



## Examining the Personality Factor and the Relationship with Selection of Counselling Theory among Counsellors in Selangor

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### Abstract

*Theories are crucial for counsellors in helping them build relationships with clients, and to help clients conceptualise, identify, and solve their issues and problems. Currently, there are more than 400 types of theories that seek to understand human problems through various perspectives. As not all of these theories are suitable in all contexts, it is of utmost importance for counsellors to be able to choose the most appropriate ones that they are comfortable with. The purpose of this paper is to examine the personality factor that contributes to the selection of theoretical orientation among the counsellors in Selangor. This quantitative study was conducted on a hundred and twenty-two ( $n = 122$ ) registered counsellors in Selangor by using the Big Five Inventory as a questionnaire instrument to examine the personality of respondents. Descriptive statistics and reliability analysis were used in the data analysis. According to the Pearson's  $r$  statistical correlation used, there were significant correlations between most of the personality factors in the Big Five Inventory and the eight counselling theoretical orientations. This study also gives implications to other researchers to explore the use of inventory that is more suitable for demographics in Malaysia in particular, besides exposing the trend of theoretical orientation by the counsellors.*

**Keywords:** *Counselling, Theoretical Orientation, Counselling Theory, Registered Counsellor*



## Introduction

The application and development of counselling theory is an important issue that needs to be addressed by counsellors (Zakaria Mohamad, 2010), and especially for novice counsellors (Spruill and Benschhoff, 2000). Since the beginning of learning about the world of counselling, existing counsellors need to also understand that in essence, they operate based on counselling theory (Zakaria et. al., 2011a, Corey, 2013; Melati et. al., 2009). Thus, if counsellors do not have a systematic basic theory, counsellors will lose strength, consistency in their training, and the necessary unity (Zakaria et. al., 2011a). Therefore, understanding the theory and applying the theory is paramount important for counsellors in providing the best counselling services (Skovholt and Ronnestad, 1992).

To ensure that counselling sessions can be conducted effectively, the application of theory in the counselling process is an important step that must be taken. Theory is a professional scheme of counsellors that may assist in client's issues (Aina et. al., 2013; Murdock et. al., 1998). Therefore, in examining at issues related to the client's problem, obviously a counsellor should have a certain theory in his intervention in order to provide support to the client (Zakaria et. al., 2011a). It is also a development and self-training of the counsellor where later the counsellor will have a specific theory that can be used in his or her counselling intervention process (Burwell-Pender, 2009).

Researchers have selected eight theories that are often used, especially in Malaysia. These theories are Psychoanalysis Therapy, Adlerian Therapy, Rational Emotional Behaviour Therapy (REBT), Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), Reality Therapy, Existential Therapy, Person-Client Centered Therapy (PCC) and Gestalt Therapy. The selection of these eight counselling theories also takes into account the emphasis on learning these theories in Malaysia, especially in universities that use textbooks that discuss the theories (Corey, 2013).

There are several factors contributing to the selection of counselling theory by counsellors. Therefore, there is a need to understand the practice of counselling among Registered Counsellors in Malaysia as a whole. Thus, this study will examine the influence of personality factors in contributing to the selection of counsellor theory, especially for counsellors in Selangor.

## Problem Statement

Developments in learning about counselling studies especially in Malaysia are still at an early stage (Ramizah, 2016; Melati et. al., 2009; Ng & Steven, 2001). The training given to counselling students is seen to be more focused on the techniques of the counselling process. This indicates that less emphasis is given to the theoretical aspects of counselling and this has been discussed since early 2000, where findings from several studies indicate that counsellors will make their own theoretical orientation choices based on what they know in previous counselling technique classes.

Most universities in Malaysia allocate and offer 3 credit hours for counselling theory subjects in their curriculum; especially in Master studies. Compared to counselling training received at universities in the United States, counselling theory subjects are given 4 credit hours performed intensively (Zakaria Mohamad, 2010; Zakaria et. al., 2011a). The allocation of only 3 credit hours, especially for counselling theory subjects, is to some extent still unable to emphasise the theoretical aspects which then contribute to the lack of theoretical understanding among counsellors (Lembaga Kaunselor Malaysia, 2000).



Although an estimated 400 counselling theories have been developed (Corsini and Wedding, 2005), there are still problems in determining which counselling theory is more appropriate for the client. Studies have been conducted and there are still no findings that some theories are more appropriate than others (Zakaria et. al., 2011b). Therefore, the main factors that determine the appropriateness of the theory used by counsellors in Malaysia are seen to be greatly influenced by family orientation, religious upbringing and local culture. This is further reinforced by the sentiment that if a theory is developed by the west, counsellors will be hesitant to choose an existing theory and eventually the consolidation and understanding in counselling theory becomes weak. Therefore, this study provides an opportunity to identify the relationship of factors to the selection of counselling theory, in particular personality factors among counsellors in Malaysia.

## **Research Objectives**

The objective of this study is to identify the relationship or personality factors that may influence counsellors in Selangor in choosing their counselling theoretical orientation. The researcher also intended to develop the understanding of the relationship from the Big Five Inventory dimensions with the choice of theoretical orientation of the counsellors.

## **Literature Review**

In using certain counselling theories such as Person Centered Therapy, Reality Therapy, or Gestalt Therapy, there are certain ways and strategies in providing interventions to help solve the root cause of the client's problems. Each theory used is also able to contribute to the counsellor's understanding of the client's emotions, cognitive and behaviour in the situation he or she is experiencing (Aina et. al., 2013). However, universities in Malaysia are seen to place less emphasis on the theoretical part of counselling (Zakaria Mohamad, 2010; Zakaria et. al., 2011a; Zakaria Mohamad & Asyraf Rahman, 2011) and this can cause the practice of understanding the theory of counselling to be quite fragile among counsellors. Therefore, the researcher suggested that emphasis should be given to ensure that counsellors are prepared in the selection of counselling theories that they can practice in future counselling sessions.

It is interesting to explore the factors influencing counsellors theoretical orientation choices. Previous researchers such as Ogunfowora and Drapeau (2008), Vasco and Dryden (1994), Beutler and McNabb (1981), Lazarus and Launier (1978), and Cummings and Lucchese (1978) have suggested that external variables such as supervision by lecturers, training received, economic factors and clinical experience have influenced the choice of theoretical orientation. However, this study only focuses on the diversity of factors influencing the selection of counselling theory. Therefore, this is one of the reasons why future studies need to be done in order to conduct research in detail on the theoretical orientation selection factors.

The selection of counselling theory is closely related to the development of counsellors in providing counselling services. Thus, in discussing the issue of counsellor development, one should also consider these developments in relation to the theoretical orientation and interpersonal behaviour of counsellors. Guest and Beutler (1998) state that a comprehensive study needs to be done on the effects of supervision on the development of psychotherapy and counsellors as a whole. Murdock et. al., (1998) studies have referred to the three stage Integrated Development Model of counsellor development identified by Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987) where counsellors' dependence on supervisors is extremely high at the first stage.



In Zakaria et. al., (2011a), the researchers conducted a study to identify the theoretical choice among the Muslim counsellors in Malaysia where it was found that the factors contributing to counselling theoretical choice were personality, lecturer and supervisor influenced, background of the family, religion, self-philosophy and the counsellor's support to the theory that he chooses. This study clearly shows that personality is one of the main factors to the theoretical orientation of the counsellors, in addition to other factors that can be variables to future studies.

In a study conducted by Zakaria et. al., (2010) on selection factors and the role of counselling theory for counsellors in Kuala Lumpur, the findings show that personality factors are found to be one of the contributors to the selection of counselling theory by counsellors. The researchers also explained that theory is important for producing a therapeutic counselling process, in which the respondents realised that counselling theory plays an important role in the counselling process. Further to that however, the respondents faced difficulties in explaining how counselling theory helped them especially in counselling sessions. However, a generalisation could not be carried out because the study was conducted in a case study approach.

Referring to the findings from this past study, the researcher was able to draw a preliminary conclusion that the findings did not show parallelism in the main factors of the selection of theoretical orientation especially to novice counsellors. Even so, many studies show that personality plays a major role in contributing as a major factor in the selection of theory by counsellors. Therefore, this study is expected to help contribute towards the understanding of identifying the factors that contribute to the selection of counselling theory, especially among Registered Counsellors in Malaysia.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Instrument**

A review of literature revealed no specific instrument designed to measure the factors that may contribute to the choice of theoretical orientation. The use of various inventories to examine the personality factors as one of the factors to the selection of theoretical orientation led to the selection of the Big Five Inventory as the instrument used by the researcher for the purpose of this study.

For a start, respondents were given a survey question that contained two parts. In Part A, the researcher requires the respondent to answer some demographic questions related to their personal and professional information. The questions asked for the basic demographic information such as age, gender, the counsellors' primary counselling orientation and their years of service as a Registered Counsellor. The descriptive information was needed to enable the researcher to observe and identify the factors that may influence the variables for this study.

The counsellor's personality was assessed by using the Big Five Inventor, a taxonomy of personality set out based on a lexical approach, which collects words or phrases used in the individual's daily life, to reflect the individual's characteristics with other individuals. This Big Five Inventory questions were provided in Part B of the survey question. Various countries have conducted ongoing research that has led to the development of the growing Big Five Inventory personality taxonomy. This 44-item inventory developed by John (1990) measures individuals on the Big Five Factors (dimensions) of personality, which are then



subdivided into aspects of personality. For the purpose of this research, items in the Big Five Inventory were evaluated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”, in which each item was also arranged randomly.

The used of Big Five Inventory is to capture the relationship between counsellor personality and choice of counselling theory, where the researcher relates the characteristics of an effective counsellor in terms of attitude and self-worth found in each dimension in this inventory. The definitions of each dimension in the Big Five Inventory are: i) Extraversion – an orientation of one’s interest and energies toward the outer world of people and things rather than the inner world of subjective experience which is characterised by positive effect and sociability. It refers to an energetic approach to the social and material world and takes into consideration traits such as sociability, activity, assertiveness and positive emotionality; ii) Agreeableness – the tendency to act in a cooperative and unselfish manner. It symbolises pro-social and communal orientation and takes into account traits such as altruism, tender-mindedness, trust and modesty; iii) Conscientiousness – the tendency to be organised, responsible and hardworking. It illustrates the control of the moving desire task and goal directed behaviour such as thinking before acting, following norms and rules, and planning; iv) Neuroticism – a “chronic level” of emotional instability and proneness to psychological distress. It defines the negative emotionality such as anxious, nervous, sad and tense; and v) Openness to experience – the tendency to be open to new aesthetic cultural or intellectual experiences.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study was conducted using a quantitative approach method. At the initial stage, the researcher had obtained data on the number of Registered Counsellors in Selangor. A breakdown according to the pattern of work organisation was also conducted to see the main work groups in the selection of respondents. Then, the research instrument was sent to each respondent via their electronic mail address (e-mail) where all respondents were given one (1) month to answer the questions from the instruments provided. They were also instructed to reply to their answers via email to the researcher once they were finished. Descriptive data analysis was also used to obtain demographic profiles of respondents. Data analysis using percentage and mean was also used using SPSS version 22 software.

### **Findings**

The findings shall refer to the objective of identifying the relationship between personality and theoretical orientation, formulated to examine whether the personality variable was a factor in the selection of theoretical orientation by the counsellors in Selangor. The results relevant to this are presented in Table 1 below. These results of the analysis indicated that there was a significant relationship between the personality and the theoretical orientation.

Referring to Table 1 below, using Pearson’s *r* statistical correlation, there were significant correlations between most of the personality factors and the theoretical orientations. The findings clearly indicated that the Agreeableness dimension has positive significant correlation with all eight theories mentioned in this study, where the highest correlation was with Adlerian theory ( $r = .598, p = .001$ ) and the lowest was with Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) theory ( $r = .205, p = .015$ ). Extraversion dimension also showed a good positive significant correlation with all eight theories, where the highest correlation was with Gestalt theory ( $r = .396, p = .000$ ) and lowest correlation was with Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) theory ( $r = .219, p = .015$ ).



The personality dimension of Conscientiousness also showed significant positive correlation with all eight counselling theories, with the highest being Adlerian theory ( $r = .431, p = .000$ ). However, it was presented that this personality dimension was non-significant negative correlation with Existential theory ( $r = -.044, p = .628$ ). Similarly, for the personality dimension of Neuroticism, where only with Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) theory, does it have non-significant negative correlation ( $r = -.028, p = .757$ ), while the highest significant positive correlation was with Adlerian theory ( $r = .531, p = .000$ ).

For personality dimension Openness, statistical correlation showed that there was a positive significant correlation with Psychoanalytic theory ( $r = .250, p = .005$ ), Reality theory ( $r = .231, p = .010$ ) and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) theory. ( $r = .222, p = .014$ ). However, the Openness personality dimension found a non-significant positive correlation with Adlerian theory ( $r = .153, p = .093$ ) and Rational Behavioural Emotive Theory (REBT) ( $r = .152, p = .096$ ). Personality dimension Openness also had non-significant negative correlation with Existential theory ( $r = -.113, p = .216$ ), Person-Centered (PCC) theory ( $r = -.161, p = .077$ ) and Gestalt Theory ( $r = -.112, p = .218$ ).

**Table 1**

*Correlations of Personality Factor and Theoretical Orientations*

Personality	Theories							
	Psyc.	Adlerian	REBT	CBT	Reality	Exist.	PCC	Gestalt
Extraversion	.385** .000	.287** .001	.394** .000	.219* .015	.227* .012	.269** .003	.280** .002	.396** .000
Agreeableness	.558** .000	.598** .000	.500** .000	.205* .023	.398** .000	.364** .000	.452** .000	.520** .000
Conscientiousness	.291** .001	.431** .000	.165 .069	.272** .002	.142 .119	-.044 .628	.207* .022	.309** .001
Neuroticism	.443** .000	.531** .000	.206* .023	-.028 .757	.183* .044	.237** .009	.429** .000	.518** .000
Openness	.250** .005	.153 .093	.152 .096	.222* .014	.231* .010	-.113 .216	-.161 .077	-.112 .218

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Psyc. = Psychoanalytic, REBT = Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy, CBT = Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, Exist. = Existential, PCC = Person-Client Centered





## Discussions

Murdoch et al. al., (1998) explained that personality can be described through the interaction of individual characteristics with others. This can be explained when a counsellor will choose a theory based on the suitability of the theory with his or her own personality. The influence of personality has been identified as one of the most frequently cited factors and significant variables in determining the influence of counsellors in making their theoretical choices (Aina et. al., 2013; Fitzpatrick et. al., 2010; Bitar et. al., 2007). Factors of theoretical suitability with counsellor personality are relevant from the findings of a study conducted by Petko et. al., (2016); Zakaria et. al., (2011a); and Arthur (2001), in which the researcher found that there are counsellors who choose their preferred theoretical orientation that suits their own character or personality.

This study brings a new perspective in determining the dimensions of the Big Five Inventory as well as the selection of counselling theory by counsellors. This can clearly be seen when there are differences in current research findings with previous studies conducted by Ogunfowora and Drapeau (2008), where the researchers in a later study discussed findings from Scandell, Wlazelek and Scandell (1997) who reported that counsellors prefer Person-Centered Theory, Gestalt theory and Existential theory in orientation are positively correlated with the dimension of Openness in which they described as preferring novel experience, intellectually curious, high in imaginative terms and having a broad interest. A study by Ogunfowora and Drapeau (2008) also found that counsellors and psychotherapists who chose Cognitive Behavior Theory (CBT) and Rational Emotive Behavior Theory (REBT) correlated with the Loyalty dimension.

However, in this study, the findings of personality and choice orientation theory showed that there was no significant relationship with People Centered theory (PPC), Gestalt theory and Existential theory with Openness and correlation dimensions were also negative. The findings by this researcher give the impression that aspects in the Openness dimensions of fantasy, aesthetics, feelings, actions, ideas and values are not addressed by counsellors who choose to apply the three stated theories. In contrast, counsellors who choose these theories do not tend to be imaginative, do not experience emotions intensively, and like changes in their lives but dislike problem-solving situations.

The researchers also presumed, with reference to the Big Five Inventory aspect, that counsellors who had a high level of Neuroticism, were seen to be unable to provide good counselling services to clients. This is because these theory oriented counsellors will face problems if they have to do longer and difficult sessions to focus on the purpose of treatment with the client. In addition to this discussion, there are also researchers who have found that cognitive behavioural therapists are less flexible, have limited acceptance of their own feelings and are more neurotic (Boswell, et. Al., 2009). Thus, for the current research, the findings from the correlation analysis indicate that and it is proven that counsellors who choose cognitive behavioural therapy have low scores on the Neuroticism dimension ( $r = .028$ ,  $p = .757$ ).

The researcher also argues that the relationship between personality and theoretical orientation among counsellors in Selangor is not relevant to some literature reviews, if referred to Arthur (2001) and Poznanski and McLennan (2003). Pearson correlation analysis that has been performed shows that there is a positive relationship between the dimensions of consciousness and psychoanalytic orientation ( $r = .291$ ,  $p = .001$ ). In a study conducted by Arthur (2001), researchers explained that psychoanalytic orientation counsellors or therapists strongly avoid mistakes and take risks. This statement further clarifies aspects of the Big Five Inventory that make it clear that avoiding unnecessary risk is a hallmark of the awareness dimension. Therefore, the findings of this study clearly show that the personality



of the counsellor is one of the main factors in the selection of his counselling theory. However, further studies could be conducted in the future to assess the willingness of counsellors to provide long term counselling services using the Big Five Inventory and also to assess their personalities with respect to their therapeutic work with clients.

## Conclusions

The process of developing a personal theory of counselling begins during student practicum and internship and will continue throughout their professional careers (Spruill and Benshoff, 2000). By having a variety of theory orientation options, counsellors will have a guide to produce good therapeutic counselling sessions (Zakaria et. al., 2011a). The current research highlights personality factor as a factor that can influence theory choice among counsellors serving in Selangor. Future studies are expected to examine several other factors which include family background, religion, life philosophy, life experience, choice of lecturer, training received at university, orientation and economics of peers, where these factors were believed to be contributing factors to the theoretical orientation of counsellors in past studies.

Counselling is a process of helping clients where a counsellor is supposed to know himself in terms of his self-worth, attitude, his counselling skills, counselling knowledge and current issues. Self-worth is very important as it shows confidence in the ability of the counsellor to act. For example, in having a self-personality that is capable of being open to any change, a counsellor will show his or her willingness to listen to any issues brought up by the client without punishing. This is also very necessary in the self-development of counsellors where the characteristic of certain counselling theories requires a different personality approach. Therefore, when the counsellor is able to connect his or her personality with the requirements of the counselling theory itself, then the counselling process will be more successful.

The researcher also agreed that the use of the Big Five Inventory greatly contributed to personality research on selection theory by counsellors. The use of the Big Five Inventory can also help understand the counsellor's experience in addressing his or her problems regarding the appropriateness of counselling theory. Be aware that counselling is a rewarding process in which the counsellor will provide assistance to his client and the counsellor himself should be in a better position than the client. Therefore, before embarking on a mission to help others, a counsellor should know about himself first in terms of self-esteem, attitude, personality, counselling skills, knowledge of counselling and current issues and his understanding of it (Nor Amni Yusoff, 2016).

This study clearly shows that the selection of counselling theory among counsellors, especially in Selangor is influenced by one of them is the personality factor. However, because this study only studied a small number of respondents ( $n = 122$ ), generalisations to all counsellors were unlikely. Therefore, the researcher suggests that surveys or case studies that take into account the population of registered counsellors, triangulation data collection and data analysis involving descriptive statistical techniques are recommended for future research.





## Acknowledgement

The author would like to acknowledge the contributions of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Fatimah Yusooff, Professor Datuk Dr. Mohd Tajudin Md Ninggal, Dr. Wong Huey Siew, the conference advisors, the conference chairpersons, and the conference editorial board members for their continuous support for the publication of this article.

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