

# The Ethics Knowledge among Counsellors in Malaysia

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**Abstract --** Counsellor ethics is an important element in counsellor training. Ethics course is one of the compulsory courses in the counseling program as proposed by the Board of Counsellor, Malaysia. Ethics knowledge is able to help counsellors to behave ethically when practising counseling in an organisation. The aim of this study is to identify the knowledge pattern of counsellor ethics in Malaysia and the difference in the knowledge of counsellor ethics based on the demographic factors like age, gender, experience and counsellor's qualification. This is a quantitative study using descriptive study design. A total of 355 counsellors had taken part in this study. The study instrument adopted is *Ethical and Legal Issues in Counselling Questionnaires-Revised (ELICQ-R)*. The result of the score of the ethics knowledge of counsellor is at moderate and high level. The result also shows that there is a significant difference between counsellor qualification and the counsellors' ethics knowledge in Malaysia. Other than that, there is no difference in the ethics knowledge based on the demographic factors like age, gender and the experiences of the counsellors in Malaysia. All in all, counsellors in Malaysia still have to increase their ethics knowledge so that they can deliver an effective counseling service to clients. The emphasis on ethics courses in the counseling program also has to be enhanced so that ethical counsellors can be produced in the future. Other than that, high ethics knowledge can help counsellors in behaving ethically.

**Keywords --** Counseling, Counsellor, Counsellor's ethics knowledge, ELICQ-R

## I. INTRODUCTION

Ethics is a group of principles that stresses on the behaviour emphasising on an appropriate behaviour by an individual or group (Corey, Corey & Callanan, 2003). According to Bradley and Henricks (2008), ethics serves to be the main characteristic to determine if a client will or will not be affected, physically, mentally or psychology. Counsellor has to have a good ethics knowledge so that ethics knowledge can be applied effectively. Ethics knowledge can also help counsellors to behave in an ethical manner. Other than that, ethics knowledge can also help counsellors to make ethical decisions when involved in ethical conflict when giving counseling service in their respective organisation. Knowledge is something that an individual has and something that one does (Magnusson & Nilsson, 2003). Ethics knowledge in the counsellor training

curriculum is instilled in the professional identity field covering the understanding about the professional functions, including history, the role of the organisational structure, ethics, legislation, licensing, standardization and accreditation. Ethics knowledge is also included in other fields like assessment, group work, career development, human growth and development, assisting relationship, social diversity and culture, program research and assessment (Education Technical and Training Committee, Board of Counsellor, 2003).

## II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Ethics knowledge is important to counsellors in counseling practice. (Solmonson, Roaten dan Sawyer, 2011) Study shows that ethics knowledge leaves an impact to counsellor's ethical behaviour (Kocher dan Keith-Spielgel, 1998). In Malaysia, there are few counsellors who serve in schools that do not have intensive a degree-level training in counseling. Some of the counsellors are appointed by the State Education Department to become guidance and counseling teachers in schools. (Ministry of Education, 1996). There is no intensive training for four years in counseling so these teachers do not have adequate training in ethics knowledge.

This lack of knowledge is faced by the counsellor in the conflicts. The work by Lambie and Hagedorn (2010) shows that ethics knowledge and legislation throughout ethics course can increase the ethical decisions that can guide trainees' actions. This current work demonstrates how important the ethics knowledge is for a counsellor so the decisions made are suitable and ethical and do not become detrimental to any party.

## III. LITERATURE STUDY

An effective counsellor needs to have a strong knowledge of ethics and have the skills to integrate the code of ethics with the situations and diverse types of clients. The counsellors in service also cannot give an excuse that they do not know or they do not learn anything about counselling ethics. Counsellor's training curriculum also determines that the subject of ethics is the core subject (compulsory) under the component of professional identity. Other than that, graduate counsellors at least have some knowledge about ethics because almost all counselling courses will be given the exposure regarding ethics throughout the program (Education Technical and Training Committee, Board of Counsellor, 2003). Thus, counsellors should have the knowledge of counselling ethics to guide them in facing with the dilemma of ethics throughout the counselling practice.

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A counsellor cannot say that he or she does not know about, or no one informs them about, ethics because counsellors are responsible for knowing, understanding and implementing the principles dictated in the Counsellor Code of Ethics. The ethics subject is also taught as early as Bachelor Degree at some universities in Malaysia as core subject and there are universities that also include the ethics component in other subjects (Education Technical and Training Committee, Board of Counsellor, 2003). Conclusively, ethics serves to be the main responsibility of the counsellor and without the code of ethics and its implementation counsellors can adversely affect the clients and the profession itself.

Counsellors have to have knowledge in counselling ethics, code of ethics also ethical consideration especially when facing ethical dilemma. According to ACA Code of Ethics (2014), the counselling educator or lecturer is responsible in giving the exposure and helping students and supervised students to be more sensitive to ethical responsibilities. Other than that, these educators also have the responsibility to expose ethical considerations across the curriculum. This exposure does not encompass the ethical subjects only but other counselling subjects are also provided, like individual counselling, family and group counselling, counselling theories and so on. Thus, serving counsellors cannot escape from the excuse of not knowing or not learning the current ethics during training because they have been exposed by educators at the university level concerning ethics and ethical consideration in counselling.

Meara, Schmidt and Day (1996) said that counsellors with no knowledge and skills in counselling can become detrimental to the client. Although Meara et al. (1996) does not specify knowledge and skills that the counsellor has to have, knowledge like ethics is crucial so any adverse effects can be prevented. The ethics knowledge that is important to be known by counsellors as suggested by CACREP cover several aspects like professional identity, ethical and legal terms, ethical-decision making principles, confidentiality, suicide and client violence, counselling and education records, educational and civil right laws, counsellor development and wellness and discrimination laws and ethics (Ieva, 2010).

In Malaysia, Education Technical and Training Committee, Board of Counsellor (2003) has outlined the standard and qualification of the counsellor training in the counsellor training curriculum encompassing the areas of appraisal, group work, career development, human growth and development, assisting relationship, professional identity, social diversity and culture and research and program evaluation. Although in Malaysia, there is no specific emphasis as outlined by CACREP but every field in the counsellor program curriculum endorsed by the Board of Counsellors need to lay an emphasis on ethical consideration and legislation so that counsellors are able to know the most appropriate consideration when serving as counsellors in various organisations.

Counsellors are not perfect professional members. There are counsellors who have yet to practise the code of ethics in their service. Khele, Symons and Wheeler (2008) state that the highest number of complaints throughout the ten

years from October 1996 to January 2006 revolved around various codes of ethics was 60 percent (50 cases). This shows that there were a lot of complaints from clients involving counselling code of ethics. The code of ethics is vital in giving guidance to the counsellors to practise ethical behaviour. A lot of complaints about ethics show the extent of weakness of counsellor's ethics knowledge and this can impact on his or her behaviour when facing any dilemma or ethics conflict when giving counselling services in various organisations.

Behun (2007) has conducted a study about the capability of the undergraduates in counsellor education in making ethical decisions based on the ACA ethical standard. The study data is taken earlier on in the semester (pre-test) and in the last test (post-test). The study finding shows that there is a better increase from pre-test to post-test. The five-week ethics course helps the potential counsellors a great deal in improving their ethical decisions. Ethics counsellors can add to the knowledge of the counsellor in the aspect of ethics where the knowledge from the course is found to be related in making ethical decisions among counsellors.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

This is a quantitative study using the descriptive study design. This involves 355 counsellors all over Malaysia. The study sample is selected using simple random sampling. The Ethical and Legal Issues in Counseling Questionnaire-Revised (ELICQ-R) questionnaire has been used in this study. According to Lambie, Ieva, Mullen and Hayes (2011), this questionnaire seeks to measure counselors' ethical and legal knowledge. This questionnaire comprises of 9 sub-scales or constructs, namely professional identity, ethical and legal terms, ethical-decision making principles, confidentiality, suicide and client violence, counselling and education records, educational and civil right laws, counselor development and wellness, and discrimination laws and ethics. This study analysis employs the t-test analysis and the One-Way ANOVA test.

#### V. RESULT

The result is divided into three sections, namely the pattern of counsellor's ethics knowledge, the counsellor's ethics knowledge score and the difference in the ethics knowledge based on counsellor's demographic factors in Malaysia.

##### ***Pattern of Counsellor's Ethics Knowledge in Malaysia***

Table I shows the pattern of ethics knowledge for counsellors in Malaysia. The data shows that only three construct obtained high mean which are professional identity (mean=2.58, S.D=0.67), ethical decision-making principles (mean = 1.50, S.D=0.63) and counselling and education record (mean=2.33, S.D=0.95). Other construct shows moderate mean which are ethical and legal terms (mean=2.04, S.D=0.82), confidentiality (mean=2.57, S.P=0.96), suicide and client violence (mean=1.94,

S.D=0.73), educational and civil right laws mean=2.05, S.D=0.82), counselor development and wellness (mean=3.06, S.D=1.12) and discrimination laws and ethics (mean=1.31, S.D=0.61). Results show that counsellors in Malaysia have mean score in moderate and high level.

TABLE I: THE PATTERN OF COUNSELLOR'S ETHICS KNOWLEDGE

Construct of Ethics knowledge	Mean	S.D
Professional identity	2.58	.67
Ethical and legal terms	2.04	.82
Ethical-decision making principles	1.50	.63
Confidentiality	2.57	.96
Suicide and client violence	1.94	.73
Counseling and Education Record	2.33	.95
Educational civil rights by law	2.05	.82
Counsellor development and wellness	3.06	1.12
Discrimination Law and ethics	1.31	.61
Overall	21.41	4.06

### The Counsellor's Ethics Knowledge in Malaysia

This section explains the ethics knowledge scores divided into low score (score 1 to 10), moderate score (score 11 to 20) and high score (21 to 30).

Based on Table II, the highest frequency is at the moderate score which amounted to 195 respondents or 54.9 percent of respondents have moderate score of ethical knowledge. However, almost half of the respondents or 146 people or 42 percent of respondents have high ethics knowledge score. Only 11 people or 3.1 percent of respondents have low ethics knowledge score. Result shows that more than counsellors in Malaysia have moderate and high score in ethical knowledge.

TABLE II: ETHICS KNOWLEDGE SCORE

Level	Score	Frequency	Percent (%)
Low	1-10	11	3.1
Moderate	11-20	195	54.9
High	21-30	149	42.0

### Difference of Ethics Knowledge Based on the Counsellor's Demographic Factors in Malaysia

To determine this, based on the demographic factors (age, gender, experience and qualification), the t-test and the one-way ANOVA test analyses are adopted.

#### Difference of Ethics Knowledge Based on Age of Counsellors in Malaysia

Ho<sub>1</sub>: There is no significant difference in the ethics knowledge based on the age of counsellors in Malaysia.

Table III and Table IV show the summary of the one-way ANOVA test for the difference in the ethics knowledge of

counsellors according to the age of respondents. The study finding shows that the mean score of the respondents for the age level of the counsellors is between 21 to 30 years (Mean=19.82, SD=3.72), 31 to 40 years (Mean=19.18, SD=3.67), 41 to 50 years (Mean 19.38, SD=3.65) and 51 years and above (Mean=18.51, SD= 3.37).

TABLE III: THE DIFFERENCE OF ETHICS KNOWLEDGE BASED ON THE AGE OF COUNSELLOR IN MALAYSIA

Age	Mean	S.D
21 to 30 years	19.82	3.72
31 to 40 years	19.18	3.67
41 to 50 years	19.38	3.65
51 and above	18.51	3.37
Total	19.45	3.75

The study finding shows that the null hypothesis is accepted where there is no significant difference between ethics knowledge and counsellor's age where the value of  $F(3,351) = 1.27, (p > .05)$ . This shows that there is no difference of the counsellors in terms of their ethics knowledge based on age. From the overall mean value of the respondents, all age categories of the respondents are not different in ethics knowledge. The mean of the respondents is as follows (Mean=20.03, S.D=4.09) and (Mean=21.79, S.D=4.00).

TABLE IV: THE SUMMARY OF ETHICS KNOWLEDGE DIFFERENCE BASED ON THE AGE OF COUNSELLORS IN MALAYSIA

	Variance Difference	dk	Squared mean	F	p
Among Groups	53.71	3	17.90	1.27	.283
In Group	4936.44	351	14.06		
Total	4990.15	354			

\*significant at confidence level  $p < .05$

#### Difference of Ethics Knowledge Based on Counsellor's Gender in Malaysia

Ho<sub>2</sub>: There is no significant difference between ethics knowledge and gender of counsellors in Malaysia

The independent sample t-test is done to identify the difference between ethics knowledge and gender of counsellors in Malaysia. Table V shows that the null hypothesis is accepted where there is no significant difference between ethics knowledge between male counsellors (Mean=19.89, S.P=3.72) and ethics knowledge of female counsellors (Mean=19.26, S.P=3.75) ( $t=1.46, dk=353, p > .05$ ). Result shows that there is no difference between male and female counsellor in term of ethical knowledge.

TABLE V: THE SUMMARY OF ETHICS KNOWLEDGE DIFFERENCE BASED ON THE GENDER OF COUNSELLORS IN MALAYSIA

	Gender	N	Mean	S.D	t	dk	p
Knowledge of ethics	Male	111	19.89	3.72	1.46	353	.143
	Female	244	19.26	3.75			

\*significant at confidence level  $p < .05$

**Difference of Ethics Knowledge Based on Counsellor's Experience in Malaysia**

Ho<sub>3</sub>: There is no significant difference between ethics knowledge and counsellor's experience in Malaysia.

Table VI and Table VII show the summary of One-way ANOVA test with regard to the difference in ethics knowledge according to counsellor's experience in counselling. The study finding shows that the respondents' mean scores for the period of experience is between below 5 years is (Mean=19.87, SD=3.41), 6 to 10 years (Mean=19.49, SD=3.73), 11 to 15 years (Mean=18.88, SD=3.86), 16 years and above (Mean=19.90, SD=4.37) and no experience in counselling (Mean=17.92, SD=4.55).

TABLE VI: ETHICS KNOWLEDGE DIFFERENCE BASED ON THE EXPERIENCE OF COUNSELLORS IN MALAYSIA

Experience (years)	Mean	S.D
Below 5 Years	19.87	3.41
6 Years – 10 Years	19.49	3.73
11 Years- 15 Years	18.88	3.86
16 Years and above	19.90	4.37
No experience	17.92	4.55
Total	19.45	3.75

Finding shows that the null hypothesis is accepted. There is no significant difference between ethics knowledge and counsellor's experience in Malaysia  $F(4,350) = 1.41, p=.228 (p > .05)$ . Based on the one-way ANOVA result, counsellor's period of experience from zero experience to experience more than 16 years does not differentiate counsellor's ethics knowledge in Malaysia.

TABLE VII: THE SUMMARY OF ETHICS KNOWLEDGE DIFFERENCE BASED ON THE EXPERIENCE OF COUNSELLORS IN MALAYSIA

	Variance Difference	dk	Squared mean	F	P
Among groups	108.32	4	27.08	1.94	.103
In groups	4881.83	350	13.94		
Total	5851.95	354			

\*significant at confidence level  $p < .05$

**Ethics Knowledge Difference Based on the Qualification of Counsellors in Malaysia**

Ho<sub>4</sub>: There is no significant difference between knowledge of ethics based on the qualification of counsellors in Malaysia

Table VIII shows the summary of the independent sample t-test to identify the difference between the qualifications of counsellors in Malaysia. The study finding shows that there is a significant difference between undergraduate qualification (Mean=19.20, S.P=3.79) and postgraduate qualification (Mean=20.11, S.P=3.57) for ethics knowledge in Malaysia ( $t=-2.27, dk=353, p < .05$ ). The null hypothesis is rejected. The outcome of the study shows that counsellors who have postgraduate qualification are different in terms of the aspect of ethics knowledge, compared to counsellor with postgraduate qualification.

TABLE VIII: THE SUMMARY OF ETHICS KNOWLEDGE DIFFERENCE BASED ON THE QUALIFICATION OF COUNSELLORS IN MALAYSIA

Variable	Kelayakan	N	Mean	S.D	t	dk	p
Knowledge of ethics	Undergraduate	255	19.20	3.79	-2.27	353	.041
	Post-graduate	100	20.11	3.57			

\*significant at confidence level  $p < .05$

VI. RESULT

**The Pattern of Counsellor's Ethics Knowledge**

Cannon (2010) states that the knowledge about ethics is critical because it can differentiate if the students (clients) receive appropriate service or otherwise. Apart from that, ethics knowledge can also distinguish if students are treated respectfully. Section H.1.a in the ACA code of Ethics (ACA, 2014) also states that counsellors have to understand the code of ethics also the code of ethics applied by other professional organisations, also the code of ethics that issue licensing and their certificates of membership. A counsellor cannot make the excuse that they lack the knowledge or understanding about ethics when they are accused of performing unethical behaviour.

Knowledge of ethics can also prepare counsellors in addressing difficult cases like suicide, abuse and cases involving the law. The study by Herman (2002) suggests that they are ready to face the issue of suicide but not really ready to be subpoena to appear as witness in the court proceeding. If a counsellor has high level of ethics he or she will be more prepared to face various challenges in practising ethics.

According to Hermann (2002), the counsellors who show that they are ready in issues involving disclosure of information regarding the counselling session, will be prepared to report cases of child abuse and determine if students are involved or not. With knowledge of ethics, counsellors are able to behave ethically and at least get to face various dilemma. Other than that, counsellor preparation with ethics knowledge through follow-up

education can prevent injury or adverse impacts in clients' cases like abuse, danger to the clients and suicide.

### ***The Difference of Demographic Factor and Counsellor's Ethics Knowledge in Malaysia***

The study finding shows that the counsellor's ethics knowledge does not differ based on their gender. Male and female counsellors are not any different in their counselling ethics knowledge. The finding is at par with Behun's study finding (2008) showing that gender does not impact the professional counsellor in their level of capability to apply ethics knowledge from earlier on to the end of the course conducted.

Counsellors in Malaysia comprise of those who have the undergraduate level like Bachelor Degree in counselling and undergraduates like Master Degree and PhD in counselling. The finding further shows that the null hypothesis is rejected and there is no difference between ethics knowledge based on the qualification of counsellor. Counsellors at the post-graduate level show higher mean compared to counsellors with undergraduate qualification. The work done by Luke, Goodrich and Gilbride (2013) shows that counsellor education helps the trainees to build and expand their knowledge and skills that fit to be practised more effectively. The main aspect prioritised in counsellor practice at school is to understand and to obey the Code of Ethics ACA 2014 and School Counsellor Standard Ethics, ASCA 2010.

However, in western countries, most counselling courses are offered at the post-graduate level only. In Malaysia, the counselling courses offered at the Bachelor Degree, Master Degree and Phd are provided at the Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu and a number of private universities all over Malaysia.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Ethics knowledge has to be given an emphasis especially in other counselling subjects such as in individual counselling, group counselling, marriage counselling, psychometric in counselling and other subjects in the counselling curriculum. Also, the emphasize on ethics course in counselling needs to be laid more comprehensively, so that trainee-counsellors in Malaysia can be given early exposure to address ethical issues in counselling. Other than that, there are still graduate counsellors whether at the Bachelor Degree level or Master level those are not endorsed by the Board of Counsellors (Malaysia). The Book of Counsellor Standard and Training (2011), a course of ethics is a core subject that needs to be professionally handled to form counsellors who have good identity, professionalism and ethics. Counsellors themselves need to be very careful in selecting study program so that the program chosen will have adequate training components so that ethics knowledge can be taught

and learned and applied in counsellors' lives when they work in institutions later on.

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