

TITLE

**PEER COUNSELLING EMPOWERMENT
AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

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ABSTRACT

Peer counselling empowerment entails specific considerations of the training process as peer counsellors. Specific issues related to such empowerment are discussed in light of the counselling profession. Subsequently, ethical considerations pertaining to peer counselling such as confidentiality, dual relationships, competency and vicarious liability are discussed in ascertaining that the necessary ethical standards are adhered to professionally.

INTRODUCTION

In a society which values competency and independence, the seeking and provision of help are gifts that have enriched humanity. Even with the increasing numbers of professional mental health practitioners, the need for helping outpaces the availability of the professional resources. As the result of the imbalance, more peer counsellors are needed. In the late 1960s, the first organized peer group that had an interest in peer counselling was called The Bridge. The Bridge had been a successful group of peer counselling devoting itself to the welfare of others in the community (D'Andrea & Salovey, 1983).

Peer counselling empowerment encourages peer counsellors to participate actively in the decision making process in order to ameliorate the positive outcomes in the helping relationship. The trust in their own ability to make changes in other people's life is of primary importance in maintaining self-esteem as well as their dignity.

PEER COUNSELLING

Peer counselling has long been recognized as an effective method of helping people. It is a combination of philosophical and methodological application of skills in active listening and problem solving. Basic knowledge on human growth and mental health are fundamental to assist people who are considered as peers in age, status and knowledge (D'Andrea & Salovey, 1983). The term peer denotes a person who shares related experiences, values and lifestyle.

Peer counselling constitutes a potential valuable helping resource in the area of academic achievement, enhancing self-concept, encouraging more efficient adjustment to the environment and actualizing their own potential in certain ambience. Also, it includes a variety of interpersonal helping behaviours assumed by a non-professional who undertakes a helping role with others (Tindall, 1989).

Peer counselling movement is no longer in its infancy. The variety of experiences in teaching peer counsellors helping skills as well as more dedicated training programmes has expanded, evolved and gained wider acceptance of peer counselling. Advancement and suggestions too have been made for selecting, training, supervising and evaluating those who are interested to become peer counsellors. The development of many programmes for peer counsellors had alerted the community at large on the existence of a powerful resource that is able to offer assistance to people in need.

PEER COUNSELLING EMPOWERMENT

Peer counsellors play a significant role in improving the learning process as well as the learning environment. Through training programmes, they learn to reach out and to assist people. They become the extended hands of the professional counsellors, enabling more people to participate actively throughout the learning process in collating daily life experiences. Peer counsellors are well trained to become sensitive listeners. They possess the necessary

communication skills that enabled them to provide appropriate feedbacks and encouragement to the people in need. The skills that they developed and used concurrently are under the close supervision of professional counsellors.

Peer counselling empowerment is defined as a process that relates the mechanism by which people, organizations and the community gain mastery over their lives. In other words, peer counselling empowerment may offer a way of fostering realistic and positive beliefs in both peer counsellors and professional counsellors (Schwiebert & Giorgano, 1994).

Peer counselling empowerment encourages peer counsellors to use past experiences to foster insight towards an effective new decision in helping people. It is an intervention to assist people in establishing a sense of life satisfaction, self-esteem and dignity throughout the life span. Peer counselling empowerment includes the trust on peer counsellors competency and efficacy as well as expectations for involvement in societal, cultural, familial and individual activities. The networking relationship with the environment provides peer counsellors support, niches and opportunities for personal development (Rappaport, 1981 in Schwiebert & Giordano, 1994).

PEER COUNSELLING EMPOWERMENT AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The challenging world leads to the need of having someone that could be a good listener. Because of this need, it is undeniable that peer counsellors play a vital role in the community. Also, it is clear that there are inadequate

professional licensed practitioners to meet the demand for psychological assistance (Corey, Corey & Callanan, 1998). This is quite evident as in the case of Malaysia where currently, there are only about 600 registered professional counsellors throughout the country for a population of about 25 millions people.

No professional is immune to ethical dilemmas. Often, no easy answers emerge when ethical crisis arises. Circumstances will always arise that will place counsellors in a quandary. Traditionally, counselling as a profession is regulated by ethical standards. Rules are enforced by professional associations, educational institutions, governmental licensing authorities and legislation. In the case of Malaysia, these rules and legal ramifications are governed by the Act 580, The Counsellors Act 1998.

The discussion on empowerment of peer counsellors will lead to the debate on ethical considerations since the nature about peer counselling itself is still a debatable issue. Peer counselling is not a professional service and it is usually offered on a non-fee basis. It is plausible and difficult to establish accountability in the case of negative outcomes. Some professional mental health practitioners are not enthusiastic about peer counselling movement (Corey, Corey & Callanan, 1998). Some point to the danger that the peer counsellors are inadequately trained. In other words, they might do more harm than good. Some view that peer counsellors will not ameliorate the situation and later will tarnish the helping service itself. Lack of supervision after the

empowerment may lead peer counsellors to certain ethical consequences such as confidentiality, privileged communication, privacy, duty to warn and to protect, dual relationships, competency and also vicarious liability on supervision itself.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is an important ethical element in counselling relationships. Stadler (1990) highlighted confidentiality as the client's right in the professional relationships. There is an ethical responsibility for the professional counsellors to respect the right and to safeguard the information revealed is free from any leakage. Generally, the ability in procuring the confidentiality in the counselling process is the constructive indication in establishing a client's trust which subsequently enables the client to gauge the professional counsellor's competency.

A client has the right to have privileged communication. Nevertheless, the privilege is not absolute. There are certain limitations which will not implicate that client or other people. Therefore, peer counsellors should be able to grasp and analyze the possible potential or ramifications about privileged communication made by the client (Othman Mohamed, 2005).

The issues pertaining to the ethical considerations have always been raised since the clients have their own privacy and there are no clear ethical standards to be observed by the peer counsellors. Therefore, peer counsellors

must profess rationally and should not plea to scrutinize into any information that would be detrimental to the clients or other people.

Peer counsellors should also abide by the duty to warn and to protect. Insufficient assessment of the dangerousness of a client will put a liability to the peer counsellors as well as to the supervisors. A peer counsellor who attends a potential dangerous client should take a specific action and precaution to protect the public as well as to minimize any possible liability.

In tackling the dilemmas of confidentiality, it would be best for the peer counsellors to be more proactive in self-securing by frequently giving informed consent at every meeting of the sessions. At this level, peer counsellors must be aware of certain circumstances which are not subject to confidentiality obligation.

Dual relationships

Ethical problems often occurred when peer counsellors mix up the helping relationship into another kind of relationship. Sexual relationship with clients is clearly unethical in the helping practice. Errors in judgement through the counselling sessions may exist when self interest is involved. Such an unethical relationship will impair the judgement of peer counsellors by justifying and discounting their practices. Moreover, the practice will also increase the conflict of interest of peer counsellors, will lead to exploitation of clients and will reserve the ambiance that may distort the helping relationship.

Heliny & Corey (1997) in Corey, Corey & Callanan (1998) mentioned that role blending is inevitable and not necessary unethical but it does call for vigilance on the part of the helping profession to ensure that any exploitation does not occur. It is the responsibility of peer counsellors to monitor themselves for not engaging in such relationships, as this area is very subtle and an insidious unethical involvement in the helping relationship.

Competency

Competency does include the concept of right and sharpen judgement, maturity as well as result of experience in certain arena. Peer counsellors are considered competent if they are able to possess patience and control, able to focus outward, able to use informed intelligence to make operational decision, able to forget vested self interest and completely at the service of another (Vriend, 1985).

The training goal in training peer counsellors is to teach basic counselling skills as well as to spur them in emulating positive attitude towards helping people. Peer counsellors must establish a clear ground on rules about ethical considerations in the atmosphere of respecting others (Phillips, 1991). They should not attempt to handle situations which might assist clients to break the law and also life threatening of others. Discretion in certain matters is crucial. For instance, in the event of failing to handle issues it will be more appropriate for

peer counsellors to discuss the issues with the supervisors and be ready to make referral to other particular authorities.

Peer counsellors would still be required to various extended training in skills such as communication skills, assertiveness and knowledge of the ethics in helping relationship. They should possess certain personal qualities for example emotional stability, self-reliance and sense of security. They should also have to understand that there are limitations in their responsibility as well as they must have the ability to allow clients to own their problem regardless of the source.

Vicarious liability

The principle of vicarious liability is grounded upon the conceptualization of beneficence and non-maleficence. Issue that arises in confidentiality, dual relationships and competency are close to the dilemma pertaining to vicarious liability. Even though peer counsellors are aware of their responsibility regarding ethical considerations of confidentiality, dual relationships and competency, there are occasions that such ethical standards may be violated.

The philosophy of empowering peer counsellors is in fact consistent with the principle of beneficence. In this respect, peer counsellors have been given that opportunity to assist and to support others. On the other hand when ethical standards are violated, the autonomous rights of the peer counsellors may dwell upon the issue of non-maleficence. As the matter of fact, the burden of responsibility of such non-maleficence is shared by the peer counsellors and the

supervisors. However, if competencies of the peer counsellors are involved, the burden of responsibility falls squarely on the peer counsellors' supervisors.

CONCLUSION

Peer counselling empowerment approaches respect and honour of the peer counsellors' life experiences. Frequently, peer counsellors are confronted with ethical dilemmas. It is essential for them to observe ethical considerations to prevent harm in helping people. As a point to ponder, ethical peer counsellors have the best interest of their clients at heart and also able to respect the rights deriving from being a professional.

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