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COMPETENCY IN MILITARY SETTINGS**

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**Abstract:**

The training and competency components of counselors are essential aspects that ensure counselors remain proficient and effective in conducting counseling sessions. Counselors serving in the Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM) face unique challenges, particularly in providing impactful counseling services that contribute to the development and well-being of their clients. This study employs a qualitative approach, involving nine actively serving ATM counselors who provide counseling services to ATM officers. Respondents were selected using a purposive sampling method, identifying key criteria for their selection. Twelve questions were posed to the respondents, covering four main constructs: the application of the counseling code of ethics, the importance of counseling services in the military, intervention planning for clients, and the training needs of counselors. The interview data, collected through focused group discussions (FGDs), were analyzed using verbatim techniques and categorized based on the constructs. The analysis from this study show the critical importance of the Counselor Code of Ethics by the LKM in ensuring confidentiality and informed consent in counseling services. Counseling services within the Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM) play a pivotal role in the psychological well-being and career development of military personnel, including screening and promotion processes. Continuous training, such as simulation exercises and advanced psychology courses, is essential for maintaining the preparedness and high skill levels of ATM counselors.

Keywords:

Counselling Training, Competency, Military

Introduction

Counselors play a pivotal role in the well-being and development of military officers in Malaysia. The life of a military officer is fraught with numerous challenges and pressures that can adversely impact their mental and physical well-being. These challenges include the risk of injury, war trauma, and the stress of daily tasks. In this context, counselors serve as essential providers of emotional support for military officers (Jones & Smith, 2018). Counselors assist military officers in managing stress through individual and group counseling sessions. In these sessions, officers are afforded the opportunity to share their experiences and feelings within a safe and supportive environment. This approach enables counselors to help officers identify sources of stress and devise effective solutions. This process not only mitigates stress but also enhances the mental and emotional well-being of the officers (Doe et al., 2019).

Furthermore, counselors are involved in educational and training programs aimed at increasing awareness about mental health. These programs may include lectures, workshops, and seminars that focus on maintaining psychological well-being, recognizing early signs of stress or depression, and strategies to overcome these issues. By raising awareness, military officers can identify mental health problems at an early stage and seek necessary assistance (Tan, 2020). Counselors also play a critical role in providing crisis intervention. In situations where military officers face extreme stress or trauma, counselors offer immediate assistance and develop long-term recovery plans. This includes providing referrals to psychologists or psychiatrists if needed (Williams, 2021).

In addition to emotional support and crisis intervention, counselors assist in the development of mental resilience. This resilience is crucial for military officers to face the challenges of service and daily life. Counselors employ various techniques such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, stress management training, and meditation to help officers build this resilience (Lee & Kim, 2017). Counselors also support the families of military officers. Families who understand the challenges faced by military officers and receive adequate support can provide strong moral support to the officers. Counselors offer family counseling sessions and educational programs that help families understand and cope with the stress associated with life as a military family (Rahman et al., 2019). In addition, according to Liley et al. (2023) explained that the counselor's role is not only tied to providing emotional support but also in the development of self-competence which is also the main objective in the implementation of counseling sessions, especially involving officers in an organization.

Literature Review

The study emphasizes the significance of ongoing training in crisis management for military counselors in Malaysia, which greatly enhances their capacity to effectively handle emergency circumstances. Counselors can acquire the essential skills to offer effective psychological assistance to military members during emergencies by participating in training programs that incorporate simulations of combat scenarios and natural catastrophes. For example, the Malaysian Military (ATM) organizes training sessions that simulate both disasters and conflicts in order to guarantee that counselors are well-prepared for any possible situation.

Internationally, including in the United States, military counselors get comprehensive crisis training through programs like Combat and Operational Stress Control (COSC). These programs give practical training in effectively treating operational stress and trauma (Hoge et al., 2014). Studies suggest that continuous professional growth and competence training improve the precision of psychological evaluations carried out by military counselors. ATM counselors in Malaysia employ modern diagnostic techniques, such as the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ) and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21), to accurately identify and cater to the mental health requirements of service members. Consistent training in the utilization of these instruments guarantees that counselors are capable of conducting precise evaluations. Internationally, including Canada, military counselors receive extensive training in contemporary diagnostic methods to enhance the quality of psychological assessments, hence providing accurate and successful therapies (Wright et al., 2013).

Research has shown that counselors who receive frequent training in therapeutic techniques and interventions are more proficient in their responsibilities. In Malaysia, counselors undergo training programs that emphasize evidence-based approaches. This enables them to create and execute treatments that are customized to meet the particular requirements of military personnel. As a result, the outcomes of these interventions are more sustainable and have a greater effect. For instance, undergoing cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) training has enabled ATM counselors to more efficiently tackle the psychological concerns of its members. Internationally, including in the United Kingdom, military counselors undergo rigorous training in several therapeutic modalities to guarantee they can deliver optimal therapy to their people (Ruzek et al., 2011). The significance of ongoing education and professional development for counselors in military environments is emphasized in literature. Participating in advanced psychology courses, international conferences, and workshops in Malaysia not only improves counselors' knowledge and abilities but also boosts their capacity to adapt to the changing difficulties in military situations. The ATM strongly encourages its counselors to participate in international conferences and engage in practical training focused on Psychological First Aid (PFA). Internationally, military counselors, including those in Australia, are urged to participate in ongoing professional development programs and attend international conferences to acquire knowledge about the most effective methods and the newest advancements in their area (Adler et al., 2015).

In-Service Training Theory in Military Counselling

The concept of in-service training in military counseling plays a vital role in the professional growth of military personnel, especially in dealing with the psychological strain and distress experienced throughout their duty. The primary objective of in-service training is to provide counselors with the necessary skills and extensive understanding of mental health challenges that military members may encounter. This training is crucial to guarantee that counselors are capable of delivering precise and efficient psychological assistance. Britt, Adler, and Bartone (2001) suggest that counseling training that emphasizes preventative measures might effectively mitigate the psychological stress endured by military troops engaged in combat operations.

Although in-service counseling training offers several advantages, it is not without its fair share of problems. An important concern is the congruence between training curriculum and the practical challenges encountered in the field. In their study, Hoge et al. (2004) discovered that

a significant number of military counselors believe that the training they get does not adequately align with the current requirements in the field. The training typically prioritizes theoretical knowledge while neglecting the importance of actual implementation, which is essential in dynamic and frequently unpredictable scenarios like military operations. This emphasizes the immediate necessity to revamp training methods to focus more on practical application in accordance with real-world demands.

The efficacy of counseling in the military is greatly influenced by the caliber and pertinence of the in-service training that counselors receive. While possessing theoretical knowledge and core principles is crucial, it is essential to provide counselors with practical and field-specific training to ensure their ability to give effective help. Enhancements in the design and execution of training programs can result in the development of more proficient counselors who possess superior skills to address mental health hazards among military personnel. According to Adler, Bliese, and Castro (2011), it is essential to combine theory and practice in counseling training to enhance the effectiveness of military counseling services.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative methodology, which includes carrying out interviews with nine counselors who are military personnel in the Malaysian Armed Forces. Researcher use a methodology of conducting interviews in both group settings, such as focus groups discussion, and on an individual basis interview. The sample selection for this study is determined by many factors, which include the following criteria:

- i. Have prior experience in counseling;
- ii. Be registered with the Board of Counselors;
- iii. Have engaged in counseling sessions for at least 6 months, and
- iv. Show a desire to participate in the study.

The interview was performed utilizing a semi-structured interview approach, with a specific focus on counselor ethics, the counselor's role and duty, and the experience of implementation. Following the interview, the researcher performed a verbatim analysis, meticulously documenting all the interactions and identifying themes based on the client interviews.

Result

Table 1.1 displays information about the respondents who voluntarily participated in the interviews conducted regarding the challenges of counseling services in the Malaysian Armed Forces. The total number of respondents involved in this research interview is nine, consisting of the army, navy, and air force. Five of the respondents are female officers and four are male, while three of them are still single and six of them are married. A total of four respondents to this study are those who have more than 10 years of service in the Malaysian Armed Forces, and only two of them have less than three years of experience. Respondents' expertise in conducting counseling sessions is also diverse; five of the respondents have expertise in mental health counseling, while two of the respondents have expertise in the career field, and one is in marriage counseling and organizational counseling. The counselor's involvement in case handling is also broad, involving marriage and family issues, career, sexuality, stress, and organizational management.

Table 1.1 Information About The Respondent (N=9)

Item	N
Gender	Male
	Female
Status	Single
	Marriage
Years in Service	1-3 years
	4- 6 years
	7- 9 Years
	More than 10 Years
Expert	Mental Health
	Career
	Family
	Organization
Case always conducted	Family and Marriage
	Career
	Sexuality
	Stress
	Organization Management

Based on the results of the verbatim analysis the researcher conducted to identify some themes related to this study, the following information is significant.

The Counselor Code of Ethics is Applied and Executed.

The Malaysian Council of Counselors (LKM) presents the ethical code of practice standards for counselors, highlighting the significance of confidentiality and informed consent in counseling services. Interviews with the counselors indicate that the counselor's code of ethics places significant emphasis on the principles of confidentiality and informed consent. These principles are expected to be strictly adhered to by counselors during joint therapy sessions. When fulfilling their duties as counselors and military officials, especially when making reports for superiors, they face this predicament. Nevertheless, as highly competent and qualified counselors, they recognize the need of understanding and applying the principles specified in the code of ethics established by the Malaysian Counselor Board (LKM). The code of ethics in the respondents' context is directly associated with confidentiality ethics and the utilization of informed consent forms in counseling sessions.

“In order to conduct group counseling sessions in private and uphold the ethics of confidentiality in the counseling process, informed consent is crucial”.

(Respondent 1)

“Confidentiality is important, especially to ensure the counselor’s professionalism remains intact.”

(Respondent 3)

The interview highlights the significance of maintaining secrecy in order to provide a secure environment for the client and foster a sense of confidence between the client and the counselors throughout the therapy session. Counselors have difficulties when they must collect

data on matters connected to discipline, highlighting the importance of consistently implementing ethical principles throughout the counseling process, especially in the context of group therapy.

Important of Counseling Service

The Malaysian Armed Forces acknowledge the significance of counseling services, not only for the psychological well-being of military officers, but also for their overall welfare. These services are essential for screening members, promoting them, and executing self-improvement courses, among other responsibilities. Consequently, counseling services are highly regarded by the military, not only as a component of the therapeutic procedure, but also as essential in moulding the professional trajectory of military personnel.

"Counseling needs not only involve aspects of mental health, but counseling services in the armed forces also involve the promotion of officers, the implementation of courses, and the implementation of psychological tests."

(Respondent 5)

Counseling services are seen as significant for military officers, especially in relation to increasing the personal potential of existing officers.

(Respondent 2)

Intervention Plan Planning

Executing an intervention plan is a crucial duty for a counselor while working with clients. When it comes to preparing interventions, counselors must possess expertise in all counseling skills, as well as the theoretical framework used to analyze the client's problem and determine its underlying cause. The importance of counseling services resides in the client and management's willingness to acknowledge and take into account the counselor's recommended intervention strategies throughout the continuing therapy process. The counselors on duty also handle instances related to mental health issues among military members. Psychological tools such as the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ) and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) are commonly used in the process of screening for mental health conditions. We exclusively handle the early phases of mental health case management. If deemed required, we refer clients with more severe symptoms to Tuanku Mizan Military Hospital for further treatment administered by psychological and psychiatric personnel.

"In instances of persistent mental health conditions, the counselor would direct the client to Hospital Tuanku Mizan. However, for less severe situations, the counselor will develop a suitable intervention strategy using diagnostic tools like PHQ and DASS."

(Respondent 8)

Furthermore, as a counselor in the Malaysian Armed Forces, he actively engages in community programs, awareness campaigns that emphasize the importance of mental health, initiatives for career advancement, and the administration of psychological assessments such as personality tests, among other activities.

Training Needs to Improve Competency

Continuous training is essential to enhance the proficiency of counselors at all times. Counselors specializing in defense and security have a strong desire to improve their expertise in psychology and first aid, both in theoretical knowledge and actual implementation. Counselors consider application skills to be very pragmatic, and it is important to ensure that these abilities are directly applied. Furthermore, it is often considered that counselors may improve their expertise and abilities by participating in international conferences and delivering presentations on subjects such as counseling in military psychology.

“One of the training requirements that is seen as significant in improving competence is the method of using PFA with clients.

(Respondent 2)

In the context of the Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM), counseling services are deemed essential for ensuring the psychological well-being and overall welfare of military personnel. This study finds that counseling services play a critical role not only in therapeutic processes but also in various other aspects related to the career and personal development of military members.

Discussion

The researcher conducted a study based on the interview process, which yielded the following results.

The Implementation of the Counselor Code of Ethics

The study highlights the critical role of the Counselor Code of Ethics, established by the Malaysian Council of Counselors (LKM), emphasizing confidentiality and informed consent in counseling services. Counselors strictly adhere to these principles, ensuring professionalism and trust in their practice. Confidentiality is paramount, as any breach could undermine the counselor's credibility, while informed consent ensures clients understand and agree to the counseling process, fostering a secure environment for open communication. Despite challenges in collecting discipline-related data, particularly when counselors also serve as military officers, the consistent application of these ethical principles is essential. The study underscores the necessity of maintaining these standards to enhance the effectiveness and professionalism of counseling services, ensuring clients' information is protected and trust is built between counselors and clients (Malaysian Council of Counselors, 2023).

Counseling Service on Military

In the current context of the Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM), counseling services play a crucial role in ensuring the psychological well-being and career development of military personnel (Ahmad et al., 2019). These services assist members in overcoming psychological issues arising from work-related stress and personal challenges, thereby enhancing their well-being and performance (Hassan & Osman, 2017). Additionally, counseling is involved in the screening and promotion process, assessing the suitability and readiness of personnel to undertake greater responsibilities (Rahim et al., 2020). Through psychological testing conducted by counselors, the ATM can identify the psychological needs of its members and provide appropriate interventions to ensure they are always prepared to face any mental challenges that may arise (Yusoff, 2018).

Beyond psychological aspects, counseling services also play a significant role in implementing self-improvement courses aimed at enhancing the skills and knowledge of military personnel

(Zainal et al., 2021). These courses are critical for the professional and personal development of members, ensuring they are always ready to face new challenges and adapt to changes in the operational environment (Kamarudin, 2016). With comprehensive counseling support, the ATM can ensure that its personnel possess the mental well-being and skills needed to perform their duties effectively, thereby shaping a more robust and effective career path (Aziz & Salleh, 2015). This highlights that counseling services in the ATM are a critical component of the holistic development of military personnel, encompassing psychological well-being, career promotion, and self-improvement (Razali et al., 2019).

The Importance of Counselor Expertise

The role of a counselor in planning and executing interventions is paramount. A counselor's expertise in counseling skills and theoretical frameworks enables them to accurately analyze client problems and identify their root causes. This indicates that the interventions designed are based on a profound understanding of the client's issues rather than superficial treatments. Effective intervention planning ensures that the solutions provided are tailored to the client's specific needs, leading to more sustainable and impactful outcomes.

Involvement of both clients and management is pivotal to the success of therapeutic interventions, underscoring the necessity of a cooperative and supportive environment. The willingness of clients and management to accept and engage with proposed intervention strategies significantly enhances the likelihood of achieving desired therapeutic outcomes. Active participation and endorsement from all parties involved foster a collaborative atmosphere conducive to healing and improvement, illustrating that the efficacy of an intervention extends beyond the capabilities of the counselor alone. Furthermore, the utilization of diagnostic tools such as the *Patient Health Questionnaire* (PHQ) and the *Depression Anxiety Stress Scale* (DASS-21) in mental health screening exemplifies a structured and scientific approach to identifying mental health issues. However, the management of cases only in their early phases reveals limitations in providing comprehensive treatment. Referring serious cases to Tuanku Mizan Military Hospital ensures that clients receive the necessary specialized care from psychological and psychiatric professionals. This referral system is crucial for guaranteeing that clients with severe symptoms obtain appropriate and timely interventions, thereby ensuring a holistic and effective approach to mental health care.

Training and Competency

Continuous training is critical in ensuring that counselors within the Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM) remain well-prepared and highly skilled. Regular training sessions, such as quarterly training and e-learning programs, allow counselors to continually update their knowledge and skills. For instance, ATM counselors can undergo practical training involving simulations of emergency situations, such as counseling during combat scenarios or natural disasters. On-the-Job Training (OJT) under the guidance of senior counselors also provides valuable practical experience. Additionally, advanced psychology courses and first aid workshops that combine theory and practical training can help counselors deepen their understanding of military psychology and first aid. Incentives for obtaining professional certification in these fields can further motivate counselors to continually enhance their expertise.

Participation in international conferences and the application of Psychological First Aid (PFA) are also crucial in improving the competency of ATM counselors. Sending counselors to attend international military psychology conferences in countries such as the United States or Europe

can provide them with opportunities to learn about best practices and the latest innovations in the field. Presenting papers at these conferences can elevate the professional profile of counselors and enrich their knowledge. Furthermore, specialized PFA training for ATM counselors, including practical exercises on how to administer PFA to soldiers experiencing trauma or stress, is essential. Providing comprehensive PFA manuals and conducting PFA simulation sessions can ensure that counselors are prepared to apply these skills in real-life situations. This practical and relevant approach will ensure that ATM counselors can effectively handle various situations, thereby enhancing their effectiveness in their roles and safeguarding the well-being of military personnel.

Conclusion

The study emphasizes the significance of adhering to the Counselor Code of Ethics set by the Malaysian Board of Counselors (LKM), specifically in relation to confidentiality and informed consent. The code of ethics serves as the basis for professionalism and confidence in counseling services, guaranteeing that counselors adhere rigorously to these ideals. Ensuring confidentiality is of utmost importance, as any violation might weaken the counselor's credibility. Informed consent, on the other hand, guarantees that clients comprehend and consent to the counseling process, therefore establishing a safe atmosphere for open conversation. Although there may be difficulties in gathering discipline-specific data, particularly when counselors have dual roles as military officers, it is crucial to consistently adhere to these ethical guidelines. The study highlights the need of upholding these standards in order to improve the efficiency and professionalism of counseling services, guaranteeing the safeguarding of clients' information and fostering confidence between counselors and clients. Furthermore, counseling services provided by the Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM) are essential in guaranteeing the mental health and professional growth of military personnel. Counseling assists individuals in addressing psychological problems that stem from work-related stress and personal difficulties, thereby improving their overall well-being and performance. In addition, counseling plays a role in the evaluation and encouragement process, determining the appropriateness and preparedness of individuals to take on increasingly significant duties. The counselors' proficiency in counseling skills and theoretical frameworks empowers them to precisely examine client issues and devise impactful remedies. It is crucial to engage in ongoing training and competency development, which includes attending international conferences and receiving training in Psychological First Aid (PFA), in order to guarantee that ATM counselors maintain a high level of preparedness and expertise. By using a holistic approach, ATM counseling services are able to successfully handle diverse situations, therefore protecting the welfare of military people and enhancing their professional trajectories.

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