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Making the road by walking: Using Role-Play and Instructor Feedback to teach Basic
Counselling Skills to Singaporean Trainee Educational Psychologists

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Abstract

This study focused on the experiential learning experiences of eight trainee educational psychologists (School Psychologists in the USA) from Singapore who participated in three role-play sessions during a two-day Basic Counselling Skills Training Program. Data collected from transcriptions of video-recorded sessions, a Focus Group Discussion session, and responses to qualitative questionnaires were analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's Grounded Theory. The results of this study revealed that Western-style counselling andragogies such as realistic role-plays and immediate instructor feedback could be used effectively to teach Singaporean Trainee Educational Psychologists basic counselling skills, and to broaden their understanding of the role of an Educational Psychologist. The study also revealed that the experience of failure in a role-play could be a motivator to change their practice both within and outside the classroom.

Keywords: Educational psychologists, School Psychologists, Singapore, basic counselling skills training, awareness, roles, andragogy.

In both the USA and Singapore, there has been a clear dichotomy between the roles of the school counsellor and the school psychologist, with the former focused on students' socio-emotional needs while the latter assessed and placed students according to their academic needs (Larson, 2008; Yeo, Tan & Neihart, 2012). Although this dichotomy has largely persisted, there have been calls in the USA for the diversification of the role of school psychologists to include the social-emotional needs of students (Cole, 2012). There has also been growing recognition in Singapore that children's academic progress is influenced by their socio-emotional functioning (Yuen, 2008). Since school psychologists have increasingly needed to work with school counsellors to help students and their families, in both preventive and therapeutic endeavors (Synder, 2012), they are usually placed in the same category as pastoral care personnel, school counsellors, counselling psychologists and clinical psychologists within the Singapore school context (Yeo, Tan & Neihart, 2012).

This expanding role of the school psychologist has also led to the need to expand the focus of initial training beyond administration and interpretation of psychological assessments, to include the skills of building good working alliances with parents, children and school personnel. Oakland and Hatzichristou (2014) mentioned that "personal qualities such as leadership, empathy, and acceptance of differences either must be present before students enter a school psychology program or should be developed during it" (p. 152) as these interpersonal skills are key to an Educational Psychologist's success in institutional settings.

The timing of such training is crucial because once school psychologists start work, they may have limited opportunities for meaningful professional development (Curry & Bickmore, 2012; Robertson, 2013). This is particularly the case in Singapore where there is a short supply of adequately trained psychologists who can provide clinical supervision to newly trained and hired staff (Yeo, Tan & Neihart, 2012). Hence, university programs providing School Psychology (known as Educational Psychology in Singapore) training were,

therefore, tasked with providing basic counselling skills training and supervision, that were directly relevant to the type of cases their students were most likely to encounter, in the shortest possible time-frame, so that the core areas of School Psychology training were not adversely affected. This challenge meant that counsellor educators would have to use counselling andragogies that could be used effectively given time constraints.

Much of the research conducted on counselling andragogies occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus far, the extant research suggested that didactic instruction was most effective when combined with experiential learning andragogies, such as role-plays (Barlow, 2004). As a result, counselling textbooks often recommended the use of the triadic or quadratic model of role-plays (Ivey, Ivey & Zalaquett, 2014). This model used one or two observers and the client. Feedback is provided to the counsellor after the role-play. In addition, Rabinowitz (1997) suggested that role-plays extended over the entire training period would be more useful than single session role-plays, as students could then experience the entire counselling process and experiment with the application of various counselling concepts, issues, techniques and ethical dilemmas, in realistic settings and with evolving storylines (Rabinowitz, 1997). Role-plays could also be used to train trainee counsellors to think spontaneously and creatively as they responded to the evolving counselling situations (Pishney, 2010; Ringstrom, 2001).

Despite the advantages of the role-play as a training tool, their efficacy was also limited by the acting abilities of the individuals tasked with portraying the clients (Weiss, 1986). Early researchers also noted that trainee counsellors playing the client role sometimes had difficulties maintaining appropriate boundaries between their client's problems and their own personal issues (Sommers-Flanagan & Means, 1987). In order to overcome this ethical issue, counsellor educators sometimes chose to play this client role themselves, or hired actors to do so (Fall and Levitov, 2002). However, instructors choosing to play the client role

needed to have co-instructors present to facilitate classroom dynamics and provide feedback on counselling processes and areas for improvement during the role-play (Rabinowitz, 1997), so that trainees could reflect critically on their counselling performance (Kit, Wong, D’Rozario & Teo, 2014b;).

It was also noted that most of the research done on counselling andragogies had occurred in the North American cultural context (Duan et al., 2011; Kit et al., 2014b). There was limited literature produced on the efficacy of such “Western-styled” andragogies in the Asian cultural context (Kit, Wong, D’Rozario & Bacsal, 2014a / 2015). A systematic search conducted via the Proquest and Ebscohost databases using the descriptors, “School” “Counselor”, “Training”, “Singapore”, produced only 3 papers from 2002 to 2012 commenting on the history of counselling in Singapore, but there were no papers on the actual andragogies used to train school counsellors in Singapore. Despite this paucity of documentation on counsellor training in Singapore, there was anecdotal evidence that short, single session triadic role-plays are occasionally used by some counsellor educators in the classroom across private and public institutions in Singapore.

The limited literature on counselling training in Asia did revealed that Asian trainee counsellors tended to be less participative in the classroom, particularly when Western counselling andragogies requiring extensive verbalization and self-disclosure of thoughts and feelings were used (Duan et al., 2012). This could be due to the fact that Asian cultural values tended to emphasize modesty in thought, action, and humility, as well as respect for authority figures – behaviours which discouraged extensive verbalization and self-disclosure (Ibrahim et al., 1997; Ramisetty-Mikler, 1993, Shea & Yeh, 2008). Hence, Duan et al. (2012) argued for the indigenization of counselling training practices for the Asian counsellor education context.

In contrast, Kit et al.’s (2014a / 2015) study found that Western-styled andragogies of experiential learning using authentic in-class and on-line support groups could be used to

teach group counselling concepts effectively. This efficacy was noted with a multicultural group of Asian Trainee counsellors, particularly when the nature of training was explained to the trainees in advance (Kit et al., 2014b). However, it must be noted that Kit et al.'s (2014b) study focused on the use of students' self-disclosure within authentic support groups where group members disclosed their personal challenges, rather than role-play scenarios which were created to fit students' learning needs.

Therefore, it was not known how comfortable beginning Asian counsellors or educational psychologists might be in the role-play setting, given that their cultural practices could potentially impede their ability to portray the emotionally expressive client, and assert themselves in the counsellor's role if their instructor acted as the client. This study was, therefore, aimed at understanding the efficacy of role-play and instructor feedback as suitable andragogical approaches for the training of Singapore Educational Psychologists (EPs) in basic counselling skills within a compacted two-day course. The researchers sought to answer this research question through a qualitative exploration of eight trainee Educational Psychologists' subjective experiences during a two-day Prepracticum basic counselling skills training program.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in the study were selected using purposive and convenience sampling methods. Participants were Masters-level educational psychology students. They included eight women within the age range of 25.75 to 32.33 years ($M = 28.24$ years). There was an ethnic mix of seven Singaporean Chinese and one Singaporean Indian. All participants were admitted into the Masters program because they had Bachelor degrees in psychology, excellent levels of English language fluency, and relevant work experience in psychological testing or classroom teaching. Five participants had no exposure to any form of counselling

prior to attending the course, while three participants said that they had conducted basic counselling as part of their work with parents and children.

Informed consent. The researchers explained that the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) had granted ethics approval for the research project to proceed if students consented to participating in the study, and having all proceedings during the course video-recorded. The first author explained to students that the purpose of the study was to inform the effective teaching of basic counselling skills in the future. As such, all video recordings of students' role-play sessions, questionnaires, class discussions, and Focus Group Discussion would be analyzed by the researchers. Following the completion of the data analysis, all video recordings, course artifacts and questionnaires, would be archived in a secure location in the University for a period of 10 years, as required by the IRB. Students' personal information and identities would be kept confidential, and pseudonyms would be used to refer to them in any publications that might arise from the study. The students were also informed that since this new course structure was experimental in nature, the university would not charge any course fees or assign any grades to the students' performance during the course. All this information was also stated in the consent forms which the students were given. All eight students gave their written consent to participate in this study. Following their consent, the video cameras in the room were turned on.

Procedures

Participant selection. All Masters-level educational and counselling psychology students were required to take the core module of Theories and Techniques of Counselling as part of the Masters Program. At the beginning of the module, the instructor interviewed each student on their prior work experiences, taught them the components of the Intake Interview using didactic teaching methods, and evaluated their basic counselling skills efficacy using

triadic role-plays of intake interviews. Students who lacked prior counselling experiences at work or who, despite having some prior counselling experience, still struggled during the triadic role-plays, were selected for the prepracticum counselling training program. The result was that the entire cohort of nine Trainee Educational Psychology students were selected for the training program. However, only eight students attended the training, as the ninth student was on medical leave during the training period.

Course structure. A combination of didactic teaching, turn-taking role-play sessions and class discussions were used in this two-day course. Details of course structure and content may be found in *Appendix A*. The eight participants sat in a U-shaped arrangement in the university's group counselling room, so that they could view slides projected onto the screen during didactic teaching segments of the course.

The role-play scenario was broken into three role-play sessions, i.e. the Intake Interview, Counselling session and Delivery of Psychological Assessment Results. The first author played the role of a "client" whose child was having significant difficulties in school. She sat in the middle of the open side of the U-shape. Participants played the role of the Educational Psychologist tasked with obtaining the client's agreement to having a psycho-educational assessment done on her child, and with delivering the results of the assessment. They took turns to interview or counsel the client for five minutes during each of two or three rounds in each role-play session. At the end of each five minute turn, the next participant would continue the interviewing or counselling process.

There was only one instructor (first author) present during the first role-play session. She would step out of the client's role only when students became stuck for approximately 5 minutes in the role-play, to give feedback and suggestions centered on the basic counselling skills that were the focus of the first segment of the course. During the second and third role-play sessions, the co-instructor (third author) was present, and she gave immediate feedback

whenever students became stuck. Her instruction was focused on the basic counselling skills taught in the didactic teaching segment of the session, as well as those taught during earlier sessions. Details of the role-play scenario and participants' reactions to each role-play segment are described in *Appendix B*.

Data collection. The course was held in the largest group room of the school's counselling centre, which was also a practicum site for the Masters program. As such, the room was equipped with two built-in video cameras, which provided a 360-degree view of the room. The video recorder was turned on throughout the course and Focus Group Discussion. Transcripts of these recordings allowed researchers to study students' reactions to the proceedings, such as verbalization of thoughts, opinions and reflections during the class discussions and debrief sessions. Class discussions were facilitated by the first author on the first day, and by the first and third authors on the second day. These took place at the beginning of each segment, and at the end of each role-play session. At the end of the two day program, a Focus Group Discussion was also conducted solely by the second author.

In addition to the video recordings, students were asked to complete a short questionnaire listing down their prior work experiences, learning needs and expectations of the course, after they had given their consent for the research to proceed, and before the first didactic teaching segment of the course. At the end of each of the four segments of the course, students were asked to complete the Post-Training Questionnaire.

Data sources. The data collection produced four data sets for this study: (1) Transcriptions of all video-recorded didactic teaching, role-play and end-of-session discussions; (2) Pre-training questionnaire; (3) Post-training Questionnaires Sessions 1 to 4; and (4) Transcriptions of video-recorded Focus Group Discussion sessions. Since there were multiple data sources, Table 1 was created to provide clarity regarding the naming conventions and the protocol for data citation

Data analysis. Approximately 12 hours-worth of data were generated from the study. The authors used NVIVO 10.0, a software used to help analyze qualitative research. Each research team member independently analysed all data sources. Each transcript or questionnaire was openly coded for key words or phrases which represented the most elemental unit of meaning such as a thought, feeling or action (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The emergent patterns in each data source were then studied for recurring themes in an iterative fashion. Open coding was initially used to identify emerging, predominant themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the second analytical stage, similar themes across the data sources were compared and citations tallied (Patton, 2002). A citation refers to a particular statement that contains a recurrent theme throughout the transcript.

It was at the second stage of the analytical process that the researchers realized that the categories were essentially structures and processes which had led to certain outcomes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In order to explain how the central phenomenon of counselling skills training experiences had occurred, these structures and processes needed to be linked to form a theory. The researchers decided to set the categories within the paradigm provided by Strauss' and Corbin's (1998) axial coding, as it provided the most logical explanation for the central phenomenon. Strauss' and Corbin's (1998) paradigm had three main components: (1) conditions, (2) strategic actions / interactions, and (3) consequences. *Conditions* were essentially "the structure or set of circumstances or situations, in which phenomena (were) embedded" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 129). *Strategic actions / interactions* 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). When linked, the three components described the situations, sequence of events and outcomes that formed the central phenomenon of the trainee EPs' training experience.

The team decided that a numerical frequency count of citations across the various data sets would be more useful in noting trends with regard to what participants perceived as useful andragogies and key learning points, rather than a frequency count by number of participants. The research team, moreover, focused on the major themes identified in the transcripts. As such, the general focus of this article was to develop a grounded analysis based on the participants' perceptions of useful andragogies and key learning points. The team decided that only themes with ten or more citations which represented most of the participants would be explored in detail in the paper.

Research Team, Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Research team. The research team consisted of three doctoral level researchers. The first and third author co-instructed the class, with the first author also acting as the client during the three role-play sessions. The second author only came into the classroom at the end of the course to conduct the focused group discussion. Neither first nor third authors were present during the Focus Group Discussion (FGD).

The first author is a Singaporean of Chinese descent with nine years of counselling and psycho-educational testing experience in school, university and clinical settings in Singapore, and seven years of experience as a counsellor / school psychology-educator in the university, at the time of data collection. The second author is of Filipino descent with 15 years of counselling experience in community and school settings in the Philippines and Singapore, and six years of experience as a counsellor-educator in the university. The third author is of European descent with five years of counselling experience in community settings in the USA and Singapore, as well as one year of experience as a counsellor-educator in the university.

Trustworthiness. In order to increase trustworthiness of the results, several triangulation procedures were used (Flick 2009). To ensure consistency of results across data sources, participants' retrospective reflections and thoughts in the questionnaires and Focus

Group Discussion, were checked against transcripts of participants' expressed thoughts and feelings during sessions, as well as the researchers' field notes from the pre and post-debrief sessions. This cross-checking revealed that participants' responses were consistent across data sources.

To address the issues of researcher bias, after the first and second analytical stages, the three researchers reviewed each other's findings, and discussed the validity of the themes as a team until a consensus grounded in the data was achieved. Finally, the three researchers also compared the results against those found in the current literature on initial counselling training.

Reflexivity. The authors were well aware that their prior experiences with students in the Masters program, and their dual roles as lecturers and researchers in this course, could bias them towards viewing the data in a positive manner. Open and honest conversations about their thoughts and feelings proved essential in helping researchers set aside any expectations and biases that they had during the data analysis process.

Results

The pretraining results indicated that participants preferred five andragogical approaches: role play (7 citations); didactic teaching (5 citations); observations (4 citations); classroom discussions (1 citation); and instructor feedback (1 citation). In contrast, the posttraining results indicated that only the role-play and instructor feedback made a significant impact on participants' learning process, as each of these methods garnered more than 10 citations from participants, while didactic teaching and observations received less than 5 citations each. Hence, the results section will focus on the main categories, namely, (1) Role-play, (2) Instructor feedback and (3) Key learning points, which arose from the combination of these two andragogies. A summary of helpful instructional methods may be found in Table 2.

Participants' experiences were located within the context of the prepracticum counselling training program. This program was primarily influenced by use of two main instructional methods of Realistic Role-Play and Instructor's Feedback, each of which created its own circumstance (context) within the larger classroom environment. Each of these circumstances comprised two interacting conditions, i.e., the causal and intervening conditions, which in turn informed participants' strategic actions. These strategic actions produced consequences. The connections of these three categories are represented graphically in Figure 1, and will be detailed below.

Realistic Role-play

The circumstance of the realistic role-play was created by the interaction of participants' *Expectations* (Causal Condition) of training and their level of *Readiness* (Intervening Condition) to participate in the Realistic Role-Play. These interacting conditions in turn influenced their decision to experiment with the basic counselling skills [*Experimentation* (Strategic Action)]. This strategic action had an *Impact on their Future Behaviour* (Consequences), and they also obtained some *Key Learning Points* (Consequences).

Participants opined that realistic role-plays were a useful method for helping them to overcome their fears of dealing with highly emotional clients. Mabel explained, "We probably come with no information, we would actually have to think on our feet. It would be like a real life situation." (FGD), and this was perceived by Lana to be, "the hindering portion" for her role-play performance (FGD). At the end of the course, they acknowledged that the role-play was challenging to manage. Octavia explained, "The parent actually is real you know we meet her every day I mean regularly and erhm but we feel uncomfortable. The things that we learn to say were very practical help (for) us to overcome that fear." (FGD)

There were a total of 25 citations from participants regarding their realistic role-play expectations, experience, and its impact on their self-awareness, learning and practice. As a result, the following themes emerged.

Causal condition: Training expectations. Participants cited experiential training as the best way to meet their learning needs. For example, Bailyne stated that “I still have a lot more to learn erhm...so I think that (role-play) will be more helpful for me” (PTD).

Intervening condition: Lack of preparedness. Despite their training expectations, they were unprepared to participate in the first role-play session. Camelia explained “We didn’t really have the chance to sort of discuss with another person and (the instructor) just threw us a situation.” (FGD). The lack of adequate preparation for the role-play provoked frustration in the initial round, as Camelia explained, the students “kept repeating the same [ineffective]) thing over and over again” (FGD). According to Lana, this repetition occurred because, “We couldn’t find a lot of things. We confronted all our inadequacies and our confidence [was affected].” (FGD) Mabel explained that having to take turns with her classmates to counsel the client was difficult as, “they may not have a very good idea where to go or how to continue” (FGD).

Intervening condition: Evaluation-provoked anxiety. The participants were stressed by their perception of being evaluated by their instructors and peers during the role-play. This was despite the knowledge that there would be no grades assigned to their role-play performance. In fact, they became more conscious of their thought processes and their perceived skills deficits during the role-play. Gabriela explained, “I think the thing that was holding me back was really the fear of evaluation and I think being watched by people even though I knew I was not being graded.” (FGD)

Strategic actions: Conscious use of counselling skills. The participants’ anxiety and diminishing confidence in their ability to perform prompted them to work harder at using the

counselling skills that they had been taught to help them to confront their fears. Becky explained that she kept reminding herself during the role-play sessions, “Oh, okay. I must be conscious of saying this thing.” (FGD)

Consequences: Impact on learning and motivation to change practice. At the end of the third role-play session, the participants acknowledged that the role-play served to promote greater reflection of the inadequacy of their Educational Psychology practice prior to the training, their realization of clients’ needs and learning of how basic counselling skills could be used to meet those needs, as well as their motivation to change the way they worked with their clients. For example, Faith reflected,

In real life, I think I might have maybe avoided certain questions or avoided going down certain path because I wouldn’t know what the mom or the parent would say....but the session had brought me to realize that we have to acknowledge certain things, we get to validate certain things that we want to go through and, and that in itself is stressful. But we we still have to deal with it, not something that we should avoid.” (FGD)

Lana further emphasized that merely listening to lectures on basic counselling skills would not have been as helpful to them as participating in the role-play,

If we had done this differently and we just sat there and (the instructors) talked us through everything, I don’t think that we would have experienced such a great impact and we wouldn’t have felt like “I really want to change how I practice as a psychologist.” (FGD)

Instructor Feedback

The circumstance within which the instructional method of Instructor’s Feedback resided was created by the interaction of participants’ *Expectations* (Causal Condition) of

training and their *Receptivity* (Intervening Condition) to Instructors' Feedback. This circumstance in turn influenced their decision to learn [*Learning* (Strategic Action)], which influenced their behaviour [*Impact on Current Behaviour* (Consequences)], and contributed to *Key Learning Points* (Consequences) gained.

Participants found that the immediacy of the feedback was an important factor in its usefulness, as it reduced their anxiety level, increased their awareness of the dynamics of the counselling session, allowed them to recognize their mistakes while they still remembered them, and make corrections on the spot. Lana explained, "I think the immediate feedback was really good so at the end when each of us finished, that was really good because everything is still fresh in our mind." (FGD)

There were 14 citations from participants about the usefulness of receiving feedback from instructors and peers on their role-play performance, particularly on the second day, when both instructors were present during the role-play sessions. As a result, the following themes emerged.

Causal condition: Training expectations. At the start of the course, only one participant, Gabriela, noted that she would find feedback from instructors to be useful (Pre-Q). None of the other participants mentioned or expected receiving immediate feedback from instructors.

Intervening condition: Feeling stuck. Participants reported feeling stuck during the first role-play when there was only one instructor present. This was because the instructor had to play both the role of instructor and client. Camelia described her first role-play experience as having "no direction" (FGD). Similarly, Gabriela felt that if she had more guidance, she "wouldn't keep asking the same question" (FGD). Participants' attributed their sense of feeling stuck to their possessing only theoretical knowledge and minimal to no actual counselling experience. Mabel summarized the group's opinions, "I think that having gone

through the theory and models in counselling, we now realize that the skill we actually lack the most was how to counsel clients.” (FGD)

Strategic action: Accepting feedback from instructors. Participants found that the feedback given by the co-instructor who was observing them during the second role-play session was a turning point in their learning experience. They became more aware of what they had done wrongly, and could make immediate corrections. In contrast, they received limited feedback during the first role-play session as only one instructor was present and took on the dual role of instructor and client. The instructor was then unable to shift roles frequently enough to provide constructive comments and timely guidance. The participants also reported being able to view the case from an alternative perspective with the help of the co-instructor. Mabel explained:

I think having someone else in the room that we could seek guidance from,

I think that will be the difference between the second day and the first day.

So when we are stuck, there will be someone to provide help. (FGD)

Consequence: Reflection on performance. As with the role-play, the feedback the students received facilitated their personal reflection of their beliefs about their roles as Educational Psychologists, clients’ needs and their behaviours towards clients. Camelia explained that the feedback, “made me realize my own preconceived assumptions whenever I push the parent. So that was really good.” (FGD) Similarly, Lana noted, “Generally I think it helps to reflect a lot on what on my own gaps as a psychologist are: what I’m doing and what I should be doing, things like that.” (FGD)

Consequence of Realistic Role-play and Instructor Feedback: Key Learning Points.

The participants discussed their key learning points and noted these down at the end of each the four sessions, both verbally and in writing. Their key learning points may be found in

Table 2. The combination of the Realistic Role-play and Instructors' Feedback allowed participants to learn some basic counselling skills and understand their relevance as could be seen in the following themes.

Attending to the client. Participants made 78 citations with regard to attending to the needs of clients and validating their emotions. They noted that prior to participating in the role-play sessions, they had not understood the need to attend to clients' feelings, and had chosen to avoid doing so, as they already had insufficient time to complete the tasks at hand. Octavia summarized this during the second role-play debrief:

I think I was driven very much by time and speed. I find this to be mostly ineffective and the intervention process is just left hanging, you know. So the parents are uninvolved, unengaged, they kind of don't know what to do. They just leave the intervention to the school to implement. (DS4)

Camelia further explained to the instructor who acted as the "client" how the first two role-play sessions provided illumination on the value of attending skills:

Yesterday, I was struggling to understand how attending to you would help me achieve my goal. So it was kind of very hard to take off the EP hat. I wanted to get the information I needed for the intake interview. But I found that today's (focus on) attending to you, a lot of information came very naturally. I think a big learning point was that if I'm too focused on my goal, I really will miss the point. I mean even as a teacher I was very guilty of not empathizing enough with the parents. (DS3)

Focusing on the positive by using complaint-free talk. Another key learning point that garnered 30 citations from participants was the need to focus on the positive during sessions. Participants cited the startling difference between the first and second role-play sessions, which resulted in very different outcomes.

During the first role-play session when they were receiving limited instructor feedback, their conversation had been problem-focused and the client was unable to move beyond talking about her unfortunate life circumstances. In contrast, during the second role-play session, the co-instructor directed the participants to focus on positive aspects of the client's situation, and this resulted in goal attainment. Mabel summarized her experience:

It was a very big difference from yesterday's session, I now see that with depressed clients, if you try to remain positive, and try to get her to remain positive, we got so much more information than when you were just talking about the negative. (DS3)

Empowering clients. The need to empower clients was an important key learning point for the participants. There were 21 citations which focused primarily on the need to work together with clients in generating solutions for their problems, rather than telling them what to do. During the second role-play debrief session, Gabriela explained that Educational Psychologists often needed to present themselves as experts, and how empowering clients could be more effective:

I think for me what struck me the most is really that as a counsellor, as an EP, we can see that we really have to put in a lot of effort not to come across as an expert, but I think in this process it's so different? The suggestions and solutions should come from the parent herself or the clients themselves, then there's more ownership of the situation. They'll be more willing to try it out." (DS3)

Clarity of language. There were 24 citations on the need to use language that was clear and easily understood by clients, particularly with parents who are coming from a low socio-economic status and have a low educational background. The EP trainees realized that

it was important not to make assumptions about their client's ability to understand their messages. Mabel explained the reason for unclear communication in the third role-play debrief session, "You assume that they understand but it seems they don't understand...I mean I haven't dealt with lower income and less educated families who may have trouble understanding and speaking English in the same way I do, so I also found it very hard to think of the appropriate term, to actually simplify it to such an extent that was very very difficult for me." (DS4)

Gabriela elucidated this point in her Post-Training questionnaire for the third role-play session, when she observed the need to avoid the use of "technical terms / jargon" to communicate with clients (PSQ3). Participants learnt that metaphors could be used to convey their messages. According to Baillyne, "I really like to use the metaphor (which likened psychological assessments to health checks) because I think it really drove home the point." (DS2)

Change in perceptions of the Educational Psychologist's role. There were 20 citations on how the course had broadened their understanding of the role of Educational Psychologists. The participants now recognize the importance of attending to the child's needs by engaging his/her caregivers in the intervention. Lana explained, "Through the role play, I learned that it's not just about assessment, identification, making a diagnosis yeah." (DS2).

Gabriela elaborated:

I think it's important to understand that while the primary client is the child, it's important to understand the parent, in the context of the system they are in, the family, the school, to get a more comprehensive, realistic understanding of the client and the issue he is facing. (DS2)

Discussion

In this study, the researchers attempted to answer the research question: How effective and efficient are the Western-style andragogical approaches of role-play and instructor feedback, for training Singaporean Educational Psychologists (EPs) in basic counselling skills? Research findings revealed three main categories and 14 themes. Please see Table 2 for a summary.

Useful Instructional Methods: Role-plays & Instructor Feedback

The Trainee Educational Psychologists (EPs) in this study appeared to possess some degree of self-awareness of their learning styles, and expressed a strong preference for role-plays that would allow them to try out the basic counselling skills which they had been taught in a didactic fashion. This preference could be attributed to experiences with clinical supervision in previous jobs, which allowed them to understand the importance of actually trying out new skills during the training process. In addition, although participants had already attended lectures on basic counselling skills, they were not aware how these skills could be applied effectively. This is consistent with literature indicating how counselling skills were most effectively learnt through a combination of didactic instruction and experiential learning (Barlow, 2004). It is, however, unclear why the majority of trainees did not cite instructor feedback as a training expectation, though they later reflected that it was very useful to their learning. One possible explanation could be that they might have expected feedback to be an inherent part of the role-play andragogy, as it is inherent in supervisory relationships and hence, they did not see the need to state it as a separate expectation.

The trainee EPs were also aware from prior work experiences that they needed to learn how to work with highly emotional clients. Their fears and learning needs were similar to that of trainee counsellors who often felt stressed and helpless when confronted by impasses during counselling sessions, and struggled with specific client behaviours such as a lack of

motivation to make changes in their lives, or crying (De Stefano et al., 2008, Rodolfa, Kroft, & Reilley, 1988).

Although the trainee EPs were aware of their learning needs, they were not fully prepared to engage in the role-play sessions. Their lack of preparedness might also have been exacerbated by their inability to enlist the cooperation of the highly emotional and resistant client during the first role-play session. Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) cited similar experiences among trainee counsellors who struggled with loss of confidence, anxiety and fear of the unknown when working with real clients. In addition, the lack of prior success also meant that they had essentially no previous knowledge that they could tap on to help them navigate this challenge (Haberstroh et al., 2007; De Stefano et al., 2008). Hence, dealing with an evolving role-play situation where their “client” was being played by their instructor, where they had no knowledge of the client’s issues, no control over which direction their classmates would take the client, and no way of predicting their client’s emotions, could have been frightening and anxiety-provoking for them. This finding was supported by research studies indicating that trainee counsellors often required predictability and certainty when working with clients, and sought to maintain control by following a preplanned structure (Kit et al., 2014b, Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). In this instance, it is also possible that the trainee EPs, who were former teachers and test administrators, were more accustomed to the structured and predictable work demands of following detailed lesson plans and the standardized rules of test administration. Under such circumstances, they naturally wanted more time to prepare for the role-play, so that they would feel more confident with their responses to the client.

The trainee EPs’ perceptions of being evaluated by their instructors during the role-play session was also stressful and anxiety-provoking. This finding was consistent with previous research which had shown that trainee counsellors tended to become very stressed when evaluated by more senior members of the profession (Ladany, Hill, Corbett & Nutt,

1996), particularly when they doubted their ability to do well and feared being judged for incompetency (Thériault, 2003).

Interestingly enough, the anxiety experienced by the trainee EPs in this study motivated them to consciously try to use the basic counselling skills that they had learnt, to manage the highly emotional client. This finding was unlike that of previous studies which had found that when beginning counsellors were anxious, they tended to experience speechlessness and lose the ability to intervene meaningfully (Duncan & Brown, 1996; Rønnestad and Skovholt, 2003). One possible reason for the difference in outcomes could be that the trainee EPs' prior failures made them more eager to learn ways of overcoming their fears. Another possible explanation could be cultural in nature, i.e., the trainee EPs' response to anxiety could have been fuelled by their fears of being viewed as incompetent by peers and instructors, thus causing them to "lose face". "Loss of face" is an important concept in Asian (particularly Chinese) societies, where individuals are perceived by others as having failed to meet essential requirements placed upon them by virtue of the social positions which they occupy (Zane & Mak, 2003). Hence, the need to "save face" could, therefore, have prompted their articulations about wanting to be better and wanting to improve, and motivated their subsequent attempts to apply what they had learnt to manage the role-play situation more effectively. This supposition was supported by organizational psychology research which suggested that Asian workers tended to work harder to meet assigned goals so that they could "save face" before their superiors (Kim & Nam, 1998). Norcross and Beutler (2011) also found that Chinese American mental health professionals who failed their licensure examinations coped with their failures and stress levels effectively by adopting the perspective that success was a matter of perseverance, and understanding some their own limitations (Norcross and Beutler, 2011).

The trainee EPs' openness to feedback from the co-instructor could have also been enhanced by their negative experiences of getting stuck during the first role-play when the only instructor present was unable to provide timely guidance while simultaneously acting out the role of the client. Hence, the role played by the co-instructor was pivotal as it served to reduce the stress level that the participants experienced. This readiness to accept constructive comments and feedback may also be a reflection of Asians' deference to the authority of a superior. In so doing they were not only being respectful to their instructors (Shea & Yeh, 2008), they were also able to enhance their chances of success in dealing with the difficult client, and "restore face" (Kim & Nam, 1998) which had been lost in the first role-play session. Hence, the stark contrast between the first and second role-play sessions, in the forms of minimal vs maximal guidance, higher stress vs lower stress levels, and failure vs success, could have inadvertently promoted greater receptivity by the trainee EPs to their co-instructor's feedback. This also highlights the importance of having at least two instructors in a role-play where one instructor is acting the part of the client (Rabiowitz, 1997).

The trainees' experiences prompted them to reflect on their past practices with highly emotional clients, and motivated them to change the way they worked. This finding was supported by research which showed that less acculturated American Chinese professionals tended to become more motivated to improve on their prior performance, after they were subjected to mid-ranges of subjective distress, became more self-aware of their difficulties, and experienced a reduction in stress when they received help (Norcross & Beutler, 2011). The results of this study also shows that the realistic role-play, which is a Western-styled andragogy, could indeed be effectively used within the Asian context to teach counselling skills and prompt reflection on both recent actions (Schon, 1983, 1987), past experiences, and beliefs (Paris, Linville, & Rosen, 2006), thereby motivating behavioural changes. However, it might be helpful to indigenize the role-play to the Asian cultural context (Duan et. al's, 2011)

by including an moderately stressful element of failure, with scaffolding provided in subsequent role-play sessions, so as to enhance the Asian trainee EP's or Counsellor's motivation to learn.

Implications for Counsellor and Educational School Psychology Educators: Key Learning Points

The combination of role-play and feedback andragogies resulted in several key learning points for the trainee EPs. One of these was the recognition and understanding of the importance of attending skills. Prior research in counsellor education had found that anxious trainee counsellors often failed to use silences and pauses to pace their conversations with clients, thus preventing clients from processing thoughts and feelings, and hastening the premature exit process (Chen & Giblin, 2008). However, unlike the trainee counsellors in Chen and Giblin's (2008) study, the trainee EPs in this study had chosen to be problem-focused because they wanted to accomplish their tasks within the time frame which had been given to them. Hence, they failed to attend to the client during the first role-play session. They only understood the reason for their prior failures in enlisting their clients' cooperation, after they experienced success in achieving their goals with the use of attending skills in the second role-play session.

Another key learning point for the trainee EPs was the utility of focusing on the positive by using complaint-free talk. This finding was supported by the literature on strengths-based counselling, which showed that problem-free talk helps build therapeutic alliances with clients as it externalizes the problem rather than locates it within the client (Sharry, 2004). In addition, strengths-based approaches had the effect of empowering clients by instilling hope that they could improve their own situations by exercising choices to make changes, and control the outcome of their actions (Epstein et al., 2003). This was another key learning point for the trainee EPs in this study, as they discovered through the role-play

process that empowering their client was more helpful in enlisting cooperation, than taking the expert stance. This finding was supported by recent literature which showed that counsellors tended to be perceived by clients as authority figures because of their expertise and knowledge (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009), and they could reduce client resistance by choosing to affirm and encourage the clients as they took the lead in solving their problems (Kit, Wong, D'Rozario & Bacsal, 2014a / 2015).

Meier and Davis (1993) had also found that lack of clarity in communication was commonly experienced by trainee counsellors who did not know how to speak or summarize their messages to clients briefly and succinctly – a finding which was evident in this study. The trainee EPs learned that their language not only needed to match that of their clients' style and level (Kit & Teo, 2012), they also needed to be sensitive to the cultural nuances of the environments in which they were operating (Dutt & Kit, 2014; Kit, Wong, D'Rozario & Teo, 2014b).

The role-play sessions successfully facilitated a change in trainee EPs' perceptions of their professional roles from one focused solely on assessment and placement to that of attending to and intervening in the broader context within which their clients operated in. This training goal was in line with the widening role of the EP in Singapore and the USA (Synder, 2012; Yeo, Tan & Neihart, 2012; Yuen, 2008). The results of this study also demonstrated the power of experiential learning methods in changing students' perceptions of the subject matter (Kit et. al., 2014b).

The results of this study seemed to indicate that it might be helpful for Asian trainee EPs to first experience failure before success, as it might enhance their understanding of the importance of applying basic counselling skills and concepts in their work. Hence, it might be helpful for educators to consider including role-play sessions with minimal guidance before

introducing didactic teaching of desired skills and role-play sessions with guided feedback from instructors.

Moving Forward on the Road that was Made

Following the end of the compacted two-day basic counselling skills course, all eight participants were tasked with using their new skills in a 40-hour counselling practicum, before embarking on their 400-hour educational psychology (psycho-educational assessment and placement) practicum. During the counselling practicum, participants provided personal development counselling to trainee teachers who were learning and experiencing basic counselling skills for the first time in an undergraduate basic counselling skills elective. Although the undergraduate course artifacts, such as trainee teachers' quantitative feedback (60-item basic counselling skills questionnaire) and personal reflections, have not yet been analysed, preliminary evidence suggests that the eight participants performed well in using the basic counselling skills. Anecdotal feedback from both Counselling Psychology and Educational Psychology supervisors also indicate that the eight participants exhibited higher levels of empathy and worked more effectively with difficult clients, compared to their predecessors.

Limitations

It is unclear if the selection criteria for participating in this course, i.e., a lack of counselling experience and expertise, might have influenced how participants felt about taking this course, their perceptions of their own efficacy as counsellors and their subsequent performance in the role-play. This might be an area for investigation in future research.

Although the students did not mention that it was awkward to "counsel" their instructor during the role-play, there is the possibility that their role-play performance might have been affected by this fact. Future studies might wish to explore how students are

affected when their role-play “clients” are played by instructors, students or professional actors.

It is also possible that the retrospective nature of self-reports could have resulted in distorted or inaccurate memories of feelings and incidents, although the researchers attempted to reduce this likelihood by using multiple sources of information, obtained at different times before, during and after the training process. Nonetheless, there is the possibility that participants’ perception of being evaluated by instructors, might have influenced them to give feedback in a socially desirable manner and ascribe more positive outcomes to the course than warranted.

This study was focused on the use of the Western andragogy of role-play and feedback in a Singaporean classroom context. Although Asians as a whole share certain cultural beliefs such as collectivism, there are also sub-cultures, as Asia comprises people of many ethnicities and religions (Culture of Asia, 2015). Hence, it might not be appropriate to generalize the findings of this study to all Asian students across the world. Moreover, it must be noted that this study was not designed to examine the specific cultural beliefs of its participants, and hence, the authors were only able to make broad deductions of the impact of culture on their actions from the content of participants’ feedback, discussions and reflections, as well as the very limited literature on the Asian culture on behavior within groups and organizations. It is, therefore, recommended that future research be conducted to examine this in greater detail.

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Appendix A

Lesson Plan

Day and Time	Session Type	Content
Day 1 Morning 9am to 12.30pm	Role-Play Session 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 9.00am to 9.30am<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Completion of pretraining questionnaire- Pretraining Discussion• 9.30am to 10.15am Didactic Teaching:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Intake Interviewing- Attending Behaviour,- Questioning- Paraphrasing and summarizing• 10.15am to 11.45am Turn-Taking Role-play session 1• 11.45am to 12.15pm

Day and Time	Session Type	Content
		<p>Debrief for Session 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12.15pm to 12.30pm Completion of Post-Training Questionnaire for Session 1.
<p>Day 1 Afternoon</p> <p>1.30pm to 4pm</p>	<p>Case-Conceptualization Discussion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1.30pm to 3.00pm Case Conceptualization Discussion of mum's issues vs child's issues using Systemic Approach • 3.00pm to 3.45pm Debrief for Session 2 • 3.45pm to 4pm Completion of Post-Training Questionnaire for Session 2
<p>Day 2 Morning</p> <p>9am to 12pm</p>	<p>Role-Play Session 2</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9.00am to 9.45am Didactic Teaching: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interpreting - Confronting - Communicating feelings & Immediacy - Self-Disclosing - Interpreting • 9.45am to 11.15am Turn-Taking Role-play session 2: Working with Mum on her feelings and concerns with the goal of helping mum to accept the need for her child to receive help. • 11.15am to 11.45am Debrief for Session 3 • 11.45am to 12.00pm Completion of Post-Training Questionnaire for Session 3

Day and Time	Session Type	Content
Day 2 Afternoon 1pm to 5pm	Role-Play Session 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1pm to 1.45pm Didactic teaching of information giving, delivering bad news, enlisting Cooperation Skills, Delivering Bad News. • 1.45pm to 3.15pm Turn-Taking Roleplay: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Post-Psycho-education Assessment results delivery of results to mum. - Helping mum come to terms with the results, deal with her feelings and work on interventions. • 3.15pm to 3.45pm Debrief for Session 4 • 3.45pm to 4.00pm Completion of Post-Training Questionnaire for Session 4 • 4.00pm to 5.00pm Focus Group Discussion

Appendix B **Role-play Scenario**

Background

The first author portrayed a character, Mrs Lim. Mrs Lim displayed a variety of behaviors which the first author had encountered in the course of her clinical work with parents. Mrs Lim was a stay-at-home-mother, who only had elementary school education. Prior to the birth of her eldest son, 10 year old Jerry, she worked as a waitress in a neighbourhood canteen, and had many friends at that time. However, since becoming a stay-

at-home-mother, she had become rather lonely and isolated from her friends. This was because she had to focus all her time on bringing up her son, looking after her aged parents'-in-law who lived with her, and managing the household. Her husband, Mr Lim, possessed a vocational certificate, and worked very long hours as an air-condition technician.

Mrs Lim had been struggling with Jerry's continual refusal to do his school work and his teachers' complaints, since he was in kindergarten. As a result of Jerry's continual examination failures and misbehaviours, her husband and parents'-in-law continually criticized her for being a bad mother. They blamed her lack of education and intellectual ineptness as the reason for Jerry's situation. Throughout the role-play, she continually said that she was afraid that her son was "stupid like (her)." Mrs Lim thought that she had already tried her best, and felt very lonely because there was no one she could turn to for help.

Role-play session 1. When participants playing the role of the Educational Psychologist informed her that Jerry might benefit from a psycho-educational assessment to determine if he had any learning disabilities, she started to cry, and talked repeatedly about her own problems. She was reluctant to give consent to the assessment process.

Participants' reaction. The participants repeatedly tried to refocus the interview to Jerry's developmental history and learning problems, but met with limited success. They did not attempt to attend to Mrs Lim's feelings or concerns, except on rare occasions when the instructor stepped out of role to guide them, so that they could proceed with the role-play.

Role-Play Session 2. At the start of the session, Mrs Lim continued to be resistant to having Jerry assessed. She cried as she explained how shameful it was for her to have a "stupid" child like Jerry.

Participants' reaction. Under the guidance of the co-instructor who gave them immediate feedback and alternative perspectives of the situation, the participants started to attend to her feelings, and listen to her fears, Mrs Lim spontaneously revealed the reasons for

her resistance to the assessment process. By the end of the session, they had managed to persuade her to agree to the assessment.

Role-play session 3. This session occurred after Jeremy's assessment was completed. The results were worse than expected, as Jeremy was found to have mild intellectual disability instead of a learning disability. Participants were therefore tasked with breaking the bad news to Mrs Lim, and working with her in strategizing an intervention plan for Jeremy. Mrs Lim was devastated by the news because it meant that her worst fears of being the person responsible for Jeremy's intellectual disability had come true.

Participants' reaction. With the help of the co-instructor, participants continued using the basic counselling skills they had learnt in the previous two sessions and the current session. They were eventually able to move Mrs Lim from dwelling on her sorrows to solution finding.