

Problems, Difficulties and Challenges Faced by Counsellors

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ABSTRACT

Even though counselling is as old as Psychology in India, counselling education at post-graduate level and counsellors working in diverse settings are of recent origin. Not much is known about the problems, difficulties and challenges the counsellors face. The current study is done within the qualitative framework, with exploratory study design for which 14 participants who were working in different settings like school, college, employee assistant programme (EAP), family counselling centre, psychiatric rehabilitation centre, de-addiction centre, private practice, multiple settings, counselling centre, Christian religious setting, HIV/Aids centre were chosen through purposive sampling and were interviewed. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative content analysis and the emerging themes were noted. The study showed among others, that the counsellors face several problems, difficulties and challenges like, lack of awareness of counselling among people, inadequate pay, job insecurity, absence of a professional body to regulate counselling, lack of network of counsellors and mental health professionals for seeking supervision and consultation, and so on. Implications for counsellor training, professional development are discussed.

Keywords: *Counsellors, Counselling, Problems, Counsellor Training*

Even though the origin of the counselling movement in India can be traced to the beginning of Psychology in India (Rao, 1991), formal counselling is not that old. It is true that the importance of counselling, particularly with reference to vocational guidance has been stressed in India from as early as 1938 (Arulmani, 2007). Short courses on vocational guidance were available in India as early as 1958 (Fuster, 1963; Joneja, 2006). But, postgraduate courses in Counselling are of recent origin. Every year hundreds of students complete their studies in Counselling and get placed in various settings like educational institutions, HIV/AIDS clinics, psychiatric hospitals, family counselling centres, corporate sectors, family courts, rehabilitation centres, de-addiction centres and so on (Janardanan & Rajan, 2015).

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Novice counsellors

Various authors have studied problems faced by trainee counsellors. Becoming therapists have challenges like being self-critical in practice and having troubling reaction to clients (Hill, Sullivan, Knox, & Schlosser 2007). Novice counsellors experience stress (Kumary & Baker, 2008; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Trainee counsellors experience anxiety and counter-transference management (Nutt-Williams et.al cited in Anastasiou, 2006). Trainees experience impasse and that they react with negative emotions because they did not know what to do in session (De Stefano, D'iuso, Blake, Fitzpatrick, Drapeau, & Chamodraka 2007). Novice counsellors experience various difficulties and challenges in the session, in the organization, in counselling (Duggal & Rao, 2016; Skovholt, 2003).

Beginning counsellors

Some authors have spoken of problems faced by beginning counsellors. Nystul (2003) has identified the following as common problems of beginning counsellors: focusing on the first issue in a session, overlooking physical or medical issues, wanting to rescue clients from their unhappiness, having perfectionist tendencies, having unrealistic expectations, getting carried away with the latest technique, getting lost in the counseling process, using inappropriate phrases, having an excessive desire to help, having an excessive need to be liked, getting too emotionally involved, taking things too personally, having difficulty differentiating between normal and abnormal, being uncertain about self-disclosure, and being uncertain about confidentiality.

Corey (2005) too has indicated that the beginning counsellor might experience a number of issues like, feeling anxious of meeting the clients and having self-doubts about one's ability as a counsellor, hiding behind the professional role than being the natural person one is, wanting to be perfect in whatever one does without making mistakes, fearing to accept one's limitations, being uncomfortable with therapeutic silence, feeling burdened to fulfill all demands of clients, not being able to deal with clients who lack commitment, not seeing the fruits of one's work, worrying too much about clients, lacking in the use of humour in therapeutic work, taking the entire responsibility for the outcome of therapy on oneself, giving advice, not being able to define one's specific role as a counsellor and not developing one's own counselling style.

Others like Theriault, Gazzola and Richardson (2009) have noted that beginning counsellors experience feelings of incompetence and that the beginning counsellors have career concerns (Busacca & Wester, 2006). Much of this has been substantiated by Pereira (2012), who studied the professional problems faced by beginning counsellors. He found that beginning counsellors face various professional problems like incompetency in skills, theories, techniques, ethical dilemmas, anxiety due to client's problems, lack of supervision, low salary and inadequacy in applying classroom learning to practice and so on.

Problems, difficulties, issues, challenges faced by counsellors

With regard to problems faced by counsellors, quite a few studies have focussed on school counsellors. Bain (2012), who studied contemporary issues of school counsellors in America, stated that school counsellors face problems related to job descriptions, mental health issues, families and communities, student success, leadership and issues in technology and so on.

Anagbogu, Nwokolo, Anyamene, Anyachebelu and Umezulike (2013) in their study of professional challengers faced by primary school counsellors in Nigeria, found that lack of a counselling clinic, lack of computer for data storage, unavailability of internet facilities, lack of equipment like tape recorder, low counsellor- client ratio, lack of dedicated time for counselling in the school time table were the topmost problems faced by the school counsellors.

Arowolo (2013) found out that secondary school counsellors in Nigeria face the following problems: wrong ideas about counselling by principals and other members of staff, assigning counsellors to duties other than counselling, lack of counselling office, lack of funds to purchase materials for counselling and non-exposure to in service training. Further, Agrawal (2015) stated that psychologists (including counsellors) face several challengers like poor salaries, lack of job opportunities, lack of licensing, lack of awareness about psychological issues and so on.

Need for the study

Previous studies speak of the problems and challenges faced by novice and beginning counsellors in India and elsewhere and school counsellors outside India. There seems to be no study on the problems faced by counsellors in general in India. Given this context, the study was aimed at investigating the issues, difficulties, challenges and problems faced by counsellors in general, hoping that this study would throw some light on the situation of the counsellors in India, especially in the context that India does not have a regulatory body for counsellors.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

- To study the problems, challenges and difficulties faced counsellors in India.

Participants

14 counsellors, who had done their Masters in Psychological Counselling or Counselling Psychology or Psychology with 1.5-25 years of experience, working in various settings like School, College, HIV/AIDS centre, De-addiction/ Centre, Psychiatric Rehabilitation Centre, Family Counselling Centre Employee Assistant Programme, Private Practice, and Christian Religious Institutions, Multiple settings, and Counselling Centre. The participants were chosen purposively.

Research Design

Qualitative exploratory design was used from the phenomenological perspective to explore the problems experienced by counsellors.

Measures

Data was collected through personal interview, guided by Interview Guide, prepared basing on the review of literature.

Ethical Considerations

The participants were informed in writing about the following:

The purpose and procedure of the study, assurance of confidentiality of the information shared, their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Any doubts and questions raised by the participants were answered by the researcher and their consent was obtained in writing.

Data Analysis: Qualitative Content Analysis - Conventional Content Analysis

Content analysis is the intellectual process of categorizing qualitative textual data into clusters of similar entities, or conceptual categories, to identify consistent patterns and relationships between variables or themes. When analyzing qualitative data such as interview transcripts, analyses across the whole set of data typically produce clusters or codes that translate into “themes.” (Julien, 2008, p. 120).

Within qualitative content analysis, conventional content analysis was used to analyze the data. Conventional content analysis is made use of with a study design whose aim is to describe a phenomenon, and is appropriate when existing theory or research on a subject is limited. Researcher allows the categories and names for categories to flow from the data, which is also described as inductive category development (Hsieh & Shanon, 2005).

Procedure

Counsellors meeting the inclusion criteria were contacted over phone and they were informed about the study. After obtaining their consent, they were interviewed and the interviews were audio-recorded and were transcribed and were analyzed using Conventional Content Analysis and the themes were generated.

RESULTS

The following are the findings of the study. The findings are divided into two main sections as professional problems and personal problems. Professional problems are divided into different sub-sections.

A. Professional Problems

1. Training and Application

Practical training was not sufficient during the post-graduate studies.

Exposure to actual counselling settings was not adequate during post-graduate studies.

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2. Stigma, Awareness and understanding of Counselling

Awareness of counselling is low among people.

People are not aware of the difference between a counsellor, a clinical psychologist, and a psychiatrist.

The term counselling is not clearly defined in India. It is understood differently by different people.

3. Recognition of Counselling Profession

Psychiatrists do not refer clients who do not need medication for counselling.

Employers are not aware of post-graduate course in Psychological Counselling (or Counselling Psychology).

Counsellors do not have their own unique identity as mental health professionals.

4. Stress and Burnout

Overload of work causes stress in the counsellor.

Clients' issues lead to emotional exhaustion in the counsellor.

5. Pay/Salary

Counsellors are not paid sufficient salary.

Clients are not ready to pay for sessions as they think that counselling involves only listening and talking.

6. Counselling Process (sessions) and the Client

Clients think counselling is a short term process.

Convincing the family members of the client about the treatment is a challenge.

Clients are reluctant to meet young counsellors because they think that young counsellors are not good counsellors.

Counselling in the vernacular is difficult as what was learned in English cannot be translated adequately.

7. Ethical Issues

In critical cases like suicide, deciding on how much information to disclose to family members is a challenge.

8. Absence of Licensing and National Body of Counsellors

The absence of licensing of counsellors by a government body is a great drawback for Indian counsellors.

9. Network /Directory of Counsellors and other Mental Health Professionals

Not having a network/association of counsellors is making it difficult to seek supervision and consultation.

Not having a directory of other mental health professionals is a problem in making referrals.

10. Professional Development of Counsellors

Counselling supervision is not available in some settings.

11. Educational Setting Issues

Teachers are not able to see the usefulness of counselling for students.

Some schools employ counsellors who are not adequately qualified.

Colleagues from other departments do not understand the importance of counselling.

12. HIV/AIDS Setting Issues

As in some places, there is no separate room for counseling, privacy and confidentiality cannot be maintained.

As the job is contractual in nature, there is no job-security for counsellors.

There is no proper coordination between various levels of authority and this causes problems to the counsellor.

Because of heavy clerical work, counsellors do not find enough time for counseling.

Workload (case load) is very heavy for counsellors.

B. Personal and Family Problems

Stress from counselling affects counsellors relationship with the family members.

Due to low salary, managing the financial needs of the family is a challenge for the counselor.

DISCUSSION

Some of the findings of the present study are similar to the findings of previous study by Pereira (2012) who found that beginning counsellors face professional problems like lack of supervision, lack of network of counsellors, low pay, and job insecurity. It is interesting that beginning counsellors and counsellors in general have quite a few problems in common. This study has found that counsellors face emotional problems due to work which was also noted by Nystul (2003) and Corey (2005). While it is probably understandable as to why beginning counsellors may be facing such issues, it is interesting to note that even counsellors in general face this issue. Probably it could be said that by the very nature of the job of counseling, it is emotionally exhausting. This underlies the need for self-care efforts by counsellors. The current study also has found out the same. Further study needs to be done to see if this is the problem for counsellors across work-settings or only for a few of them.

What has emerged very strongly is that there is no licensing authority which would govern and guide the counseling profession. This has been pointed even by Agrawal (2015). It is also interesting to note that perhaps along with lack of licensing authority, stigma about counseling, lack of awareness about counseling, job insecurity and low pay are some of the highlights of the problems and challenges faced by the counsellors.

Some of the other problems faced by counselors are about the counseling profession like there being no government body for regulating counselling, counselling is not clearly or understood in India and the government does not seem to accept Counselling as a separate discipline. These are problems that may be unique to India. Some of the problems are setting specific like availability of supervision, low salary heavy workload and even ethical issues.

Mental health professionals in general, including counsellors are generally paid low in India. Even though, it seems that more and more people are becoming aware about counselling, in general, many are not yet comfortable with the idea of seeking counselling. Often seeking counselling is understood / equated to seeking psychiatric treatment. Quite a few people equate counselling, psychological services and psychiatric treatment. The good news is that

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stigma about seeking psychological is decreasing and the awareness about counseling is gradually increasing.

Implications

This study has several implications for the counselling profession in India. This study gives a cross-sectional view of the problems faced by counsellors. Among others, this study underlines the fact that people need to be more aware of what counselling is the need to seek counselling, that there should be a national level body to lay down guidelines about the training and practice of counselling to govern the counselling practice.

Limitations

The present study did not include counsellors working in all settings. May be there are counsellors working in settings that are not covered in this study. Those counsellors may have some additional problems which are specific to their settings.

Scope for Future Study

Future studies can also include counsellors working in other settings. The future studies can focus on finding out as to which counsellors from which setting face more problems and reasons for the same. Future studies can also be aimed at designing interventions to address the problems faced by counsellors. Future studies could also focus on the problems faced by specific counsellor populations.

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