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Strengthening Support for Children and Youth in Singapore: A Personal Therapy Approach  
to Training Paraprofessional Counsellors.

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### **Abstract**

Although personal therapy was advocated as a route to personal and professional growth of therapists, it was rarely used in the training of non-professional counsellors, such as teachers and youth workers. This qualitative study explored the experiences of 15 undergraduate preservice teachers and youth workers from a university in Singapore who attended mandatory individual and group personal development sessions as part of para-counsellor training. Twelve subcategories in four categories were identified using Strauss' and Corbin's grounded theory methodology. Participants perceived that personal therapy influenced their personal and professional growth, and changed their perception of counselling from negative to positive. Their beliefs in the efficacy of counselling were validated, and they were more willing to seek help through counselling in future.

**Keywords:** Singapore; Personal therapy; Counselling Training; Para Counsellors

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Adults, such as teachers, youth workers and volunteers who worked with children and youth, often found themselves in situations where they needed to provide emotional support to their charges (Allen & Ashbaker, 2004). They often did so through the process of *embedded counselling*, i.e., a form of informal counselling provided by non-professional counsellors (McLeod and McLeod, 2015). This meant that in order for them to provide emotional support effectively, they needed to know how to build quality relationships with their charges (Johnson, 1998; Pazaratz, 1998).

Research had shown that counselling skills training was effective in teaching teachers and youth workers to build quality relationships through empathy, active listening, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness (Allen & Ashbaker, 2004; Cornelius-White & Cornelius-White, 2004; Doikou & Diamandidou, 2011; Lin, 2011; Rogers, Cornelius-White, & Cornelius-White, 2005). Basic counselling skills training also helped increase self-awareness in individuals (Doikou & Diamandidou, 2011; Lin, 2011). This was important because practitioners with self-awareness were better at recognizing and understanding how others felt, more effective at managing conflict and setting limits firmly and respectfully, without impeding children's or youth's ability to explore and learn (Jennings, Goh, Skovholt, Hanson, & Banerjee-Stevens, 2003).

Self-awareness could also be fostered in various ways, for example, through in-service learning or reflective skills training for non-professional counsellors (Doikou & Diamandidou, 2011; Holiday, 2015; Ioannidou-Koutselini & Patsalidou, 2015; Lin, 2011; Siraj, 2013), or through personal therapy for professional counsellors (Orlinsky, Schofield, Schroder, & Kazantzis, 2011). Personal therapy had been found to be useful in enhancing counsellors' personal development, well-being, and relational capabilities (Orlinsky, Schofield, Schroder, & Kazantzis, 2011). However, a literature search on the Ebsco Host and Proquest databases (2017, May 9) using the search terms, "personal therapy" and "para-

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counsellor” or “non-professional counsellor” or “Youth Worker”, only elicited one article by Lin (2011) on the use of personal therapy by teachers, and none by non-professional counsellors. Lin (2011) discovered that when teachers attended at least one mandatory personal therapy session as a client and engaged in role-plays, they had a better understanding of the counselling profession, enhanced self-awareness and a deeper appreciation of the value of experiential learning.

Personal therapy took the form of individual or group counselling. Individuals who attended the group counselling sessions enjoyed the same benefits as those who attended individual personal therapy sessions (Leva et al., 2009; Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Moller & Rance, 2013; Young, Reysen, Eskridge, & Ohrt, 2013). In addition, group members became more aware of how their behaviour affected others and how they were in turn affected by others (Rose, 2008).

Although personal therapy was found to be beneficial for professional and non-professional counsellors, it was challenging to persuade Asian teachers and youth workers to attend personal therapy (Heine, 2001; McCarthy, 2005). This was partly due to the fact that the Asian culture did not encourage individuals to share personal problems or information with strangers, as this could indicate that one was weak or lacked self-control or the ability to endure suffering (Fowler, Glenwright, Bhatia, & Drapeau, 2011; Tang, Reilly, & Dickson, 2012). Moreover, by sharing personal information with strangers, such as counsellors, Asian youth risked bringing shame to themselves and their families (Ang & Yeo, 2004). This qualitative study was therefore aimed at understanding how mandatory individual and group personal therapy impacted the personal and professional development of Asian undergraduate preservice teachers and volunteer youth workers. This study also sought to gain insights into their experiences of personal therapy and their understanding of the counselling process, particularly with children and adolescents.

## **Method**

This qualitative study was approved by the university's Internal Review Board. Strauss' and Corbin's (1998) Grounded Theory approach was used to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomena. Strauss' and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory method was chosen over other versions of grounded theory because it provided a framework for data gathering and analysis, as well as a paradigm to organize and link concepts. This inductive and systematic analysis of data allowed the generation of theory that was grounded in data, and added insight, enhanced understanding and provided a meaningful guide to action. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## **Program Structure**

The basic counselling skills elective with a personal therapy component had been running for seven years at the time of this study, with approximately 600 undergraduates including trainee teachers, and volunteer youth workers, taking this course. The personal therapy sessions (Personal Development Sessions [PDS]) were conducted by trainee counsellors from the university's two Masters level counselling programmes. Participants of the course had to attend six individual and six group sessions as part of their course requirements. It was emphasized to participants that the information they shared in the sessions were confidential and had no bearing on their grades or performance evaluation in the course. However, they would receive five marks (5%) participation grade if they attended all their PDS sessions. In class, students had to participate in role-plays, playing the roles of being the counsellor as well as being the counsellee. At the end of their PDS and role-play sessions, they were required to write a reflection paper on their experiences (refer to Appendix A).

### **Research Participants**

Given the large sample size, a total of 15 scripts from the course were randomly selected using purposive and convenience sampling methods. The participants were all undergraduates from a university in Singapore. There were 10 females and five males, with an average age of 22.33 years. Their ethnic breakdown was 11 Chinese and four Malays. Six participants were preservice teachers with no teaching experience apart from five weeks of supervised teaching practice in school. The nine remaining participants were volunteer youth workers in the community. These volunteer youth workers had indicated that they wanted to learn basic counselling skills to aid them in their volunteer work in church and voluntary welfare organisations.

### **Informed Consent**

Participants were asked to provide consent to allow the contents of their paper and their demographic information to be used for research purposes, with the provision that their identities remained anonymous. All 15 participants had given their consent at the time of submission of papers. Pseudonyms were used to identify the participants in this study.

### **Research Team and Positionality**

The research team comprised two researchers and three auditors. The principle investigator was a doctoral level psychologist with 12 years of experience as both a clinician and counsellor-educator in the university. The co-investigator was a Masters level student with seven years of counselling experience in clinical settings.

The three auditors were experienced doctoral-level counsellor-educators in the university who had taught this basic counselling skills course to undergraduates. Each had between 20 to 30 years of experience as counsellor-educators, supervisors, and clinicians in the field.

## **Research Procedure**

**Data collection.** Data from the participants' Post-PDS Reflection Paper, which was one of the gradable assignments of the counselling course was used in this study. Participants were aware that their reflection papers were graded based on the depth and quality of their reflections. Their reflections were guided by a list of given questions (refer to Appendix A).

**Data analysis.** Prior to selecting the qualitative method for analysis, the researchers reviewed the data corpus. This preliminary review revealed an emerging story of the participants' experiences, which appeared to fit well with Strauss' & Corbin's (1998) paradigm. As such, the researchers decided to use the grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to analyse the data, while bearing in mind that they did not need to adhere to it in a static and rigid manner, but could instead use it systematically with some degree of creativity and flexibility (Hallberg, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data analysis process was therefore divided into three phases of open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

In the first phase of open coding, each researcher coded the individual reflection papers independently. They did this by identifying key words or phrases which represented the most elemental unit of meaning, such as a thought, feeling or action (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After the independent open-coding, they compared and discussed their codes until they reached a consensus (Hill et al., 2005).

At this time, the researchers also compared similar codes across the data corpus and tallied the quotations (Patton, 2002). The researchers decided that at least 50% ( $\geq 8$ ) of the participants would need to have described a code as important, before they could consider it as representative. Their choice of cut-off mark was influenced by the Consensual Qualitative Research literature which recommends not reporting in detail those codes representing only 25% to 50% of participants (Hill et al., 2005). However, given the relatively small sample

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group, the researchers decided that if more than 50% representation level was required, much of the richness of the obtained information would be omitted from the study. So the researchers eliminated 10 of the 23 preliminary codes which could not be consolidated with another code and which also had a low number of participants ( $\leq 7$ ) (refer to *Figure 1* for the 13 codes which were retained).

In the second analytical stage of axial coding, researchers clustered the initial codes that were related, so as to identify higher order categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). They did this by using Strauss & Corbin's (1998) coding paradigm of conditions, context, strategic actions / interactions and consequences. Conditions were essentially "the structure or set of circumstances or situations, in which phenomena (were) embedded" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 129). *Strategic actions* were deliberate responses made by participants to manage issues, problems, happenings, or events, which had arisen under the conditions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). *Consequences* were the "outcomes of participants' strategic actions / interactions" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 129). This process resulted in the four categories within the paradigm: *Causal Conditions: Pre-existing Perceptions of Counselling, Intervening Conditions: Counsellors' Effectiveness, Strategic Actions: Active Participation, and Consequences: Impact on Self*. These four categories were populated with the 12 codes which became sub-categories.

In the third stage of selective coding, the researchers unified the categories according to the core category of para-counselling students' PDS experience. This process was achieved by diagramming the categories, as seen in Figure 1.

**Trustworthiness.** Each investigator had biases. The principle investigator had introduced the personal therapy component into the undergraduate counselling skills syllabus, and taught the course. The junior researcher had provided personal therapy to some undergraduates (but not the participants), during her own practicum. Hence, to address the

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issues of researcher bias, both researchers had to be careful to set aside their beliefs and preferences for personal therapy, so that they could look at the data with “unmotivated eyes” (McLeod, 2006). They did so by reading about both the advantages and disadvantages of personal therapy, as well as reflecting on their own personal therapy experiences.

Both researchers were also mindful of the dual relationships (teacher-student and co-investigators) and the resulting power differential, which could impede open and honest discussions. Hence, in order to ensure that the junior researcher (second author’s) opinions were taken into account, both researchers agreed that the junior researcher would always be given the opportunity to give her feedback and opinions before the more senior researcher spoke. Both researchers found that regular open and honest discussions about their thoughts, feelings and experiences, helped them to reflect upon and set aside any biases that surfaced before, during and after the completion of the research.

Similarly, dual relationships existed between the principal investigator and the auditors. This was because the auditors were senior faculty members who had supported the inclusion of the personal therapy component in the syllabus. They agreed to critically reflect upon in their interaction with undergraduates and marking of the reflection papers, whilst taking into account both positive and negative feedback they had received about the program from their students. They also agreed to review the final list of categories and subcategories only after they had completed this process of reflection and marking.

Finally, to ensure trustworthiness of the results, the two researchers checked the categories and subcategories for consistency across all participants and examined the linkages between the categories against the data, as required by Strauss’ & Corbin’s (1998) grounded theory method. The auditors then checked the emerging categories and subcategories against their own experiences marking the reflection papers and the verbal feedback given by their students. All three auditors agreed that the categories and subcategories were representative

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of the experiences of the majority of students whom they had taught over the years. Finally, the researchers also compared the results with those found in the literature for added confirmability.

### **Findings**

Strauss' and Corbin's (1998) paradigm model was used to explicate the relationships between the categories and describe the phenomenon of the participants' experiences of personal development sessions (PDS) which were situated within the context of a basic counselling skills course. The Causal Condition was the participants' *Pre-existing Perceptions of Counselling*. The Intervening Condition of the *Counsellors' Effectiveness* altered the effect of the Causal Condition and influenced the Strategic Actions that the participants took in response to the conditions. The Strategic Actions referred to the participants' *Active Participation* in both individual and group sessions shaped their experience of the PDS, and they experienced as Consequences the *Impact on Self*.

#### **Causal Condition: Pre-existing perceptions of counselling**

Most of the participants were apprehensive about attending the PDS and did not enter with any goals or objectives in mind. This was because they did not have any prior experience of receiving counselling. In addition, their unfamiliarity with the counsellors and the expectations to share at a personal level with stranger(s) caused them to feel uneasy. They also had doubts about the effectiveness of counselling for themselves, as well as a lack of certainty of its effects. For example, Serene (female, 21, volunteer youth worker) shared:

I expected negative things to happen in the individual counselling sessions, whereas for the group counselling sessions, I did not really have any expectations. Before I started the individual counselling sessions, I was afraid that I would find out negative things about myself that previously I was unconscious about.

Belle (female, 22, preservice teacher) also shared her mixed feelings:

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The counselling sessions brought on many feelings. For instance, during the first individual PDS session, I felt anxious and nervous. However, I felt excited too. All these feelings came up because I was very unsure of what to expect. I had never been to a counselling session and I did not know what to say. Furthermore, before attending this module, I viewed counselling in a bad light due to all the negative stereotypes attached to it.

### **Intervening Condition: Counsellors' effectiveness**

**Attributes and qualities.** The participants described their counsellors as being warm, friendly, genuine, caring, empathic, and having unconditional positive regard for them. The latter included elements of displaying respect, affirmation, encouragement, acceptance and valuing of their opinions and who they were. Joshua (male, 24, volunteer youth worker) explained,

My counsellor was very reassuring and caring, constantly acknowledging my feelings and reflecting on them as well. This was a key factor to helping me relax during the individual counselling session and to be more comfortable with voicing out issues.

Another participant, Felica (female, 21, volunteer youth worker) praised her counsellor:

Her sincerity was extremely helpful for it made me feel important and I was able to share freely and felt more comfortable divulging more about my current situation and myself... Her constant encouragement and allowing me to envision my ideal outcome instilled hope in me and I eventually was able to carry out the small task.

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**Helpful actions.** Along with the positive attributes that participants described, they also shared the actions taken by their counsellors that they found helpful. For instance, they shared that their counsellors built therapeutic rapport and alliance and created a sense of safety for them, through empathic listening, accurate reflections, providing affirmation and even displaying positive body language. Tina (female, 22, preservice teacher), described her experience:

Firstly was the reflecting of my content and feelings. My emotions were identified and acknowledged, and by rephrasing this affective component, it gave me the opportunity to explore my own feelings in greater details, sorting out my complex or confused emotions and even to understand my underlying hidden emotions.

Brenda (female, 22, volunteer youth worker) also explained how her counsellor's empathy helped her, "(My) individual (PDS) counsellor was often empathizing with me through the mirroring of facial expressions and encouraging comments. It encouraged me to be more optimistic and to believe that things will get better soon!"

Appropriate self-disclosure was also one of the therapeutic tools that the participants felt was helpful in building the rapport with the counsellor and facilitated their own willingness to open up in the session. Tony (male, 24, preservice teacher) explained,

Another area that was helpful for me was when my counsellors shared their personal experiences with me and communicated their feelings about a particular issue that we were discussing. In doing so, I identified that they were self-disclosing and I felt encouraged.

**Unhelpful actions.** The participants also highlighted certain counter-therapeutic behaviours that their counsellors engaged in. For instance, they found that their counsellors' lack of body language and formality of the communication disrupted the therapeutic rapport.

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A lack of self-disclosure was also listed as a barrier in building of the relationship with their counsellors, as elaborated by Noelle (female, 22, preservice teacher),

However, I felt that my individual counsellor was not as open, and she did not want to disclose any personal information about herself...I felt that it did make me feel less inclined to share my personal feelings with her, and that I did not feel like I had a proper connection with her...

Felicia (female, 21, volunteer youth worker) expounded on why counsellor self-disclosure was so important to her, "It felt like they were dictating and the process felt very mechanical...If they had the opportunity to disclose any other information about themselves, it would have further increased the dynamics of the team."

### **Strategic Actions: Active Participation**

**Individual PDS.** Participants engaged in the individual PDS sessions by sharing their personal issues and challenges, such as past struggles, current problems in their personal lives and issues relating to their personal relationships. Aden (male, 23, volunteer youth worker) explained, "In particular when I shared with her about my family matters, I felt heard, I felt understood and I felt enlightened." Similarly, Sylvia (female, 21, volunteer youth worker) also shared her problems with her counsellor, "One of the strong feelings I had from the individual counselling sessions was being relieved. This was especially so when I was asked to elaborate on some of the key issues and struggles I had."

**Group PDS.** Participation in the group sessions involved participants listening to other members in the group, providing feedback or suggestions and asking questions, sharing their personal problems, experiences and viewpoints as well as providing affirmation and support to their fellow members. Timothy (male, 25, volunteer youth worker) explained, "After a few PDS sessions, I felt more relaxed and was able to share some of my personal issues with the group."

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Joshua (male, 24, volunteer youth worker) explained his motivation to share, “During sharing sessions in the group counselling process, I (felt) eager to contribute my ideas and also enlightened by the vastly different viewpoints brought forth over the same issue.”

### **Consequences: Impact on Self**

**Self-awareness.** All the students reported an enhancement in self-awareness as a result of the experience. They viewed their insights as beneficial on both personal and professional levels. Belle (female, 22, preservice teacher) revealed:

Previously, I have always thought that I knew myself well enough and I did not think I would learn anything new about myself and, obviously, that was very ignorant of me. I am glad that I learnt that about myself.

Heidi (female, 22, preservice teacher) who discovered that her behaviour was not helpful to her health said:

My self-awareness gradually heightened over the counselling sessions. I began to love myself more, for I know it is vital to do so in order to be a strong person.

Throughout the process, I was brought to a self-realisation that I am always rushing, too concerned about how others feel and that I have not been taking care of myself.

**Personal growth.** The participants reflected that they had experienced personal growth. They conceptualized personal growth as positive changes in personal aspects of self, having more positive emotions towards themselves, increased self-acceptance, having more appreciation of certain aspects of their lives, finding resolutions to some of their personal issues, learning new skills in managing their own emotions and issues and finding a direction for future growth. For example, Theresa (female, 22, volunteer youth worker) noted:

I recognized that I demonstrated certain avoidant personality communication styles...I realized that this affects my relationships negatively... I felt like this was

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a breakthrough in mind-set for me to make this connection, as this is something unpleasant I would have previously avoided thinking about.

Esther (female, 22, preservice teacher) explained how counselling helped her to grow, “My counsellor helped me learn alternative ways to “treat myself” first and make myself a better person wholly before I could start being a better person for someone else.”

**Professional growth.** All the participants highlighted how the experience of receiving counselling had helped them to better understand the role of the counsellor, counselling actions and the counselling process. They also explained how they used the counselling skills in their roleplays and to help children and youth in the future. Heidi (female, 22, preservice teacher) explained:

Thus, as a future teacher, I can practise what I have learnt by helping the students that need to be counselled so that through the rapport forged, it will enable me to reach out to them. I must also remember that I should not be a solution provider and let the client explore their own solution by using the right question techniques and methods to help them in self-discovery.

Brenda (female, 22, preservice teacher) shared how she could use the realistic goal setting with regular reviews that she experienced in PDS to help her future students make changes, “This will be useful for students as it gives them the drive and commitment to make realistic changes on their own.”

Serene (female, 21, volunteer youth worker) elaborated on how the skills would help her in her work as a volunteer youth worker:

In the future, if I were to meet a new group of people or had to counsel an individual, I would make sure that they would feel a sense of comfort around me before I start asking issues that the other parties think are sensitive.

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**Understanding of client's experience.** Being in the role of a client during the sessions had allowed participants to appreciate how it felt like to be a client, and the impact that the counsellor could have on a client. Students reported how this led to an increased sense of empathy and respect for the client. Luke (male, 24, volunteer youth worker) summarised his learning points:

It is important to use the client's perception of the counselling process as the client's perceptions and experience in the counselling process is vastly different from that of the counsellor...Without any experience as a client in the PDS sessions, I would have greatly influenced the client with my ideas, probably even impose them if I were a counsellor.

Noelle (female, 22, preservice teacher) explained that being a client was helpful when she had to counsel her own role-play client:

Furthermore, as a client in the PDS sessions, I was able to understand personally how a client would think or react to something that the counsellor said. Thus, I could pre-empt what to say next during role plays as I would be able to predict what they were feeling at that point of time.

**Understanding of therapeutic process.** Engaging in the counselling process as a client also allowed participants to experience how a sense of safety grew during therapy, thus allowing them to be vulnerable and share openly in both the individual and group sessions. Felicia (female, 21, volunteer youth worker) explained,

Through our conversation, I would admit that it was initially tense, and I was rather sceptical for I was not sure where our conversation was heading...

However, with the weekly counselling sessions, the trust and rapport between us built up. I was more enthusiastic with consequent counselling sessions for I felt

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that with every session, I learnt something new about myself and was able to see things from a wider perspective.

Esther (female, 22, preservice teacher) explained how the group dynamics helped her to engage in the group process, “When my group members started to discuss about the fears, I felt encouraged to voice out my thoughts on the issue.”

**Positive emotions about PDS.** Students reported feeling positive about their counselling experiences. Frequent terms and key points that emerged were feelings of being “thankful” and “comforted”, having a sense of having had a(n) “fulfilling”, “satisfying”, “enriching” or “fruitful” experience, and also having “enjoyed” the process. Esther (female, 22, preservice teacher) wrote, “However, on most days, I will leave both the individual counselling and group counselling room feeling optimistic and positive.”

Tina (female, 22, preservice teacher) echoed Esther’s sentiments:

After going through 6 weeks of individual and group counselling, I felt contented, satisfied and optimistic about the processes I went through and the skills I have learnt so far, within that short time frame. For the individual counselling process, I felt rejuvenated and aglow, each time I attended the counselling sessions.

**Validation of belief in therapy.** The experience of undergoing counselling allowed most of the participants to acknowledge that counselling was a beneficial process. Heidi (female, 22, preservice teacher) described her perception of therapy after her PDS experience, “After going through both counselling sessions, I deduced that counselling is a spa for the mind. It detoxed me from my problems and replenished me with positivity.”

Participants shared on how their perceptions of counselling became more positive after the experience. Sylvia (female, 21, volunteer youth worker) explained:

The group counselling changed my beliefs as I learnt that it can be as productive as an individual session if facilitated appropriately and if we were given equal

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amounts of attention and opportunities to share. Although group counselling is always stigmatized as therapies for people with mental health problems, I think that it can also be very beneficial even if it is just for things like gaining greater self-awareness.

### **Discussion**

In this study, researchers sought insight into the impact of personal therapy on the personal and professional development of Asian undergraduate preservice teachers and volunteer youth workers. An examination of participants' written reflections of their Personal Development Sessions (PDS), revealed twelve subcategories in four categories. The categories were linked using Strauss' and Corbin's (1998) paradigm to describe the central phenomenon of the participants' experience of PDS, as illustrated in Figure 1. Figure 1 shows how participants' PDS experiences comprised four key components which not only influenced the participants experiences, but were also influenced by the experience itself. The interaction of the first two components (causal and intervening conditions) explained how participants' preconceptions of counselling and preparedness, together with their counsellors' actions, influenced their behaviours during session (third component: Strategic Actions). Their active participation resulted in the fourth component of consequences of personal and professional growth. *[Insert Figure 1 here]*.

Existing literature does not focus much on participants' perceptions of personal therapy and the barriers that prevent them from using personal therapy as a source of help. Almost all the students were fearful and apprehensive about attending PDS because they had preconceived notions that they would be expected to share on themselves and their thoughts on a personal level with a stranger(s). Students' reluctance to disclose personal problems to others seemed to reflect Asian cultural attitudes and values that inhibit interpersonal openness (Tang et al., 2012). Asians are therefore unwilling to engage in counselling or psychological

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services (Tang et al., 2012). However, there was a change in the participants' perceptions, feelings and attitudes towards counselling before and after they attended PDS. They had a more favourable view of counselling and were more open to seeking counselling in the future, because they found their PDS experience useful. This finding is supported by the extant literature which show that after experiencing the benefits of personal therapy and / or personal development groups (Leva et al., 2009; Moller & Rance, 2013; Murphy, 2005; Von Haenisch, 2011), trainees in professional and paracounselling programs continue to attend personal therapy repeatedly at different times of their lives for a variety of reasons (Holzman, Searight, & Hughes, 1996; Norcross, 2005).

The participants experienced their counsellors as being effective when the latter embodied positive attributes and qualities, such as being warm, genuine, empathic, caring, affirming, and respectful, and having unconditional positive regard. The counsellors in this study also used skills and techniques deemed helpful to the counselling process, such as reflection, empathic listening, noting and affirming successes and strengths, exploration, and using appropriate self-disclosure. This finding is supported by research which shows that the positive attributes of therapists and the techniques that they use contribute positively to the alliance with clients (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003). It is also possible that the counsellors' positive attributes and qualities, and their guarantee of confidentiality given at the start of the sessions, helped reduce the Asian participants' sense of shame for revealing personal matters to strangers and increased their sense of psychological safety (Ang and Yeo, 2004, Kit, Teo, Tan & Park, 2017; Zane & Mak, 2003),.

However, participants also reported some negative experiences with their counsellors that had ruptured the rapport and therapeutic relationship, and hindered their openness in the counselling process. They felt disconnected from their counsellors when the latter did not sufficiently self-disclose their thoughts and feelings verbally or non-verbally. This finding is

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congruent with the results of meta-analysis which show that self-disclosure by counsellors leads to more favourable perceptions of the counsellor, better therapeutic alliance, higher retention of clients, and also elicited clients' own disclosure (Henrietty, Currier, Berman, & Levitt, 2014). In addition, there is the possibility of a cultural explanation for Asian clients' desire for counsellor self-disclosure. Research shows that Asians typically only discuss intimate matters with close acquaintances, and not with strangers, such as counsellors (Sue, Ivey, & Pedersen, 1996). Hence, by choosing not to self-disclose, PDS counsellors might have inadvertently given their Asian clients the message that they were strangers who were not obliged to reciprocate their clients' disclosure of intimate matters. Since reciprocity forms the basis of all relationships, the counsellors' lack of reciprocity might therefore have had a negative impact on their therapeutic relationships (Buunk & Schaufeli, 1999).

Although PDS was mandatory for participants, they reported having enhanced self-awareness, personal and professional growth. This is important because self-awareness of core beliefs and attitudes is integral to the growth of the trainee counsellor (Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Carruth, 2007). Another benefit of being placed in the position of the client, was that it gave the participants insight into the client's perspective and experience. This was vital for heightening their sense of respect and empathy for clients and their recognition of the importance of paying attention to creating a safe and supportive therapeutic relationship with clients. In addition, participants also gained validation that therapy indeed worked, even if their counsellors did not always behave in helpful ways. This finding is congruent with research that demonstrates that the personal therapy experiences help convince trainee counsellors that talk therapy is an effective psychological intervention, even when they have some negative experiences during personal therapy (Grimmer & Tribe, 2001; Murphy, 2005).

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It was also possible that the preservice teachers and volunteer youth workers benefitted from mandatory personal therapy partly because they were incentivized by the examinable components of coursework to participate actively during group sessions. In this process, their beliefs about counselling changed. This in turn could have a ripple effect on destigmatizing counselling for the Asian children and youth that they would work with in future.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

One limitation of the study was the generalization of the findings and theory beyond its current context and the relatively small sample group. Furthermore, the methodology depended heavily on the conceptual skills of the researchers and the results could be subjected to researchers' own biases. The researchers attempted to overcome the potential pitfall of researcher bias by adopting the rigorous structure of Strauss' and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory approach, and by using auditors. However, the role of the auditors in teaching the undergraduate course also meant that they too had some inherent biases which they had to set aside as much as possible.

The retrospective nature of the reflection papers could have distorted the accuracy of the memories of the students' thoughts, feelings and experiences. The fact that the reflection papers were examinable components, might have also led students to give socially desirable answers. Future studies could seek to explore the negative experiences of personal therapy to provide a more balanced view of the process. Future studies could also be both prospective and retrospective in nature, so as to track the changes in participants' views of personal therapy.

This study was conducted in hopes of throwing light into Asian preservice teachers' and volunteer youth workers' perceptions and experiences of personal therapy. However, it was not designed to explore the impact of their cultural background and values on their

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willingness to participate in therapy and their experience of the receiving counselling. This again could be another potential area for future research.

## **Conclusion**

With a greater focus on developing the social and emotional aspects of children and youth (Chong et al., 2013), there was a call for training of teachers and youth workers to include soft skills development and to implement these programmes and changes in their teaching pedagogy (McLaughlin, 1999), so as to enable them to build therapeutic bonds with children and youth (Allen & Ashbaker, 2004). The results from this study revealed a potential for the inclusion of personal therapy in counsellor training, to develop both professional and personal aspects of teachers and youth workers so that they could be more effective helpers for students.

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## Appendix 1

### List of Guiding Questions for the Post-Personal Development Sessions Reflection Paper

1. What are my feelings (not thoughts) about the individual versus group counselling process? (*The statement, “I feel happy” is about feelings, whereas the statement “I feel that the counselling process has been very helpful to me” is a thought.*)
2. What have I learnt about myself?
3. What did my individual and group counsellors do that was helpful or not so helpful for me?
4. How did my experience as a client in the PDS sessions influence my counselling style in the in-class role-plays?