the existence of a complete complementary element from the other parties. In the research findings, collaboration methods that may happen from various parties are through teamwork or referral.

### **Attending Seminar**

Research findings found that one of the ways to increase counselor's self-competence is by attending seminars and related courses for instance seminars on HIV and LGBT. One of the research participants, PK10 has shared their experience in attending seminars and courses related with LGBT. They always attends seminars and courses organized by state government and International Counseling Association of Malaysia (PERKAMA). Other than seminars conducted inside of the country, they also had attended HIV and LGBT seminars overseas for instance in Philippines. Furthermore, he also works in a place that uses social orientation modules. Through their involvement in seminars and courses like this, counselors can certainly hone their skills in the handling of gay and lesbian cases, as well as deepening their knowledge about this group. This is proven when PK10 is not awkward when responding to questions raised about this LGBT group. This finding is explained again through the following passages:



I went to LGBT seminar for numerous times. We have a module related to this sexual orientation at the National Population and Family Development Board Malaysia (LPPKN). For outside seminar training, I will attend the ones organized by PERKAMA or state government. Other than that, our own agency will send counselors to overseas to attend seminars related with LGBT issues. That time, I went to Philippines for seminars that discussed on HIV and LGBT issues (PK10/B255-233/6)

This findings are strengthened by the interviews conducted on PK13 who stated that seminars and workshops on HIV and LGBT issues are able to improve counselor's competency. The seminar that has been organized is proven to enable counselors in increasing their knowledge and help them in being more prepared in dealing with gay and lesbian clients. Nevertheless, most of seminars and workshops that have been attended only touch on this LGBT issue generally. It is strengthened through transcript passage below :

second, I will also go to the seminar which involves sexual and LGBT seminars to further enhance my knowledge on these issues. As I can remember, there were three seminars that I have attended, the last of which was the seminar on HIV and LGBT at department in Negeri Sembilan because I myself am working in Negeri Sembilan that time. I went to the sexuality seminars organized by the ministry but the input they gave was just the surface and in general like what is gay and what is lesbian (PK13/B246-251/7)

According to the study by Laura Boyd (2012), she mentioned on the importance of attending seminars and workshops related to gay and lesbian issues. It can increase the awareness of counselors related to the understanding of sexuality issues. There are also specialized training in conducting sessions with LGB clients overseas for example, in her study she stated that about 75% of the sample counselors who reported that there are only two or fewer hours of graduate training and most of the time were devoted to LGB clients counseling. This finding is consistent with the study by Stephanie (2009) stating the importance of counselors' knowledge and understanding regarding gay and lesbian issue. Research has shown that more interactive, experience related activities tend to increase self-awareness of the participants and increases understanding of various clients (Phillips, 2000). However, most conference sessions are less than an hour long and tend to be more adept in nature than workshops or advanced training sessions (Stephanie, 2009). Hence, counselors need deep knowledge of this issue, to help these individuals to change for the better.

Although counselors have been involved in LGBT workshops and seminars, the required information is still insufficient. This is because most of the seminars attended were not focusing on the handling of counseling sessions with gay and lesbian clients. Due to the absence of specific training provided by the parties, the counselor has taken his own initiative to undertake various activities to improve the competence of counselors in the gay and lesbian counseling competencies. This effort requires high level of awareness for the counselor that gay and lesbian counseling is very important. Among their activities are watching videos related to gay and lesbian counseling sessions, utilizing ICT or 'YouTube' facilities and learning through personal experience or reflection and increasing their readings on articles related to sexual orientation involving gay and lesbian. The findings of this study are consistent with what the previous researchers have suggested about the forms of training

to improve the competence of the counselor. The study by Stephanie (2009) has provided activity-oriented ideas to enhance the counselor's competency and in raising awareness among counselors which are through the method of approaching gays and lesbians directly, presenting the cases and conducting assessments on certain community.

According to Stephanie (2009), specific trainings, programs and courses related to LGB are decreasing. There is a lack of research about the actual content of training or courses for counseling students on sexual orientation, explanation and anecdotal report of graduate level and the present research only often involves exploring attitudes and promoting the dissemination of appropriate knowledge to LGB. The educational approach, however, is not usually developed in the framework of theory (Israel & Selvidge, 2003). Recently, authors and researchers have speculated about the possibility of understanding the concept and development of competence counseling with LGB customers in the conceptual model of multicultural education (Fassinger, 1991; Fassinger & Sperber-Richie, 1997; Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007; Israel, 1998).

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, it is evident that counselors require knowledge in other areas relating to gay and lesbian so they can easily handle such cases. Therefore, they need to seek initiative to understand the context and experience of handling cases. This is because the issue of sexuality is not a common issue, as it involves a person's psychology, sexual orientation, and mentality. Therefore, counselors should consult with experts regarding cases handled to help these people get out of their world. Additionally, counselors also play a role in providing clients with awareness of the effect of same sex intimate relationships. Hence, they need expert referrals on this subject so that the information that will be presented to the client is clear and accurate. Through this approach, the problems faced by the client are well researched and assisted.

In this regard, gay and lesbian counseling training should be taken care not only by the counselor but also by the parties concerned as it affects the effectiveness of counseling services provided. Most of the research participants have stated that sexuality-related courses and sexual orientation should be emphasized during university level studies. Universities students who take psychology counseling courses will be offered sexuality and developmental psychology courses but this course is not offered to counseling students and it is not comprehensive. Nevertheless, one or two courses are insufficient to fully understand this LGBT culture. The university also needs to offer cross-cultural counseling subjects that include sexual orientation, gender and multiculturalism. Gay and lesbian-related disclosures may also be applied in cross-cultural counseling including the application of multiple inputs in other counseling courses as a whole need to be integrated in order to strengthen existing inputs.

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