

Emotional Intelligence from Perspectives of Malaysian Helping Professionals: A Qualitative Study

Ida Hartina Ahmed Tharbe¹, Melati Sumari^{1*}, Kok-Mun Ng², Norsafatul Aznin A. Razak¹ and Salleh Amat³

¹*Department of Educational Psychology and Counselling, Faculty of Education, Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

²*College of Education, Oregon State University, 97331 Corvallis, United States of America*

³*Department of Community Well-Being and Education, Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

Frequent emotional interactions between professional helpers and their clients mean that helpers must possess a high level of emotional intelligence (EI). No previous study explores the specific aspects of EI needed to become efficient helpers. Moreover, most EI research has been carried out in Western countries, where the concept of EI may be different in comparison to the Malaysian context. Therefore, this study explores the idea of EI from the perspective of professional helpers in Malaysia through a qualitative research design. Twenty-four professional helpers, with a minimum of five years working experience in their respective fields, were recruited for four focus group interviews. Participants included counsellors, psychologist, rehabilitation officers and social workers. Data were analysed using Atlas.ti, and the results yielded 11 themes. They were self-awareness, self-expression, self-understanding, self-acceptance, self-management, social

awareness, effective decision making, effective communication, management of others emotion, intrapersonal professional competencies and interpersonal professional competencies. The research highlights the vital components of EI from the perspective of professional helpers in the multicultural society of Malaysia.

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E-mail addresses:

hartina@um.edu.my (Ida Hartina Ahmed Tharbe)

melati@um.edu.my (Melati Sumari)

kokmun.ng@oregonstate.edu (Kok-Mun Ng)

safatul@um.edu.my (Norsafatul Aznin A. Razak)

sallehba@ukm.edu.my (Salleh Amat)

* Corresponding author

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INTRODUCTION

Humans differ in their skills of perceiving, understanding, and utilising emotional information, suggesting that individuals differ in their ability to cope with their emotional experiences. Such individual differences are referred as differences in emotional intelligence (EI), which contributes substantially to the psychological well-being of individuals (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Based on previous studies (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Petrides & Furnham, 2000) the theoretical conceptualisation of EI can take the form of three different perspectives: ability, mixed model, or trait. These different conceptualisations of EI provide the basis for the literature used in this study and are discussed in detail in the following section.

Salovey and Mayer introduced the first model of EI in 1990, then revised their earlier definition to include the area of thinking about feelings in 1997. An explanation of EI by Mayer and Salovey (1997):

Emotional intelligence involves the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotions; the ability to access and generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotions and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. (p. 10).

In 2002, the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT),

an ability-based test was developed, to assess the four branches of EI namely perceiving emotions, facilitating thought, understanding emotions and managing emotion. MSCEIT consists of 141 items and takes 30-45 minutes to complete. Self-rated inventories based on the Mayer and Salovey's conceptualisations have been developed such as the Self-rated Emotional Intelligence Scale (SREIS; Brackett et al., 2004), Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS; Wong & Law, 2002) and Schutte's Self-report Emotional Intelligence Inventory (SSREI; Schutte et al., 1998). These inventories have been used in research in the recent years.

The Bar-On model of social intelligence defines EI as "an array of non-cognitive capabilities, competencies and skills that influence one's ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures" (Bar-On, 1997, p. 14) He further rationalised that "intelligence describes the aggregates of abilities, competencies, and skills... that represent a collection and knowledge used to cope with life effectively. The adjective emotional is employed to emphasise that this specific type of intelligence differs from cognitive intelligence..." (Bar-On, 1997, p. 15). Bar-On (1997) listed five personality areas that were related to life success and which defined EI. They are (a) intrapersonal skills, (b) interpersonal skills, (c) adaptability, (d) stress management and (e) general mood. Bar-On's mixed approach of EI resulted in the first commercially available inventory for assessing EI, named the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i).

A later version of EQ-i 2.0 (self-report scale) and EQ-i 360 (observer rating scale) was developed to evaluate the complete profile of EI and provides five modified composite scores and fifteen subscale scores namely self-perception (self-regard, self-actualization, emotional self-awareness); interpersonal (interpersonal relationships, empathy, social responsibility); decision making (problem solving, reality testing, impulse control). Self-expression (emotional expression, assertiveness, independence) and stress management (flexibility, stress tolerance, optimism). However, Bar-On EQI has evolved more in a clinical context rather than an occupational one.

Goleman's (1995) mixed model of EI covers five areas namely (a) knowing one's emotions, (b) managing emotions, (c) motivating oneself, (d) recognising emotions in others, and (e) handling relationships. In 1998, Goleman further divided his five emotional intelligence dimensions to include 25 different emotional competencies under two main umbrellas of competencies; personal competence and social competence. Goleman's conceptual model of EI was used to develop ECI and ECI-2 with the collaboration of the Hay Group (Boyatzis & Sala, 2004; Goleman, 1998) and is widely used in the context of organisational leadership.

Furnham and Petrides (2003) highlighted theoretical differences between trait EI (or 'emotional self-efficacy') and ability EI or 'cognitive-emotional ability' (Petrides & Furnham, 2000, 2001). According to Furnham and Petrides (2003,

p. 278), EI bears consideration as, "a constellation of behavioural dispositions and self-perceptions concerning one's ability to recognise, process, and utilise emotion-laden information". Included in this "constellation" are emotionally relevant personality traits, such as empathy and perseverance, and self-perceived social abilities allowing conceptualisation as "emotional self-efficacy." Petrides and Furnham introduced TEIQue as a measure of proposed trait EI. The TEIQue encompasses 15 subscales organised under 4 factors: well-being (self-esteem, trait happiness, trait optimism); self-control (emotion regulation, stress management, low impulsiveness), emotionality (Emotion perception (self and others), emotion expression, relationship skills empathy) and sociability (social competence, emotion management (others), assertiveness). Two other subscales (Adaptability and Self-motivation) do not belong to any of these factors but are included directly under the total score. The internal consistency of original TEIQue, based on the initial sample pool of 102 individuals, is 0.86. The TEIQue (short form) was later developed with two items from each of the 15 subscales from the TEIQue based on their correlations with the total subscale scores (Petrides & Furnham, 2006).

After building an EI profile for government workers in Malaysia, Noriah and her colleagues (2004) adapted the Goleman model to fit a Malaysian context by adding two more EI domains, spiritual awareness and maturity. The

study resulted in the development of the Malaysian Emotional Intelligence Quotient Inventory. Meanwhile, Yusoff et al. (2010) developed the USM Emotional Quotient Inventory (USMEQ-i) based on the mixed model of EI. They used it to measure the EI of the medical student applicants to assist with student selection (Yusoff et al., 2011). The self-report measures seven domains of EI, namely emotional control, emotional maturity, emotional conscientiousness, emotional awareness, emotional commitment, emotional fortitude and emotional expression, and a special index called the faking index.

This current research is driven by the belief that individuals in the helping professions require a higher level of EI compared to those in other jobs due to the emotionally taxing responsibilities associated with the profession. A study by Nastasa and Farcas (2015) highlighted the relationship between EI and the sense of personal accomplishment, which determined the level of burnout among healthcare professionals. Past studies identified the benefits of EI and its relation to other variables such as job satisfaction (Anari, 2012), psychological wellness (Kumar & Hasnain, 2009; Shabani et al., 2010), stress and stress management (Naidoo & Pau, 2008; Salim & Nasir, 2010) and many more.

Research shows that EI is of benefit to counsellors because it enables them to identify the client's strengths and weaknesses, thus providing input on whether the client is improving or not (Ciarrochi & Scott, 2006). The research

also suggests that clients are less likely to experience high levels of stress in the future if counsellors can assist them to accurately identify emotions (Ciarrochi & Scott, 2006). Emotional competence variables are also potential mediators of change in counselling interventions that may lead to a decrease in negative issues like depression (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 1999).

The study by Mercer and Reynolds (2002) highlighted that a key component of EI was empathy. It is a crucial element in therapeutic relationships and contributes to improving the quality of care administered by doctors, nurses, and therapists (counsellors). Meanwhile, empathy is regarded as one of the major contributors to psychological wellness (Kumar & Hasnain, 2009). Findings by Wagaman et al. (2015) indicate that among social workers, empathy might prevent or reduce burnout and secondary traumatic stress, as well as increase levels of compassion and job satisfaction. The researchers proposed that empathy should be incorporated into training and education as part of continuous learning throughout a social worker's career. This suggestion is in line with earlier research by Ogińska-Bulik (2005), which found that EI played a significant role among professionals in the helping professions (doctors, nurses, morale officers and managers) in perceived job stress and related health effects. The research highlighted that a high level of EI reduced the feeling of lack of control and support. Kinman and Grant (2011) emphasised the importance of inter- and intrapersonal emotional competencies in social worker

trainees and showed that it encouraged coping skills and increased psychological well-being. Being emotionally intelligent can be regarded as an added value to help professionals build alliances with clients and for self-care maintenance.

As discussed, all previous studies are based on the quantitative measurement of EI using a standardised test and may lack the depth of understanding towards the EI of those in the helping profession. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the meaning of EI from a qualitative perspective through direct interview with participants in the profession itself.

Moreover, all conceptualisations of EI originated in the West and may differ from the conceptualisation of EI among multicultural Malaysian helping professionals. This qualitative study investigates the different realms of EI from the perspective of Malaysian helping professionals. Taking into considerations all conceptualisations of EI from a variety of theoretical approaches, the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview through a series of focus groups with helping professionals from multiple backgrounds. The methodology is discussed in further detail in the following sections.

METHODS

The present study examines EI from the perspectives of helping professionals in Malaysia, which includes counsellors, psychologist, rehabilitation officers and social workers, using qualitative research design. The qualitative research design was chosen because it is an overarching

concept under which a variety of issues may be examined (Rahman, 2017). It also produces an in-depth description of participants' feelings, opinions, experiences; and interprets the meanings of their actions (Denzin, 1989). Meanwhile, the focus group discussion method was chosen for data gathering for several reasons. Firstly, its environment enables participants to discuss perceptions, ideas, opinions and thoughts (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Secondly, Morgan (1988) asserted that the interaction among participants, in this case, the helping professionals, in the focus group would yield valuable data. Since time was of the essence for this study, the third reason for choosing the focus group method was because of the in-depth data it provides in a relatively short period (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

Participants and Sampling Procedure

According to Morse et al. (2002), to ensure the reliability and validity of the data, "the sample must be appropriate and must consist of participants who best represent or have knowledge of the research topic. These guidelines ensure the efficient and effective saturation of categories, with optimal quality data and minimum dross" (p. 18). Based on the operational definition of helping professionals for the study, participants include counsellors, psychologists, rehabilitation officers and social workers. Purposive sampling was used to select representatives of helping professions from various agencies.

Based on Creswell's (1998) suggestion of 20-30 sample size for focus group discussions, 24 participants were selected. There were five private practising counsellors, one counsellor from a prison setting, one counsellor from a school setting, two counsellors from organisations, two student counsellors from higher education settings, five counsellor educators also from higher education settings, one hospital psychologist, three counsellors who were community social workers, and four rehabilitation officers from drug rehabilitation settings. All participants met the research selection criteria of five years working in the helping profession, regularly attending to clients from different backgrounds, and had received formal education in their respective fields. Their age ranged from 35 to 58 years old. In terms of ethnicity, there were eighteen Malays, three Chinese and three Indian participants in the study.

Ethical Considerations

Upon invitation, all participants confirmed that they were willing to participate voluntarily and not due to any coercion from the researcher. Before each interview, the participants were verbally informed of the objectives, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study. They were also given written material about the research and informed of confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time. All the participants gathered for their focus group meeting on the assigned date. They signified their agreement to participate and that they understood the

terms and conditions by signing an informed consent form.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was done through four series of focus group interviews. These interviews were conducted from October 2016 to April 2017. Each focus group was held for 6 hours with 45 minutes lunch break. The researchers prepared semi-structured interview protocols based on the different conceptualisations of EI found in the past literature to fit the objectives of the study. The questions were open-ended to enable samples to add to their perspective of EI relating to their daily activities as helping professionals. Two of the researchers conducted the interviews. Some sample questions of the meeting included: "What does EI mean to you as a professional helper?"; "How important is it to identify the emotions of clients in your role as a professional helper?"; "What is your opinion about making professional decisions during the emotional state?"; and "as a professional helper, how do you manage your own emotions?".

Data Analysis

The focus group interview was recorded to ensure all relevant information was gathered. The interview data were then transcribed verbatim for analysis. To promote trustworthiness, triangulation and members checking were conducted. In qualitative research, validity refers to the appropriateness of the process, tools and data of the study (Leung, 2015). Triangulation

was done to determine whether the data from all available resources in the study converged and led to the same findings (Yin, 2011). Member checking was carried out by taking the transcribed data back to the participants to determine its accuracy and synchronicity with their experiences (Birt et al., 2016).

During data analysis using Atlas.ti, open coding through line by line analysis was used to ground elements that emerged from the data. Essential words and phrases are labelled to identify concepts. Initially, each focus group interview was coded separately. Later, a combined open coding session was conducted to determine emerging concepts and categories across all focus group interview and confirm data saturation. The open coding resulted in 365 codes. The data were further analysed using axial coding, whereby “the researcher develop the concepts into categories and organise the categories” (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 414). Researchers looked for recurring themes or similarities across the interviews which resulted in 43 subthemes.

The axial coding process was followed by selective coding, focusing on theoretical connections among the core categories that emerged. The researchers looked for a storyline of the theory by rechecking the theory with the data, and by making constant comparisons with existing literature until theoretical saturation occurred. Theoretical saturation refers to when no new information or concepts emerge from the data (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). From the data analysis, the research team was able to confirm eleven main themes.

RESULTS

Data analyses revealed the professional helpers’ EI dimensions. Eleven themes were identified which include self-awareness, self-expression, self-understanding, self-acceptance, self-management, social awareness, decision making, effective communication and management of other’s emotion, intrapersonal professional competency and interpersonal professional competency. Each theme is described and illustrated as follows.

Self-awareness

The majority of the participants agreed that the basic element of EI was self-awareness which referred to awareness of their emotions, mood changes, and external influences. Awareness of one’s own emotions is crucial as highlighted by a private practitioner,

“It’s related to how we are aware of our own emotions....”

This is supported by another counsellor who mentioned,

“If you are emotionally intelligent, you are in touch with your own emotions”.

One participant highlighted awareness towards mood changes and how it affected him

“I’m aware of things that change my mood...”

Several participants talked about the awareness of external influences. One participant stated,

"I realised my surrounding will lead to positive or negative emotions and may cause stigma. Sometimes I need to reframe the emotion positively and feel better about it."

In summary, self-awareness is one of the fundamental EI component needed among helping professionals, and it requires them to be aware of their own emotions, moods and interplay of external influences towards their emotion.

Self-expression

Through this theme, several aspects of self-expression were identified including the ability to express oneself accurately, Possession of extensive emotional vocabulary and assertiveness trait. The participants agree that helpers with high EI can accurately self-express, as voiced out by a participant,

"Even when we are angry at someone, we should use accurate self-expression".

Another participant supported that extensive emotional vocabulary would assist better self-expression,

"It's very important to know a lot of this (emotional) words; it can get tricky if we cannot identify the actual emotion".

Emotionally intelligent helpers were also able to express themselves more assertively than those with low EI as mentioned in the following statement:

"if the counsellor manages to express, means we are able to put the emotion in place, at times be assertive. Although you might be rejected for being assertive, it's very important as a counsellor".

In essence, the ability of self-expression among professional helpers can help to improve emotional communication with clients.

Self-understanding

The self-understanding theme includes the ability to understand a broad range of emotions, emotional triggers and the effects of these emotions on one's behaviour. A participant pointed out his view on the ability to understand different emotions by saying,

"We have to look at ourselves in a more holistic manner, understanding which emotion is most significant at the moment".

The data also supports the ability to understand emotional triggers as part of EI. A participant shared,

"(his story) makes me recall that emotional experience which happens to me and I guess others too. So, I need to be aware of anything that triggers me emotionally and decides how to deal with it".

Participants also highlighted the ability to understand the effects of emotion on behaviour as an important component of helpers EI. A female participant shared,

“During the times when I’m experiencing a very negative emotion, I know that if I deal with anyone, it will cause trouble to the person”.

In conclusion, the ability of helpers to understand themselves reflects their EI and enhances their ability to attend clients effectively.

Self-acceptance

The data revealed three sub-themes under self-acceptance, namely acceptance of positive and negative emotions, ability to self-reflect (past situation) and emotional maturity. A participant shared how he accepted emotions,

“As for me, emotion depends very much on our cognition, our thinking, our belief system. If you’re always negative, you will have negative emotions. But of course, negative and positive emotions are not wrong”.

Another participant believed that self-acceptance also included the ability to reflect on past situations. He said:

“Sometimes I reflect on myself, my weaknesses in the past I know I’m not perfect but if I think about it makes me realise I need to improve myself”.

Participants also agreed that self-acceptance also led to emotional maturity,

“Emotional experience will lead us to be more mature. It helps us to control our own life”.

As a whole, acceptance of oneself is related to EI since accepting oneself reflects the openness of helpers towards their here and now.

Self-management

This competency refers to how EI competent helpers manage themselves at emotional times. It includes the ability to regulate emotion, seek emotional support from others and use spiritual and emotional management. The following statements from the participants support these subthemes.

A counsellor shared regarding his regulation of emotion,

“Our emotion needs to be stable, moderate... I find that if I’m too happy, or too sad, I do tend to make the wrong decision. Therefore, I need to cool down and keep calm.”

Participants also mentioned seeking emotional support to regulate emotions for intelligent, emotional helpers. A psychologist in the study suggested,

“I would say emotional support is like psychological first aid for me to manage stress. When I’m not stable to think well, that’s one of my coping mechanisms”.

Spiritual, emotional management was mentioned frequently in all focus group

discussion. It is regarded as a crucial element of being emotionally intelligent. A participant shared his view by saying,

“I believe in the concept of ‘Syukur’, appreciating our life, it’s one of the important ways to control our emotions”.

Another participant supported by saying,

“When I’m stressed out, I seek solace in my religion; it never fails to help me calm down.”

Interestingly, in addition to the above, patience was mentioned several times as a critical part of EI that is necessary for professional helpers to manage their emotion during interaction with clients. A counsellor shared his view on patience as follows,

“As counsellors, we seldom have prior information about a new client, so the emotions of the client have to be explored to be managed. If a counsellor is emotional and rush, then you can’t do that. Exploration needs patience.”

It can be concluded that emotionally intelligent helpers practice personal self-management and are open to supporting others. They utilise the spiritual approach to as stress coping mechanism and bear a high level of patience when dealing with challenges.

Social Awareness

This refers to the cognitive processes which assist the sensitivity of the participants toward others during the interaction. The subtheme includes awareness of the emotions of others, the ability to empathise, to discriminate genuine and non-genuine emotions, to be non-judgmental, and to have patience.

Most of the helpers stated that they were aware of the emotion of others, as shared by a psychologist in the focus group,

“I can understand the emotions of others well”.

On a deeper level than basic awareness, the ability to empathise is recognised as an important component of EI. A counsellor shared his view on empathy as follows,

“Sometimes they look aggressive, yes they seem threatening, but I always hold on to a belief (which is) I need to empathise with them, How it feels like to be in their place. Some of these kids become notorious because people accuse them of being bad. When we empathise, they will open up to us.”

A few participants shared the ability to discriminate genuine and non-genuine emotions. Quoting from a social worker, he mentioned,

“If we have high EI, we should be able to identify genuine and non-genuine disclosure of clients...”

Being non-judgmental was also seen as EI requirement in terms of helpers' social awareness. The statement of a participant clearly illustrated this,

"In the case, if I have a prostitute as a client, although my values may oppose I will not judge her because my I'm here to help her, although for me prostitution is wrong".

In conclusion, social awareness is highlighted as one of the EI components that enables participants to work more effectively with clients in achieving positive changes.

Decision Making

This theme includes an awareness of how emotions affect decision making, and the ability not to let emotions influence decision making so that rational decisions can be made. The following statements support each one of these sub-themes. Being humans with emotions, the participants agreed that helpers needed to have an awareness of the emotions that influenced their decision making, as shared by a participant,

"We need to evaluate constantly, is our emotion appropriate or not. If we are too emotional, most probably we are not able to make a good decision".

Interestingly a lady counsellor emphasised the ability to avoid any decision making while in emotional condition. Her statement was,

"When we are too emotional it's better to withhold the decision making if that's not possible for me, then I will discuss with someone before deciding".

Under this theme, all participants agreed that the ability to make rational decisions while at work was very important. A statement from a counsellor illustrates this need,

"At work, I have to make more rational decisions. We have to identify with whom we can refer to help us with rational decision making".

Since decision making is an integral part of the relationship, it can be summarised that emotional intelligence helpers must always strive to make rational decisions by keeping their emotions at bay when necessary.

Effective Communication

Effective communication refers to the ability to interact well with others nonverbally and verbally. The data from the focus group supports that an emotionally intelligent helper communicates effectively with their clients verbally and non-verbally.

A blind counsellor in the study shared a fascinating insight into the ability to understand non-verbal and paralinguistic communications in his statement,

"Sometimes I can identify from the breathing and the way he talks, and I can identify that there is something else to explore. Therefore, I try

to communicate based on his reaction”.

Another participant supported the importance of non-verbal understanding as part of effective communication. He mentioned

“I can see in his (client’s) way of sitting; he needs time to open up. I encourage the client through my words”.

The participants also agreed that an emotionally intelligent helper could communicate effectively to generate rational thinking. One of the participants stated

“I would say that emotionally intelligent counsellors deliver the message more rationally. Rational communication helps the client to consider between emotion, behaviour and action to be taken.

In summary, the emotional intelligence of a helper is reflected through their communication style, both verbally and non-verbally, thus leading to rational thinking of the client.

Management of Other’s Emotion

This component refers to the ability to evaluate and regulate the emotions of clients effectively. Emotionally intelligent helpers can assess their client’s feelings and identify appropriate ways to manage them, as illustrated by this statement,

“I can detect if someone’s mood changes during my interaction with him. It helps me to be ready in terms of managing his emotions”.

An emotionally intelligent helper can regulate the emotions of clients in various ways. The following statement supports this idea,

“When we are managing the emotions of others, aware of the words we use, if we are using a negative word, we definitely will not be successful in managing their emotions”.

To conclude, an emotionally intelligent helper manages their clients’ emotions well, and this ability benefits the therapeutic relationship.

Intrapersonal Professional Competencies

This theme refers to how helpers manage themselves and their emotions, precisely, concerning their professional identity. Several interesting concepts related to a professional role were identified in this theme. A participant highlighted that awareness towards one’s value system is a vital component of EI. As illustrated in the following statement:

“As a counsellor, we must be aware of our personal identity as a counsellor and as a human. Do not bring in your perceptions into the session. There needs to be a thick divider.”

This brings another realisation that emotionally intelligent helpers are also open-minded and able to refrain from being judgmental. The following verbatim illustrates this:

“Our emotions are interrelated and need to be in line with our cognitive thinking, which we can actually filter. Before entering the counselling room, we need to be open-minded; be cognitively ready.”

Based on the focus group discussion, emotionally intelligent helpers are also determined to have an excellent ability to self-care and cope with unfinished business. These elements were mentioned by two different participants follows:

“EI does not depend just on our maturity; it’s about how we give space to ourselves, to love ourselves. Self-care is very important.”

“In the process of counsellor education, we can use the time to heal ourselves. We have to expose ourselves to unlimited issues which we need to express and deal with it.”

As a result of all the EI abilities in this theme, participants agreed that it led to the ability to manage countertransference more effectively among intelligent, emotional helpers. One of them shared,

“When experiencing countertransference, I will pause, I will summarise what the client has

said, slow down a bit and take the opportunity to calm down”-

In essence, an emotionally intelligent helper has the competencies to manoeuvre their self as professionals by identifying intrapersonal elements which may affect their professional work.

Interpersonal Professional Competencies

This theme concerns the quality of emotional interaction between the helpers and clients in their professional roles. Several participants highlighted the acceptance of professional limitations. An example of this narrative is as follows:

“As a human being, we sometimes feel reluctant, but we cannot say that we can accept everything the job needs. If we feel that way, we accept our weaknesses.”

This idea is supported by a counsellor in the study who mentioned about the readiness to refer to others in the profession. He said,

“If we do not know what to do, it’s better to refer, rather than pretend to sympathise with the client, because we aim to help.”

Meanwhile, the ability to differentiate between personal and professional emotions was also deemed as an EI ability. The following verbatim is from a social worker. He mentioned:

“It has to be a habit, the practice of separating our personal from

professional emotions has to be done effectively. If it's not trained, it affects the session and can cause problems in providing our service."

The participants agree that emotionally intelligent helper who differentiates between personal and professional emotions can avoid a dual relationship with the client. A counsellor shared,

"In a counselling session, we should not have any other relationship with the client, because we know the relationship has attachment implications"-

Based on this theme, it can be concluded that highly intelligent helpers act professionally to deal with the interplay of emotions between themselves and the client. This EI component may not be a requirement for individuals outside the helping profession.

DISCUSSIONS

It is thought that this study is the first to explore EI from the perspective of helping professionals. Previous EI models are conceptualised for the overall general population, with some concentration on specific groups of respondents. Working in human-related jobs means a person is subjected to various emotional experiences both positive and negative. The findings of this research are useful in understanding the different themes of EI required by professional helpers to be efficient at their

jobs. These EI competencies can buffer the effects of emotional stress factors thus enabling the professionals to provide quality care while preserving their psychological well-being.

This research supports many EI components proposed by earlier researchers. However, there are some unique findings that are worth mentioning that differentiate this study from earlier ones. The study highlighted spiritual and emotional management and patience as components of EI among helpers in Malaysia in managing their emotions. It is common to find Malaysians who are spiritually connected to their religions. The first national principle of Malaysia is to "Believe in God", and this principle is upheld by most Malaysians, including those participating in this study. Several common spiritual coping skills to manage emotions were found during the focus group, irrespective of the different cultural backgrounds of the helpers. Meanwhile, patience which is not mentioned as an EI trait in earlier studies is recognised as an important component of an emotionally intelligent helper due to the challenging nature of the cases and clients they encounter each day. During the sharing's of Muslim participants, patience was recognised as an essential Islamic virtue.

Conducted in a multicultural society of Malaysia, the findings of this study embrace the importance of multicultural awareness in counselling. Emotionally intelligent helpers are identified as non-judgmental and more

aware of their value system under the theme of intrapersonal professional competency. These EI components are in line with Article 17-19 in the Ethical Standards of Human Service Professionals (National Organization for Human Services, 1996) which emphasises that services should be rendered to clients without discriminations and that service providers should be aware of their cultural background, beliefs, and values. Meanwhile, the findings under the interpersonal professional competency theme suggest that emotionally intelligent helpers are also mindful of their professional limitations and have the readiness to refer to other professionals if the need arises. Ivey et al. (2014) mentioned that multicultural counsellors understood their multicultural background and the differences from others. They recognised the limitations this posed and acknowledged the need to refer clients on certain occasions.

This study also points out two unique EI components exclusively related to the professional role of helpers, namely the ability to manage counter-transference and to avoid dual relationships. The therapeutic relationship can be jeopardised because of these two components and the distraction caused to helpers' emotions when carrying out their professional duties. Emotionally intelligent helpers can manage countertransference by monitoring their emotional reactions and behaviour during sessions to adequately recognise what the client said or did to bring about that reaction in them (Goldfried & Davidson,

1994). Meanwhile, the ability to avoid a dual relationship is closely related to ethical practice. It is argued that dual relationships can lead to a loss of professionalism, which results in poor judgment and decision making (Brownlee, 1996), and may lead to the exploitation of the client, either in the form of exertion of power, or sexual transgression (Gross, 2005; Kitchener, 1988). Therefore, a professional helper is considered emotionally intelligent if they can manage counter-transference and avoid dual relationships during their professional life.

In conclusion, the study found several components of EI that were not discussed in the Western conceptualisation of EI. Furthermore, the study classified two themes uniquely related to the EI of professional helpers. They were intrapersonal professional competencies and professional interpersonal competencies. Based on these findings, our research team aims to develop an EI assessment scale to help professionals. The availability of such a measure will assist in identifying the level of EI in existing helping professionals, and in identifying opportunities for future training to enhance the competency levels of those with low EI. A scale could also assist with future recruitment by identifying the competencies of prospective helping professionals. This study provides researchers with the framework identify, evaluate, and plan appropriate training to ensure existing and future professional helpers enhance and develop their EI competencies.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study provides a new perspective of EI among helping professionals. The research focuses specifically on professional counsellors, psychologists, rehabilitation officers and social workers in Malaysia. It is the first step towards understanding the similarity and uniqueness of helpers EI components, compared to those of the general public. The data analysis using Atlas.TI produced 11 themes. Most were replicated items that appeared in earlier conceptualisations of ability-based, mixed and trait EI. However, the study identified new components of EI among helpers in Malaysian society. It provides a useful framework to understand helpers' EI and develop an EI assessment tool for aiding professionals.

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