

# THE USE OF COUNSELING THEORIES IN HANDLING GAY AND LESBIAN CLIENTS: EXPERIENCE OF MALAYSIAN COUNSELORS

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## ABSTRACT

Counseling theory is an approach used by counselors to explore and assist clients. Counseling theory also comprises of a conceptual framework that enables counselors to think systematically on human development including counseling practice. This study explores theories applied by counselors in handling counseling sessions with gay and lesbian clients. The study used a qualitative design involving semi-structured in-depth interviews. The purposive sampling is used to interview counselors which have been identified by the researcher to have information regarding the management of counseling sessions for gay and lesbian clients. Fifteen counselors were chosen to participate in this study based on two selections. The counselors participated in this study were registered counselors and have experience in handling gay and lesbian clients. Based on the findings, participants have emphasized several necessities of conventional theories applied by counselors during the counseling session. Counselors discuss the stand-alone theory that consists of Person-Centered (Rogers), REBT, Psychoanalysis, and Adler. Besides that, counselors also use integration theories including Rogers and Adler; Psychoanalysis, and REBT. The study also found that additional training is required during counselor training that includes techniques in counseling, religious approach, and complementary approach that can enhance the existing counseling knowledge. The results of this study can help counselors who work with gay and lesbian clients. The study also suggests that institutions conducting counseling training should develop more courses related to handling gay and lesbian clients. It can be concluded that counselors can apply a specific theory or integrating several theories to identify and understand the problem brought by clients.

## Keywords:

Counseling theories, counselor experiences, gay and lesbian clients

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## INTRODUCTION

The development of counselling services in Malaysia which began around the '60s has been similar to other countries in the light of advances led by counselling profession in America (Amla et al., 2009; Azizah & Siti Salina, 2015). The highlight of counselling recognition in Malaysia happened when the government establishes a counselling act to regulate counselling services in Malaysia. Through this act, only those who had already received training from an institution recognized and subsequently registered by the Board of Counsellors can provide counselling services to the general public (Amla et al., 2009; Lembaga Kaunselor Malaysia, 2011). The need for guidance and counseling services increasingly gaining place and covers all walks of life including the importance of gay and lesbian counseling in Malaysia (Kamarul et al., 2017).

The issue of gay and lesbian is a

phenomenon that has existed a long time ago in the west. Now, it has begun to spread in Malaysia (Israel & Selvidge, 2004; Laura, 2011; Roslee, 2017; Siti Hajar, 2020). Malaysian society is still not open when discussing issues related to gay and lesbian sexual relations. The problem evolved around gay and lesbian is not discussed in detail. It's considered as a personal problem that does not involve the general public. However, in recent times the issue of gay and lesbian involvement has become increasingly apparent in modern life. This is due to the increase in the number of people involved. Due to changes in the culture of life and way of thinking in an increasingly open and liberal society. Therefore, counselors should have the knowledge and skills in handling gay and lesbian cases. This is because previous studies show counselors are less competent in terms of knowledge, skills, and lack of training (Laura, 2011; Rebekah, 2012; Stephanie, 2009).

Counseling competency is vital towards gay and lesbian as they face greater emotional disturbance issues compared to heterosexuals' clients. At the same time, studies from West also shows that gay and lesbian clients are more prone to committing suicides compared to heterosexual (Guha, 2013; Reisner et al., 2015; Siti Hajar et al., 2018). A study by Marshal et al. (2011) found that 28% of gays and lesbians have been reported to attempt suicide compared to only 12% of heterosexuals and the numbers continue to increase. They purposefully harmed themselves and 16% have tried to take their own lives. King et al. (2008) mentioned that homosexuals now need to acquire counselling services or health therapies to solve their problems. Apart from that, they also face emotional problems and other personal problems the same as heterosexuals. Among the problems that they face are depression, career issues, problems at the workplace, relationship problems, and so on.

The counseling process takes place when counselors assist clients to change from one level to another to enhance their potential. The results will show the change in clients' maturity and behavior (Corey, 2012; Trevor & Pamela, 2014). The use of counselling theory is based on the necessities and issues brought by clients in the counseling session. Hence, this has supported the past researches related to the counseling adaptation conducted in the cultural context apart from the ones in the western culture especially in Asian countries context (Berg, 2016; Kamarul Shah, 2014). This theory is considered as a form of intellectualism in the ideas and concepts of an individual through the basis of work, experiences, readings, and meditation. Counseling theory on the other hand consists of a conceptual framework that enables the counselor to think systematically on human growth including counseling practice (Corey, 2012; Kamarul, 2014; Whitman, 2006). Counseling theory is an approach used by counselors to explore and assist clients in solving their problems.

Kamarul (2014) stated that for the continuity of counseling process, the counselor and client's cultural factors or values should be taken into consideration. This means that in the context of understanding clients, counselors need to understand the cultural definition in a structured way. This is because when an individual is willing to become a client, he or she is also willing to expose his or her identity within the scope of the matter to the counselor. Cultural values include descent, ethnicity, language, gender, economic status, kinship, sexual orientation, and spiritual worship (Berg, 2016). These cultural values also influence clients' worldviews including his or her thoughts, beliefs, way of life, and identity. If counselors can understand these aspects, it will further facilitate the counseling process.

Therefore, it seems that when involving issues of identity, integration theory should be used by counselors. Integration theory is the combination of theories in counseling that have been developed in counseling sessions (Tiffany & Zachary, 2017; Guha, 2013). The approach used by counselors is not only based on a single theoretical basis instead uses a variety of theories to help the client. Several counseling theories were applied based on the compatibility of the problems brought by clients in the counseling session. In order to assist the clients better, counselors should be equipped with sufficient knowledge about gay and lesbian to facilitate them in dealing with the issue. Sometimes, these individuals need moral support to carry on with their lives without any disruption from others. They required professional and effective aids to assist them to improve their quality of life (Ferlatte, 2015; Israel, 2013; Gates & Viggiani, 2014; Singh & Dickey, 2017). This study is conducted to explore theories that have been applied by counselors in handling counseling sessions with gay and lesbian clients.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study uses a qualitative approach that involves in-depth interviews using semi-structured interview protocols. Purposive sampling is used to

interview counselors who have been identified by the researcher. The counselors involved in this study must be registered counselors and have experiences in conducting sessions with gay and lesbian clients.

**Participants**

Fifteen registered counselors that consists of eight males and seven females participated in this study. The number of respondents is said to be sufficient

to obtain rich data for qualitative studies (Hill et al., 1997; Yin, 2015). The research team contacted the participants, explained the objective of the research, invited them to be interviewed. They were asked to sign the consent forms before collecting the data. Each participant was interviewed one or two times lasting from 30 to 120 minutes by using voice recordings. The interview guides were created from related theories and previous studies.

Background of participants

Participants	Age (Year)	Education level	Experience (Year)
P1	38	PhD	12
P2	45	Master	15
P3	37	Bachelor	12
P4	35	Master	7
P5	47	Master	19
P6	33	Master	8
P7	30	Master	5
P8	38	Master	9
P9	42	PhD	17
P10	40	Master	16
P11	29	Bachelor	5
P12	32	Master	8
P13	33	Bachelor	9
P14	61	Master	21
P15	59	Bachelor	13

**Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data (Bold, 2012). Both inductive and deductive methods were employed to generate the themes and categories (Podhisita, 2011). Firstly, the researcher transcribed the voice recording word by word. The data obtained through the transcription of recorded interviews were analyzed by theme analysis based on the objective of the study using NVivo software (version 11). The process of analyzing data using the NVivo method is compatible with Glaser & Peshkin (1992) notion that computer software could assist researchers who use qualitative methods to

compile, analyze and store data effectively other than helping the researchers to work more systematically. Then, the researcher read the transcripts of the participant several times to identify the common and emerging themes. Later, codes and categories were generated to support each theme. The results of this narrative research were written into stories in a chronological sequence (Creswell, 2012).

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a method to ensure that the results from a qualitative study are reliable and

valid (Podhisita, 2011). The trustworthiness process involves triangulation, peer review, member checking, field notes, and verification of expertise. The triangulation method was used to ensure credibility by collecting data from in-depth interviews and analysis documents from counselors. Furthermore, the researcher had several debriefing sessions with the team members during the study. The results of the data analysis were sent back to all the participants to verify that all the information presented are accurate and suitable. All data will be destroyed after the one-year completion of the study by deleting voice recordings and Microsoft word files from both computers and drives.

## RESULTS

Based on the statements, participants have discussed the use of conventional theories or western theories in a counselling session with gay and lesbian clients. Counselors discuss the stand-alone theory that consists of consist of Person-Centered theory (Rogers), rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT), Psychoanalysis, and Adlerian theory (Adler). Besides that, the counselor also uses integration theories including Rogers and Adler; Psychoanalysis, and REBT.

### 1. Theory Rogers

The humanistic approach focuses on the will and the uniqueness of man apart from the freedom to choose their goal of life. According to participant 14 (P14), they are adamant about Rogers' theory because this theory encourages counselors to actively listen and attend to the client's problem. When the counselor is listening and attending to the client's problem, they will use minimal encouragement in order to encourage the client to talk more freely. When the client sees the counselor's interest in listening to his or her problem, they will not feel shy to reveal his or her private problem regarding their real identity. The counselor is also a positive person and always mentioned that each client should be helped. Sometimes, the reason they came to see

counselors is only that they want to share their problems and they need emotional and mental support to stay strong in their lives:

I am a Rogerian because I always think positively and I believe that every client can grow into a better person. For me, in every session that has been conducted with these gay and lesbian individuals, I believe that they just need people to lean on and have friends to share their stories with. Some of them feel like they are confined to their family so they do not have people who they can trust and share their stories with and only restricted to those of their same-sex if they were to share their stories. (*Participants 14*)

The above finding can be strengthened through an in-depth interview with participant 8 (P8). P8 also stated that Rogers theory is applied during the beginning of the counseling session to help clients in uttering the issues and problem faced by them. The counselor also mentioned that Rogers has stated the components in this theory are unconditional acceptance and not being judgmental on clients with different values and background culture. He also stated that after the issues and problems are identified, the next step was taken by the counselor using other counseling theories:

In the early session, I will apply the common theory just like when I use Rogers theory, meaning I will just listen to everything the client has to say and what he feels. The strengths of Rogers theory are unconditional acceptance and not being judgmental to the client no matter who he is. When we succeed in digging into his primary problem, as for myself, through these questioning skills, it may assist the clients in revealing their problems to the counselor. (*Participants 8*)

## 2. REBT Theory

Rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) is one of the theories applied by research participants in handling counseling sessions with gay and lesbian clients. This theory was also utilized to see the client's behavior when the session was conducted. According to participant 11 (P11), this theory is fundamental as counselors should be careful and wise in using the style of the question according to the client's understanding. Hence, the client will indirectly reveal in more detail about their problem if the counselor is using appropriate questions. This is the importance of applying this REBT theory because the behaviors and beliefs of each client are different, therefore the counselor needs to use a different technique to approach their clients:

I usually look at the situation, I would prefer to choose the REBT theory. We will dispute the belief system that the client has. As for me, I will see how rational his speech because you need to use a different style of inquiry for scientific questions so that he will not feel like he is being forced to speak.  
(*Participants 11*)

According to participant 6 (P6), REBT theory can only be applied in the middle of the counseling session which is after a few sessions. It can only be used after the counselor has gained trust from the client and they feel comfortable in sharing any events involving his or her dignity. Then, the counselor will ask suitable questions to be answered by the client. Next, the client will naturally expose the real story of what happened to him or her. Participant 6 shared experience in handling a client's case who got involved in gay life after his private part was touched by his guy friends when he was in a hostel back in school days. After that incident, the client felt aroused whenever his penis is touched by men. It seems that the client somehow shows an incorrect belief system in his mind. Therefore, the counselor used

REBT theory by applying the ABC model concept. ABC model concept is the short term for activating events (A), beliefs (B), and consequences (C). ABC concept was utilized to teach clients in debating their negative thought. At this point, the client felt that everyone around him is of different sex although, in reality, they are of the same sex as him. In this statement, the counselor tried to change the client's false belief system. With this concept, the counselor able to identify his "A" belief system concept which was wrong due to the past incident that happened to him.

REBT theory is only applied in the third, fourth, and next session afterward. This is because after we have built a good relationship with the client. Once we have got the trust, then only we can use the REBT theory. REBT is based on the ABC model concept. Until we as the counselors can dispute the belief system of the client, we have to make them dispute their belief system and correct it. That is what really matters about the belief system. The client had an experience where his private part was touched by his friends at boarding school causing him to feel that everyone around him is of different sex. This is proven when he enjoys and feels aroused after being treated that way. Next, he has this belief system about himself and other people, I quote, "I feel aroused when my penis was touched by my seniors. It feels like they are of different sex". This probably happened because it was his first experience of being treated that way.  
(*Participant 6*)

## 3. Psychoanalysis Theory

Freud mentioned that gender-role progress is an unconscious process that resulted from different biological interactions and identification processes experienced by men and women. In another word, Freud explained that those are biological factors

and environmental factors. Psychoanalysis theory is a fundamental theory in exploring the client's background including their family history. Participants of this study mentioned that the exploration of the client's past experiences and history is crucial. Through that way, counselors can find out the reason why homosexual individuals became that way. According to participant 11 (P11), the use of psychoanalysis theory was to discern the client's progress level from childhood to adult. Past experiences and history exploration is fundamental to identify the reason why the client turned out that way. It is also vital to know if the client holds a grudge and is depressed because of the past experience that affected him deeply. As claimed by P11, the client was already involved in gay life since a child because he had experience being sodomized by his family member when he was ten. He has difficulty in forgetting that past incident because he always blamed his cousin until he was enmeshed in inverse sex:

It is the same case with the latest client. He came from a poor family with several siblings. He was sodomized by his cousin when he was a child about nine or ten years old. I explored his childhood developmental age and also his development during adolescence until early adult age. For exploration connected to the client's development from childhood until now, I applied psychoanalysis theory by Sigmund Freud. He really had difficulties in forgetting his past incident and tend to blame his cousin for that. (*Participants 11*)

This finding has been strengthened through the interview with participants 5 (P5) who experienced the same situation as P11. They claimed that psychoanalysis theory is used in perceiving the past history experienced by the client. Their client revealed that during his childhood, he was sodomized when he was three years old by his father. It reoccurred when he was

a teenager. He was bullied sexually where he was sodomized and forced to do oral sex by his friends at boarding school. Every progress that happened to the client's life has left a bad impact until nowadays. He has already embroiled in inverse sex when he was only a child. At the same time, he was exposed to a sexual relationship with men:

It is not an interesting experience for us but probably it is vice versa for the client. So, the client shared his experiences for about 15 minutes. He told me that since he was three years old, he had already gone through the experience of being sodomized so it is more understandable for me as to why the client became that way. It happened when he was a teenager, he experienced it once again at boarding school. At this point, he had already been introduced to sex where he was sodomized and forced to do oral sex. From there, we will see how far his involvement. I also look at the theoretical approaches related to the cause of this kind of sexual behavior. (*Participants 5*)

#### **4. Adler Theory**

Adler's theory is also one of the theories used by counselors in handling gay and lesbian cases. This theory is closely related to someone's family and the parents' upbringing. Counselors need to explore the clients' private background especially the relationship with the family. For participant 13 (P13), he chose this theory to explore clients' family background as he believes that family can be another factor that leads to these gay and lesbian issues.

P13 described that the use of this Adler theory is based on the client's story which leans more towards his family primarily on the relationship with parents and siblings. The client said that his father was strict. He is the only son in his family. When he was a child, he has been treated as a girl. He can cook, has a gentle attitude, and very close to the mother and the

other siblings. He lacked love and attention from his father because the father was so strict and he was always scolded for no reason:

It is just that I used Adler theory for my client because I wanted to see my client's history and, I was trying to find out about the factor that turned him that way. Mostly he really did not have a good relationship with his father. So, because of a lack of love from a father's figure, it encouraged him to find another man who can replace the father's figure and give him the love and warmth he has been longing for. Those were among the answers I got. Some clients have these kinds of characters because of the way they were brought up. For instance, a client was educated strictly by the father. Another factor is for having all-female siblings that influence his interest to cook and clean up. That is what I can see when it is related to the family as a factor. (*Participants 13*)

This finding was supported by P13 who explained that he was using Adler theory to explore the client's family way of life. It was to discern whether the client had a family problem or not which led him to be emotionally affected. Based on his story, the client did not socialize much with his family or go back home frequently because his parents never care about him although he is the only son of the family. Hence, the feelings of frustration and loneliness caused the client to find significant people like him to share problems and those who are always there for him. Furthermore, the reason for not having any other male sibling in the family has led him to find a compatible partner to express his problems and do activities together. Love and affection are the prime reasons for the client to search for a same-sex partner to heal the longing and lost feelings inside him:

For this adult client, I applied Adler theory, and this theory does mention what the client needs and the exploration of the client's life. Through this exploration, I found out that he is the only son in the

family so probably he did not have much of a man's influence in his family leading him to figure out about it outside through his partner for sharing moments aside from doing activities together. The parents are too busy with work and causing him to experience a lack of love and attention. (*Participants 13*)

### **5.Integration Theory**

However, the study also found that there were participants who use more than one theory to handle cases of gay and lesbian. For instance, they integrate the theory of Rogers and Adler. Counselors manage to gain trust from clients through Rogers theory, after that counselor play their role to explore client problems using Adler theory in handling gay and lesbian cases. At the same time, a few counselors use integration theories of REBT and psychoanalysis. After using Psychoanalysis to explore the client's background and family history that contributes to gay and lesbian behavior, counselors continue to take further action using REBT theory.

According to participants 15 (P15), counselors need to diversify counseling theories to be applied in sexual cases to help counselors to have better control during counseling session:

In dealing with lesbian and gay clients, we need to use more than two or three theories. During my session I used the integration theory of Rogers and Adler, after that, I use Psychoanalysis and REBT to be more effective. I use several theories in counseling sessions that include Islamic counseling with clients LGBT. (*Participants 15*)

Participants 5 (PK5) also stated that he does not focus on a specific theory. Instead, he modified the theory according to the client's acceptance phase. The modification of the theory involves the client's acceptance during the counseling session:

I usually do not stick to one theory alone, I will make modifications to the theory, I

did not change theory. Modification of the theory is in accordance with the phase of the client. For example, at the level of the client acceptance process, I will be using Rogers theory that focuses on unconditional acceptance and genuineness. In the second phase, I used the integration theory of psychoanalysis and REBT. This approach helps the client to have a better understanding of counseling process. I could see the client's willingness to participate in the discussion. (*Participants 5*)

## DISCUSSION

The finding shows that the participants applied several theories during counseling sessions with gay and lesbian clients. The application of these theories should be mastered by counselors in handling cases to smoothen the counseling session. Based on the findings, most of the research participants emphasized using Rogers theory in their counseling sessions. This is because, Rogers highlighted three components which are unconditional acceptance, being non-judgmental, and congruent. The application of this theory helps counselors to become more active and attentive listeners and do not judge their clients. These are the reason why the theory is used at the beginning of the session to build rapport with clients. The finding is supported by Jim Lemoire and Charles (2005) research who stated that Rogers theory contains therapeutic nature (Rogers, 1987). It also unfolds the stigma and discrimination problems towards minority groups consisting of these gay and lesbian clients (Trevor & Pamela, 2014).

Rogers (1987) mentioned that the use of Rogers theory in counseling will overcome the problems faced by gay and lesbian clients. Although their identities are different compared to heterosexuals, they also have the same necessities as others. At the same time, they are exposed to society's stigma that often questions their sexual

identity. Therefore, the person-centered counseling process plays the role of facilitator and helps gay and lesbian clients to face the exposure of their sexual orientation. There are at least six strengths can be identified in gay and lesbian client-centered therapy that are (a) unconditional acceptance, congruent and empathy towards clients; (b) client's perspective basis; (c) encouraging client's locus of evaluation; (d) emphasizing on client's assumption on self-concept; (e) believing in client's potential for self-growth; and (f) ensuring the client's growth process.

Counselors also use REBT theory during the counseling session with gay and lesbian clients. This theory is based on the belief that someone should change the way his or her thinking through cognitive restructuring to readjust the irrational thinking that becomes the core of the psychological problem. The focus of REBT in counseling sessions is on the role played by the mind and the belief system as the cause of the problem. In this study, most of the participants have applied this theory based on the type of issues brought by clients in counseling sessions. For instance, if the client has a conflict with the same-sex partner, it may cause them to be emotionally unstable. The pressure faced by them will lead to irrationally thinking or have unfit thoughts on their lives (Pachankis et al., 2015)

Based on past research, this homosexual concept is more clearly linked to the psychoanalytic approach introduced by Sigmund Freud on the basis that human is born with instinct (Millar, 2016; Guha, 2013). Freud's psychoanalytic theory provides an approach in analyzing and treating abnormal behavior among adults including gay and lesbian individuals (Dean & Lane, 2003). According to Freud, human personalities consist of three elements that are id, ego ad superego. It is the biological necessity towards needs such as food, shelter, and warmth including sex and it is operating based on the satisfaction principle.

The theory expressed by Sigmund Freud is suitable to be used in discerning the primary problem faced by the client. Freud believed that any problem that is happening to an individual now is related to the incident that happened when he was a child for instance becoming a victim of sodomy and sexual abuse. This has led the victims to feel depressed and has an unstable feeling. He further claimed that the human mind is divided into three different levels. There are the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious states. In their conscious mind, humans are aware of the events that already happened to them and the events that are happening to them at the present moment. The subconscious mind on the other hand is situated between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. Sometimes, individuals will not realize or know that something is happening unless they give full attention. Whereas in their unconscious mind, humans are not aware of what happens to emotions because of a phenomenon that occurs. In humans' lives in his opinion, mankind experienced a lot through the unconscious mind and this has affected the behavior in their life. This unaware admission from the client's childhood days has led him to suffer from a lot of other problems in his life (Corey, 2012; Kim et al., 2019; Nanchatsan Sakunpong, 2018).

Participants in this study also used Adler theory to identify the relationship between the clients and their families. According to Adlerian Psychology, human beings have the impetus to mingle and socialize with other members of society. In this kind of relationship, human has a unique lifestyle. Adler also believed that every action has its own purpose. Adler's main purpose is to feel safe and overcome the inferiority complex in his self. This is important, especially when the goal of overcoming inferiority feelings will encourage an individual to do their best in obtaining power, superiority, and perfection. One of the clients in this study was found to be someone who has very low self-esteem. This character holds him back and leading him to be

frustrated and depressed especially when communicating and socializing with people who were significant to him. He felt helpless, not confident, and disbelief about his strengths.

Overall, the study found that the Person-Centered theory and REBT theory were widely used by the participants of the study. Rogers theory is typically used at the beginning of the counseling session. Other theories also were used depending on the problems and issues brought by the clients. In addition, the study also found that the participants of the study used various theories in handling the case of gays and lesbians based on the requirements during the counseling session. The application of these theories is important to help counselors conduct sessions smoothly as well as help clients solve their problems.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, based on the findings, most of the counselors do not adhere to one theory alone; instead, they modified or integrated several theories to be flexible to the clients' acceptance phase. The modification of the theory is suitable for the client's phase. For instance, at the beginning of the session counselors will focus more on Rogers theory which practice unconditional acceptance and genuineness.

Most participants also explore theories associated with the occurrence of the behavior of gays and lesbians that include the theory of psychoanalysis, behavior, and sexual orientation. The study also found that counselors prefer to use the theory of Rogers, REBT, and psychoanalysis in counseling sessions. This occurs due to the counseling training that mostly emphasized those theoretical approaches. However, the use of a special theory or approach to handling gay and lesbian clients are lacking during counseling training. Therefore, to improve competency in dealing with gay and lesbian clients, counselors should know other related theories that help improve the quality of

counseling services.

Lastly, the study also found that additional training is required during counselor training that includes techniques in counseling, religious approach, and complementary approach that can enhance the existing counseling knowledge. The results of this study can help counselors who work with gay and lesbian clients. Other than that, this research also suggests that institutions conducting counseling training should develop more courses related to handling gay and lesbian clients. It can be concluded that counselors can apply a specific theory or integrating several theories to identify and understand the problem brought by clients.

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