

Ethical Considerations in Researching Counsellor Trainees' Experiences

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Abstract

The main purpose of this qualitative research is to explore how the counsellor trainees organized their world, emotion, thoughts, and perceptions while performing counselling practicum during their training. Ten counsellor trainees participated in this study, and their stories were gathered through a series of interviews, written documents and observation. The data also included field notes of the researcher and review of the related documents. In order to get close to their experiences and to understand their experiences, the researcher must have direct contact and close relationships with the research participants and context of the study. A close relationship between a research participant and researcher promotes sustainability of research participant. In doing this, the idea of Bond (2000) about six ethical principles, which include autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, fidelity and self-interest, serves as a guideline. Sustaining research participants involves an ethical relationship between a research participant and researcher. Being able to understand goals of the research and the purpose of data, contributes to commitment of the research participants during the data gathering stage. Despite this, issues on sufficient information and informed consent are challenges experienced by researcher in recruiting as well as sustaining research participants. Despite those challenges, relationship between researcher and research participants are able to sustain through the period of gathering data, which explain about ethical relationship between those parties.

Keywords: qualitative research, ethical considerations, counselling research, counsellor trainees

Background

This paper explores the process of building as well as sustaining an ethical relationship with research participants. This study aims to explore learning experience of the counsellor trainees during the counselling practicum. The focus of this research is not to search for objective facts and objective truth about the counselling practicum, but the main interest lies in the subjective experience captured in the individual stories of trainees while engaging in counselling practicum. This event, counselling practicum is required to counsellor trainees at the final stage of the training programmes. The counsellor trainees are performing the role of counselor at various setting during the counselling practicum. They engage in counseling session with real clients and real issues. In order words, the counselor trainees are in a natural setting during the process of applying their theoretical knowledge. Ten counselor trainees participated in this study. They were participated in a series of interview, at the beginning, at middle and at the end of the counseling practicum, as well as engaged in journal writing. Data gathering period lasted for three months. However, data analysis started immediately after the first interview, and this analysis process was fully performed after gathered all data, which included interviews and journal entries from the trainees as well as field notes from researcher and related documents.

The main purpose of this qualitative research is to reveal in-depth how the counsellor trainees have organized their world, emotion, thoughts, and perceptions. In order to get close to their experience and to understand personally the details of their actual experience, the researcher must have direct contact and a close relationship with the subjects and context of his study (Patton, 1990; 2002). Rudestam and Newton (2001) also support this idea. According to the latter author, 'the new generation of qualitative researchers emphasizes the socially constructed nature of reality, a close relationship between the researcher and the object of study, and the context that influences the inquiry' (p.36). A relationship between a researcher and participants seems very important in understanding experiences of individuals.

In addition, a relationship between a researcher and participants needs to develop prior to the data gathering stage. In other words, building relationship with a research participant was required before the data gathering stage. Through this relationship, a researcher will be able to capture the subjective experience of counsellor trainees, and to provide a description of the realities of counsellor trainees during their process of becoming counsellors.

Qualitative Research Participant

Counsellor trainees who are performing counseling practicum are participants of this research. Participants and researchers knew each other. The researcher knew the participants through her role of counseling lecturer previously. However, at the time of the research, the researcher no longer had any teaching involvement with these trainees, nor was in a position of evaluating performance of trainees.

It might be suggested that this relationship could have affected the data gathering process, because of this previous rapport. It is possible that these trainees would withhold certain information, because of the previous role. Because of this, the trainees might want to share only their positive experience. They might also expect the researcher to help them in their learning journey. The researcher also might be in a similar position. The researcher might bring her previous perceptions, such as that one particular trainee would experience a smooth journey during the counselling practicum, because of his or her good counselling skills.

On the other hand, this previous relationship and familiarity provided the opportunity for the researcher to explore in-depth the issues that were experienced by the trainees. Furthermore, that previous experience contributed to the strength of this research. The researcher was in a position to gain a better understanding on experiences of the trainees. As mentioned by Hollis and Clark (cited in Tryssener, 1999), phenomenological methods, one of the qualitative approach, require the researcher to have a working knowledge of a clinical speciality area to eliminate as many differences in language, culture and understanding between the researcher and the participants as possible.

The researcher had the opportunity for about one hour to meet with all the counsellor trainees in the particular cohort and explain about the research to them. Focus during the session was about what, who, when and how, that is 'what' was the purpose of this research, 'who' could participate, 'when' the research would be conducted, and 'how' the data would be gathered during the period of the research. In addition, the researcher explained her role, as well as the confidentiality of their information. Printed information about the research which included contact details such as a telephone number and email address were provided to the counselor trainee. They had time to consider their involvement in this research, and to contact the researcher for more information, if they wished to do so.

After meeting with the counsellor trainees, the researcher was available for four hours between eleven o'clock and three o'clock for three days. Interested counselor trainees are invited to discuss their interest during that time, and ask anything related to this research. During the available time, the researcher had an opportunity to interact in informal sessions with the interested trainees. The information from the informal sessions was very valuable because the researcher gained a better picture about them, especially about their interests, and past experiences.

There are 30 volunteer trainees, however, the researcher chose only ten trainees using criterion sampling, based on (i) willingness to participate in this study, (ii) ability to articulate their experiences, (iii) location of the school, and (iv) ethnicity. In order to focus in-depth on the experiences of counsellor trainees, willingness is very important. With willingness, the trainees would be prepared to share their feelings, thoughts, and actions during their counselling practicum. Besides that, ability to articulate experiences freely became the priority because data will gather through interviewing. The researcher also needed to be practical about the location of schools because she conduct all interviews. By involving all ethnic groups, Chinese, Indian, and Malay as well as both male and female, it is expected that this study will uncover diversity as well as common issues that faced the trainees during the counselling practicum. It is possible that those criteria became limitations to this study. However, the researcher was aware of all limitations as well as her intention for diversity. This awareness guided throughout the selection process.

After completing the selection process, all the participants were invited to a group meeting. Although this meeting would reveal the identities of the research participants to this group, it provided an opportunity for them and the researcher, to discuss the purpose of the research.

During the meeting, the researcher explained again about the nature of the research, especially the process of gathering data, and the duration of the research. Also, the researcher informed that they had a choice from the beginning to the end of this study to withdraw from this research. This meeting provided an opportunity for trust to develop between researcher and research participant. Counsellor trainees participated in this research voluntarily, which promote trust towards research and researcher. They were aware about data gathering process as well as type of data that involved during the three months. Voluntary participation, trust towards research and researcher as well as awareness about data gathering process partly contributes to an ethical relationship between the two parties, researcher and research participant.

Ethical Principles

Sustaining qualitative research participants requires strong understanding of ethical principles. Related to this, the idea of Bond (2000) about six ethical principles, which include autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, fidelity and self-interest, serves as a guideline in this study. Autonomy means that each research participant is free to choose whether to participate or not in the research. Relating to freedom of choice and freedom of action, participants can determine the extent to which information will be shared with researcher (Kitchener, 1984). Beneficence means actions that are ethically and no harm will come. Also, such an action will contribute to the health and welfare of others. Related to this, Heppner et al. (1992) suggested that the beneficence associated with competence. If the value of an individual to help others, then it is responsibility of the individual to provide efficient service as possible. Non-maleficence means each research participant will not be harmed, either physically or emotionally, through involvement in research. It also includes emotional distress faced by the participants. Therefore, it is responsibility of the researcher to plan and carry out research so that injuries can be avoided. Justice means that each participant is entitled to review the opportunities and fair treatment while engaged in the study. Fidelity refers to adhere to the promises and what has been agreed upon. Last but not least is self-interest of the research participant is a priority of the researcher in the course of the study.

Ethical relationship

Engaging in this inquiry was a challenging experience. The researcher needed to be aware and make ethical decisions while trying to explore the lived experience of the trainees. Robson et al., (2000) remind us that 'It is important that we explore our philosophical assumptions and hold them up for examination so that we can be truly accountable for our decision-making' (p.545). An understanding about aims of the trainees as well as awareness of the vulnerability experienced by some trainees informed the ethical decision process in this study. In relation to this, as a researcher, awareness of my own knowledge, experiences and beliefs about the counselling practicum, and the possibility of my being influenced by these elements during my interaction with the trainees are very important. Furthermore, my knowledge and background may interplay with experience of trainees.

This study started by identifying own experience and knowledge related to counsellor trainees and the counselling practicum. An awareness of this experience, the trainees, and this particular study required an on-going process of reflection. As a part of this, a notebook as a diary to record thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perceptions throughout the interviewing process was useful. McLeod (2001) reminds us that 'to produce good work, qualitative researchers need to reflect on how they see and understand, to reflect on the process of knowing itself' (p.54). This reflective process was an opportunity for a researcher to be aware of the purpose and aim in this study. Understanding of own experiences, beliefs, assumptions that was brought into this research will help in understanding the counsellor trainees. By doing this, it was a hope that this study and the researcher did not harm the trainees.

A main concern of researcher is did not want to harm the trainees. Also, the trainees are expected to exercise the maximum autonomy with regard to participation in this research as well as their sharing of experience. As stated earlier, the researcher was aware that the both parties, participants and researcher, knew each other. It might be suggested that this relationship could have affected the data gathering process, because of this previous rapport. On the other hand, the trainees participated in this research voluntarily. They might view this opportunity as a chance to share their experience. Furthermore, this previous relationship and familiarity provided an opportunity for the researcher to explore in-depth the issues that were experienced by the trainees. The researcher was in a position to gain to a better understanding of experiences of the trainees. In other words, both parties, the researcher and the research participants, were responsible to this relationship. In addition, this relationship was build upon ethical principles.

In exercising autonomy of the trainees, they had the opportunity to choose a suitable time and date for the interviews. They could also change the agreed time if they felt that it was necessary. While exercising choice, the participants were aware about the time period for the first, second and the third interviews. Each interview is building upon the previous ones. The first interview was conducted during weeks 2 and 3, the second one during weeks 6 and 7, and the third interview during weeks 10 and 11. Each meeting was allowed up to one and a half hours. This included time for 'warming up', the interviewing phase, and time for 'cooling down' at the end of the interview. These interviews were based on themes that are relevant to growth of counsellor. Since the interviews were semi-structured interviews, they were given focus and direction based on the research question, but not confined to predetermined questions. Rudestam and Newton (2001) suggest that qualitative researchers generally prepare some questions in advance, preferring to alter them if it seems appropriate as the interview progresses. On the other hand, engaging in dialog as a method of data gathering can lead to both unsettling questions and life changes (Eide and Kahn, 2008). However, as a researcher, I was balancing the autonomy needs of individual trainees, and trying to avoid harm towards them as participants, with the broader ethical research consideration of keeping control of the process of gathering data. Being able to feel autonomous in their actions might encourage the trainees to engage in the interviewing sessions as well as to sustain as research participants for the period of three months.

Another example of an unwillingness to harm the participants is related to the interviewing sessions. As a researcher, I did not want to harm the participants during their counselling practicum. However, this research required counsellor trainees to reflect on their experiences, either through interviews or journal writing. They needed to write this journal on a weekly basis. Also, the participants were encouraged to provide a narration prior to their practicum, in particular a narration about their personal expectations of what they hoped to gain from their practicum experience. Their weekly story was to be based on: (i) the most significant experience, (ii) the worst experience, and (iii) what they had learned from the experience. The participants were to keep this journal until the end of their practicum, then hand it in to the researcher, during week twelve of their practicum. There was a possibility that they would feel uncomfortable, because they had to reflect on unhappy feelings and difficult experiences during these two activities. In addition, some trainees might feel dissatisfied with their interviews, because they were not able, or forgot, to relate the issues that they considered important to them.

All these experiences might indirectly harm them. On the other hand, the participants had the opportunity to write and control their words and ideas. Through writing, they would reflect on their behaviour, and the relation of this behaviour to their thoughts and emotions. Poirier (1992) mentions that journal writing during her practicum provided her with the feeling of strength, ability to communicate her voice, and empowerment. Moreover, Janesick (1999) suggests that journal writing is an ultimate way of getting feedback from oneself, as it provides us with an opportunity to experience that particular moment in an unlimited way. Despite this, the trainees were aware that the researcher was listening to their stories. Having someone to listen to our difficulties is a therapeutic experience. Eide and Kahn (2008) stated that this relationship can evoke new understandings of past and present events and situations. Being able to experience feeling of therapeutic partly contribute to their sustaining participate in this research.

There is an idea that harm cannot be avoided, especially when we are dealing with our research participants (Robson et al., 2000). While participating in this research, they could engage their thoughts, emotions and behaviour, and try to make sense of their behaviour. As a result, they might get a better understanding of their behaviour. Also, they might become more aware of what they were doing and why they engaged in that particular behaviour. Essentially, the reflection on their experience as counsellor trainees might provide more personal benefit than harm. Furthermore, the participants were aware that they had the right to withdraw at any time from this research if they wished, because their participation was voluntary.

In addition, this research is also beneficial because it is doing good for other counsellor trainees and for the counselling profession in general, even if some research participants might not directly benefit from their participation. Essentially, this research provides valuable information to the counselling profession. Experience of the trainees can help counsellor educators to gain a better understanding of the learning journey during the counselling practicum, particularly during the process of becoming a school counsellor. This description is genuine for this group of trainees, and this may contribute to future planning of the counselling practicum.

A further question relates to freedom of choice and freedom of action. Could the counsellor trainees choose whether or not to participate in this research? This was another conflict that I experienced, since my position as a member of university staff might restrict freedom of the counsellor trainees. However, this situation could not be perceived negatively because the previous experience with these trainees indirectly contributed to the ethical relationship. Furthermore, this ethical relationship promotes trusting relationship and it facilitated the gathering of genuine and rich data (Grafanaki, 1996). In addition, this trust promotes quality of relationship and interaction, which makes the research possible (Bond, 2004). The participants might feel more comfortable sharing their lived experience with someone who was familiar.

A related issue was whether the participants might not have freedom of choice because of the difference in power between myself, as a researcher, and themselves. They might not have felt able to say no, because of this difference in power, especially in view of my previous role. On the other hand, the participants were given freedom of choice in their actions relating to the study. They received essential information about this research at the beginning of the study, in particular during the process of making their decision. As a researcher, I had an obligation towards the research participants because of their voluntary participation. Providing as much research information as possible to the participants was part of my responsibility towards them. However, the research participants also had the same obligation towards this research. They had to be genuine. Their voluntary participation had to come from themselves, because it would contribute towards an ethical as well as meaningful relationship.

In relation to voluntary participation, I gave the participants the written informed consent form before starting each interview. They had time to read it and ask anything related to this research before they gave their consent to engage in the interviews. The purpose of the written informed consent was to inform the trainees about this research, and their right to withdraw if they wished. According to Robson et al. (2000), consent is the process of giving the participants the right to choose whether or not to participate in the research. As the researcher, I needed to provide adequate information to enable the participants to make the right decision. The question arises, "What is adequate?" To answer this question, I needed to make my own judgement related to this research. Basically the information that needed to be provided to the research participants was: (i) the purpose of this research, (ii) the duration of the research process, (iii) the clarification of roles, research participant and researcher, (iv) how the data was going to be obtained, (v) issues of confidentiality, and (vi) the withdrawal process.

The consent form was intended to protect the trainees throughout this research, and to remind myself of accountability towards the trainees. By employing ongoing informed consent, both of us were kept aware of our responsibilities and the purpose of our relationship. Bond (2004) reminds that the best practice of informed consent as a process, in which participant consent is reviewed at different points during the course of study. In relation to this, some believe that an informed consent form creates a power imbalance in the researcher-participant relationship (Fine et al., 2000). On the other hand, the opportunity to get detailed information, and ability of the trainees to decide about their involvement in the research created a strong researcher-participant as well as an ethical relationship. In order to develop trust in this relationship, I gave the participants the opportunity to revise their informed consent form at every interview. All the participants read their informed consent form, and none of them asked 'What is this for?' (Fine et al. 2000). This situation may be related to the trust of the trainees in the research and myself as researcher. In addition to this, I started the first interview with research structuring, intending to provide information to both of us, the trainee and myself, about the purpose of this research, our responsibility to this research and to each other, and the length of the interview, as well as to prepare us for our commitment throughout this research.

As mentioned earlier, the experience of trainees is subjective. There is no objective reality about getting into the experience of trainees. Therefore, this basic information might be added from time to time during the ongoing informed consent. As mentioned by Grafanaki (1996), counselling research requires a flexible researcher. There might be unexpected incidents and, as the researcher, we need to deal with these incidents with the best alternative at that particular moment. Basically, any changes in the research plan are for the benefit of the research participants. In addition, the trainees must be able to make their decision based on the information that has been provided by the researcher, and they should be aware that their participation is voluntary. However, I could not be sure that all participation was solely voluntary.

The trainees might have wanted to participate in this research because they knew me and wanted to please me. In order to tackle this issue, as the researcher, I needed to revise their participation from time to time, through ongoing informed consent. The informed consent is a very important written contract between the researcher and the research participants.

Conclusion

Engaging in a qualitative research was a challenging experience. Gathering qualitative data required a prolonged engagement with the research participants. Sustaining research participants during data gathering stage involved an ethical relationship with the research participants and context of the study. Six ethical principles, which include autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, fidelity and self-interest, were a guideline in creating an ethical relationship the research participants. Being able to understand goals of the research and the purpose of data, contributes to commitment of the research participants during the data gathering stage. Awareness of the responsibility towards the research participants and this research as well as prior knowledge and assumptions about individuals were important factors in building and sustaining the research participants. Finally, as a researcher, I believe that my decisions were for the benefit of the research participants and this research.

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