

The experience of COVID-19: assessing the Malaysian counselors in training coping strategies

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic also had a psychological impact on various levels of society including trainee counselors. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the coping strategies employed by trainee counselors to overcome their challenges within their internship during COVID-19. This study is a quantitative study and was conducted among 106 final-year trainee counselors enrolled in a bachelor's counseling program at the University Malaysia Terengganu (UMT). There were two instruments used in this study, consisting of a sociodemographic questionnaire and the Malay Brief COPE (MBC) scale. The findings indicate that emotion-focused is mostly used by counselors in training with a mean value of 28.96 (SD=4.891); the mean of problem-focused was 18.08 (SD=3.080); and the mean of avoidance coping was 26.12 (SD=5.341). The study's dataset can be used by counselor educators, the Malaysian Board of Counsellors, clinicians, and academicians to improve the effectiveness and competencies of trainee counselors completing internship during the adverse period.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The world has experienced a very drastic phase of change when every single person has to fight their own battle with the COVID-19 pandemic that started in 2020 [1]–[3]. The COVID-19 also known as novel coronavirus is a severe acute respiratory disease [4] that is categorized as a health crisis and has various impacts on human life until today [5], [6]. COVID-19 has caused people panic and fear because the virus has spread so rapidly and widely throughout the country. Even COVID-19 has caused an increase in the number of deaths daily. Based on the most recent statistics, there are more than 500 million confirmed COVID-19 cases worldwide, of which more than 6 million have been fatal [7]. In addition, COVID-19 also spawns some negative effects on their psychological well-being [8], [9].

COVID-19 has indeed caused various areas of human systems to become paralyzed, and education areas were among the worst impacted [10], [11]. Previous literature reported that stress [4], [12]–[14]; anxiety [15]–[17]; and depression [4], [16] were the highest cases recorded among university students, especially during the quarantine period. Since the wake of COVID-19, life has turned upside down when all the universities and colleges had to be shut down, and all the face-to-face teaching and learning processes were terminated immediately [12], [15]. They were feeling uncomfortable of having to abandon their fellow friends or relatives, of suddenly having to restrict their freedom, developing fear regarding the spread of the

disease, and feeling confused as they grapple with total changes in their academic systems [2], [18], [19]. Unfortunately, trainee counselors tend to receive the same impact, as they were also university students [1], [5], [12], [13]. Despite the extremely drastic change, trainee counselors have to adapt fast to the change [13]. This is because, even as a trainer, they still have to face real clients during training as required by the Malaysian Board of Counsellors to acquire the registered counselor license. All these demands and challenges surely cause them to feel deskilled, anxious, stressed, and fatigued as well [12]. Consequently, the quality of counseling services provided to clients can also be affected [5], [12]. If the situation is not taken into account, it will ruin the reputation and credibility of the counseling profession in this country.

Hence, the issues and challenges among the counselors-in-training must be dealt with through some healthy means. As suggested by Agha [20], one effective means to manage these mental problems or negative psychological impacts due to COVID-19 were through coping strategies. According to Lazarus [21], coping can be defined as an effort by an individual to adapt and manage the stressful situations they encounter that change over time. Previous literature indicates that coping strategies are very important on trainee counselors as they found it very difficult to handle all the pressures, particularly in the internship environment [10], [13]. Thus, the objective of this study is to identify in much detail, each type of coping strategy employed by Malaysian trainee counselors who undergo internship training during the COVID-19 pandemic.

– Counsellors in training during COVID-19

As asserted by Martin *et al.* it was a tougher challenge for trainee counselors undergoing internship training in the time that the COVID-19 pandemic had hit [22]. They not only had to manage their own pressure due to COVID-19, but they also had to bear the responsibility of helping clients who were facing the same situation. This is such a heavy and arduous task to shoulder, and supervisor support plays a pivotal role in ensuring that the counselors-in-training can afford to complete their training successfully [22]. Other than that, researchers claimed that there is empirical evidence to support the fact that both high-quality supervision practices and effective supervisors can result in positive outcomes for healthcare workers and organizations within the COVID-19 period [22]. Buxton and Schuder explored how the supervisor can support and help the helpers to live in adverse times [1].

The results indicate that supervisor can channel their support to assist and facilitate the counselors-in-training during COVID-19 through a supervisory relationship that consists of parallels and disclosure, reframing, containment and holding, rehearsal space, boundaries, and meaning-making [1]. These forms of support are very important as one of the efforts in increasing the coping skills of the internship or training practice students that were impacted due to the pandemic [1]. Next, Suarez *et al.* found that personal attributes, social impact, academic impact, and coping strategies have become the central themes to the resilience of counsellors-in-training facing COVID-19 [5]. Under the theme ‘academic impact’, students stated that they noticed the efforts exerted by the supervisor in making changes to adjust to the new environment [5]. Efforts like this, are substantial as a form of support in making sure that the counsellors-in-training can endure the precarious situations due to COVID-19.

– Coping strategies among counselors in training during COVID-19

Coping strategies’ refers to an individual’s ability to handle pressure-inducing situations [23]. It is key to protect one from experiencing burnout, as well as mental and psychological problems [24]. Currently, coping strategies have gained attention due to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic and the impending lockdown have caused a lot of people especially university students, to experience mental health problems [15], [25], [26] mentioned that the use of coping strategies during the outbreaks of viruses were perceived as crucial to help university students reduce high levels of anxiety.

However, Sundarasan *et al.* [27], found that even if university students faced stress and anxiety during COVID-19 and movement control order (MCO), unfortunately, they lacked the coping strategies needed in dealing with these psychological impacts on them. Hence, studies related to the need to empower coping strategies among university students have found its way under the limelight. Kamaludin *et al.* [15] found that most of the university students in Malaysia used acceptance and mental disengagement coping strategies compared to humanitarian and seeking social support coping strategies. Meanwhile, Mohammed *et al.* [25], assessed the most common coping strategies applied among university students during the lockdown. According to the results of the study, the majority of the students choose social withdrawal as their coping mechanism with anxiety symptoms.

Rathakrishnan *et al.* [16], confirmed in their study that university students employed problem-focused coping types as they perceive it to be more efficient in dealing with depression. In contrast, they used emotion-focused coping such as venting, use of emotional support, humor, acceptance, self-blame, and religion, to deal with their anxiety or stress. Another study by Johari *et al.* [14], indicated that as all the respondents are Muslim, they had used positive coping, such as prayer (religious coping), positive reframing, active coping, acceptance, and seeking emotional support.

In the trainee counselor context in Malaysia, there were two studies that were conducted on trainee counselors' coping strategies they were by Subhi and Che [12], [13], both of the studies found that Malaysian trainee counselors experienced stress following COVID-19. The results also indicated that when counsellors-in-training experience a higher level of stress, they have the tendency to use avoidance-focused coping strategies [12]. In contrast, counselors-in-training prefer to use emotions-focused coping strategies, for instance seeking social support at a low-stress level [12], [13].

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This is a descriptive design to identify the type and level of coping strategies employed by the trainee counselor during internship training. The data were obtained using the survey method by distributing the questionnaires along with the informed consent through Google Form to the respondents. Respondents were estimated to take about 30 to 45 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

2.2. Participants

The study participants were the final year counseling students from all states in Malaysia who studied at University Malaysia Terengganu (UMT). However, counseling students who are not at degree level; and who study outside UMT are excluded from this study. Using purposive sampling, a total of 106 counseling students or counselors-in-training were selected in this study. All participants were undergoing internships in several organizations to meet the requirements in acquiring the counseling hours as set by the Malaysian Board of Counsellors during the period of COVID-19.

2.3. Instruments

The questionnaire used in this study was divided into two sections. The first section was a sociodemographic questionnaire that included gender, ethnicity, state, and internship setting. The second section was the Malay Brief COPE instrument consisting of 28 items to measure an individual coping strategy used to cope with the challenges in life. This instrument had 3 subscales consisting of emotion-focused (positive re-interpretation, acceptance, humor, religion, and use of emotional support); problem-focused (active coping, planning, and use of instrumental support); and avoidant (self-distraction, denial, substance abuse, behavior withdrawal, expression of negative feelings, and self-blame). All these types of coping strategies adopt a 4-point Likert Scale namely 1 (never do it), 2 (rarely do it), 3 (do it often), and 4 (do it very often). The instrument Malay Brief COPE has high internal consistency with the value of Cronbach's $\alpha=0.83$ [28]. However, the researcher has re-tested the reliability instrument in this study and the Cronbach's α value=0.84. Based on the reliability test result, the items of the Malay Brief COPE were considered as having excellent reliability as the total alpha value accepted was more than 0.60.

2.4. Ethical procedures

The researcher obtained permission and ethical clearance from the UMT Research Ethics Committee. The UMT Research Ethics Committee has reviewed and approved the research project (UMT/JKEPM/2022/105).

3. RESULTS

Table 1 shows the findings of the descriptive analysis of the demographic information of the trainee counselors. A total of 106 respondents with a breakdown of 21 (20%) males and 85 females (80%) were recruited for this study. Regarding race, the highest respondents in this study were Malay 99 (93.4%), meanwhile the lowest respondents were Chinese 1 (0.9%). According to respondents' states, majority respondents from Kelantan 37 (34.9%), followed by Terengganu 19 (17.9%), as the lowest respondents from Perak, 1 (0.9%). Other respondent states can be referred in Table 1. For the internship setting, there were 9 categories involved in this study: i) statutory agency 1 (.09%); ii) teacher education institute 1 (.09%); iii) non-government organization 11 (10.4%); iv) government organization 48 (45.3%); v) semi-government organization 1 (.09%); vi) polytechnic 1 (.09%); vii) school 13 (12.3%); viii) semi-government 1 (.09%); and x) university 29 (27.4%).

From the descriptive analysis in Table 2, it indicates the mean distribution of the coping strategies employed by the respondents. There were three main coping strategy subscales namely: i) emotion-focused; ii) problem-focused; iii) and avoidance. However, the results show that emotion-focused is mostly used by the counsellors-in-training with the value of $M=28.96$ and $SD=4.89$ followed by avoidance with $M=26.12$ and $SD=5.34$, and the least used is problem-focused, with $M=18.08$ and $SD=3.08$. The highest mean coping

strategies obtained under emotion-focused subscale was religion $M=6.91$ and $SD=1.25$. The second highest was positive re-interpretation with $M=6.47$ and $SD=1.48$, followed by use of emotional support with $M=6.08$ and $SD=1.63$, then acceptance with $M=5.91$ and $SD=1.44$.

Table 1. Demographic information of the respondents

Demographic information		Frequencies (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	21	19.8
	Female	85	80.2
Race	Brunei	1	0.9
	Bugis	1	0.9
	Bumiputra	1	0.9
	Chinese	2	1.9
	Iban	1	0.9
	Malay	99	93.4
	Tidung	1	0.9
State	Johor	10	9.4
	Kedah	13	12.3
	Kelantan	37	34.9
	Melaka	3	2.8
	Pahang	8	7.5
	Perak	4	3.8
	Penang	1	0.9
	Sabah	4	3.8
	Sarawak	2	1.9
	Selangor	5	4.7
	Terengganu	19	17.9
	Statutory agency	1	0.9
	Teacher education institute	1	0.9
	Non-government organization	11	10.4
Internship setting	Government organization	48	45.3
	Semi-government organization	2	1.8
	Polytechnic	1	0.9
	School	13	12.3
	University	29	27.4

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of coping strategies

Coping strategies subscales	Mean	Standard deviation
Emotion-focused coping strategies	28.96	4.89
Positive re-interpretation	6.47	1.48
Acceptance	5.91	1.44
Humor	3.59	1.64
Religion	6.91	1.25
Use of emotional support	6.08	1.63
Problem-focused coping strategies	18.08	3.08
Active coping	5.75	1.31
Planning	6.29	1.37
Use of instrumental support	6.05	1.58
Avoidance coping strategies	26.12	5.34
Self-distraction	6.33	1.32
Denial	3.57	1.43
Substance abuse	2.42	1.08
Behaviour withdrawal	3.42	1.59
Expression of negative feelings	6.08	1.50
Self-blame	4.31	1.84

M=mean; SD=standard deviation

As for the humor, $M=3.59$ and $SD=1.64$ this was the lowest score of mean in the emotion-focused subscale. Meanwhile, as for the second subscale of coping strategies which is problem-focused, planning obtained the highest mean score with $M=6.29$ dan $SD=1.37$, followed by use of instrumental support with $M=6.05$ and $SD=1.58$. Active coping was ranked with $M=5.75$ and $SD=1.31$ in the problem-focused subscale. Other than that, self-distraction was at the first hierarchy in the avoidance subscale with $M=6.33$ and $SD=1.32$, expression of negative feelings with $M=6.08$ and $SD=1.63$, and $SD=1.50$, followed by self-blame with $M=4.31$ and $SD=1.84$ respectively. As for the three last coping strategies in the avoidance subscale, denial had $M=3.57$ and $SD=1.43$, behavior withdrawal with $M=3.42$ and $SD=1.59$, and substance abuse showed the lowest mean with $M=2.42$ and $SD=1.08$.

4. DISCUSSION

Our results show that the majority of prospective counselors use all types of emotion-focused coping. These findings are consistent by [12], [13] which indicated that the emotion-focused strategy was the coping strategy most frequently used by the trainee counselors. Furthermore, both studies reported that the emotion-focused strategy was chosen primarily for stress management. This is undeniable when there are multiple roles that need to be played in any given time, making the situations for the counselors-in-training undergoing internship more difficult compared to novice counselors [29]–[31]. The study is also supported by Johari *et al.* [14], where it indicated that most of the university students in their studies used religious coping such as prayer, positive re-interpretation, and acceptance, as well as seeking emotional support more frequently during COVID-19.

Apart from religion, the majority of the trainee counselors also employed positive re-interpretation coping to battle the effects of the COVID-19. Positive re-interpretation can also be defined as meaning-making that reflects on how to ‘respond’ rather than ‘react’ to the situations arising which often shifted the feelings of powerlessness to empowerment [32]. Our study also found that the emotional support is the third highest type of coping used by the majority of the trainee counselors after religion and positive reinterpretation. Notably, our findings are consistent with Johari [14] and Putri [33] who found that university students gain emotional support from those closest to them such as family members during the pandemic. In a similar vein, acceptance is also among the coping type used by the majority of respondents in this study. This is in line with the study by Kamaludin *et al.* [15], indicating that Malaysian university students practiced more acceptance coping during COVID-19 lockdown. This represents Asian cultural values, instead of the resistance to the stressors they opted by accepting and accommodating the stressors [15].

Meanwhile, as for the problem-focused coping subscales, the results in this study indicate that the trainees used all types of coping in this subscale consisting planning, active coping, and instrumental support. Similarly, Subhi and Che [12], [13] also found that problem-focused coping strategies are used to handle the stress among trainee counselors during the COVID-19 lockdown. As a counseling student, there were a lot of techniques in the counseling syllabus learnt by counselors-in-training throughout their study [13]. Besides that, the instrumental support, known as a seeking social and psychological support was another type of coping that is frequently used under the problem-focused subscale in this study. This is somewhat different from the finding of [15] where the frequency of university students to seek for social support is very low. Interestingly in this study, as for avoidant coping strategies, self-distraction and expression of negative feelings types are found to be more frequently used by trainee counselors.

Suarez *et al.* [5] reported that most of trainee counselors have been turning to work or other activities to take their mind off things. Consequently, the results also parallel with Buxton and Scudder[1], that the trainee counselors also use expressions of negative feelings during their internship journey in the COVID-19 pandemic phase. Meanwhile, this study also found that, as for the rest of the avoidant coping strategy types such as denial, behavioral withdrawal, self-blame, and substance use, they were at the lower level of use. These results contradict with Rathakrishnan [16] and Putri [33] showing that university students in their study highly engage in avoidant coping that consists of denial, substance use, and behavioral disengagement. The results differed as the respondents in our study consist of counseling students. As mentioned earlier, in our study they had learned a lot of skills on how to manage stress or any drastic changes in life in order to help clients [1], [12], [13]. Despite the challenges they are facing due to COVID-19, the trainee counselors are clearly showing positive traits, as shown in the results.

It is assumed that their training and experience as trained counselors enabled them to cope effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic. The information and knowledge received by trainee counselors help them identify the best way to self-care for themselves [5], [12], [13]. The positive trait displayed by the trainee counselor shows their positive qualities in becoming a competent counselor [5], [12]. In addition to the positive traits of the trainee counselor, the counseling curriculum design must also be considered to prepare the future good counselor [29], [34], [35]. In Malaysia, the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) and the Malaysian Board of Counsellors have the responsibility of approving counseling program offers. There are certain credit hours required by the Malaysian Board of Counsellors [35] for trainee counselors to fulfill their internship hours and counseling sessions. The trainee counselor can overcome obstacles during their internship, provided they have clear regulations from the authorized body and good supervision from the supervisor [29], [30].

The positive characteristics of trainee counselors are crucial not only during COVID-19 but also after, as the impact of COVID-19 has affected all aspects of life development. COVID-19 impacts people of all ages, from young to elderly, including women and children, as they are at greater risk of abuse [36]. Trainee counselors with positive coping mechanisms can provide psychological support to those in need. Unemployment, economic recession, and economic crisis are all consequences of COVID-19 [37]–[39]. The trainee counselor who survived COVID-19 will possess empathy and comprehend the situation of those

affected. Career counseling services will be offered by them during their internship to aid those whose careers have been affected by COVID-19. COVID-19 has also caused psychological problems such as health anxiety, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and depression [39]. More negative emotions are being displayed by people than positive emotions [40]. Mental strain in the general population, individuals, and professionals increased following the post COVID-19 epidemic [41]. With the emergence of these situations, people need more assistance to help them cope with the post COVID-19 pandemic [6], [42].

4.1. Limitations and suggestions

There are several limitations that have emerged during this study. This study is a cross-sectional study, done on counsellors-in-training undergoing internship training during COVID-19. Thus, this study only adopts the descriptive design, and the variables of this study are limited only to the coping strategies. Future studies may need to use a more advanced study design in determining the potential factors that have a connection or contribute to the selection of coping strategies adopted by counsellors in training. It is difficult to compare the level of stress during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is even unfair to underestimate the scale of stressors faced by current counselors-in-training. Taken together, rather than comparing the scale of stressors during and post-pandemic COVID-19, it is much more nuanced understanding to consider the interplay of people personality and the type of coping strategies. People personality is quite stable over time, and people do have habitual coping responses toward stress.

Therefore, the type of coping strategies used in the era of COVID-19 or in the current situation is quite invariant due to personality influences. Another important central question is: does prolonged COVID-19 pandemic impact general population in equal ways? There is a vast and substantial literature that has proven that some population groups appear to thrive even better during pandemic COVID-19. Therefore, the effects of the pandemic on substantial group of individuals are quite heterogeneous, but the traits and quality to adapt with the stressful situations are identical to specific people. Given stable personality influences on coping responses, the study of coping strategies among counselors-in-training during COVID-19 is still relevant and essential, so that effective interventions can be tailored to alleviate their well-being.

5. CONCLUSION

All in all, the counsellors-in-training still require some sort of coping and adaptation with inevitable day-to-day negative (even positive) events and realities. The psychological adjustment also seems common for so many people due to the COVID-19 crisis. Adapting to post-COVID-19 requires the prevention and intervention of professional workers including trainee counselors. The present study highlights a shortcoming in previous research as it provides some additional, more detailed information about the coping strategies used by counselors-in-training during the recent pandemic. This study assessed, the use of three subscales of coping strategies namely emotion-focused, problem-focused, and avoidant coping was assessed. Overall, it was found that the trainee counselors used a variety of coping styles. Nevertheless, there are some types of coping that are most commonly used, such as religion, positive reinterpretation, use of emotional support, acceptance, planning, use of instrumental support, active coping, self-distraction, and expression of feelings. The development of coping strategies is crucial after COVID-19, especially for prospective counselors. Due to their positive characteristics during COVID-19, it is assumed that they are able to cope with challenges after COVID-19.

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