



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Need for Iranian Counselors for Iranian Undergraduate Students in Malaysia: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research was to study the need for Iranian counselors for Iranian undergraduate students in Malaysia. Five female undergraduate Iranian students were participants of the study. The researchers used one-on-one interview in order to have an in-depth understanding of the issue. Six major categories were identified in this research: psychological needs, trust, guidance, comfort, educational needs, and cultural needs. In conclusion, the participants had a strong desire for having Iranian counselors in Malaysia. Based on the present study, some suggestions were offered.

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Introduction

Recently, the number of international students in Malaysia has increased, and a large number of these students are Iranian (Madanian, Seyed Mansoor & Omar, 2013). Iranian students choose Malaysia for continuing their education because this is an Islamic country with high educational standards, low costs of living, great transportation facilities as well as easy visa processing (Al Arabiya, 2009).

Moving to a foreign country to study brings many potential challenges, and international students may experience acculturative stress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Leaving ones own country and entering a new place, especially for international students may cause homesickness (Woolf, Dryden & Strawbridge, 2003).

On the other hand, entering the university may induce additional challenges for international students. Transition to higher education incorporates a great deal of stress (Landow, 2006). Transition to higher education in a foreign country could have more psychological challenges, because students face two stressful situations, one the new country and two the new educational setting which is a university. Here, culture shock is regarded as a critical issue (Woolf, Dryden & Strawbridge, 2003).

Some students are able to experience this transition as a challenge to personal growth, but some other students are overwhelmed by the changes and experience emotional problems, amongst them depression which is an important mental health issue (Newman & Newman, 2009). Therefore, psychological and educational needs of those who study in foreign countries, especially undergraduate students are of immense importance.

The purpose of this research was to study the need for Iranian counselors among Iranian undergraduate students in Malaysia. A counselor is an educated and qualified person in the field of counseling or psychology who has a Masters or Ph.D degree. Undergraduate student means a member of a university or a college who has not taken her first degree.

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

- 1- Why do Iranian undergraduate students living in Malaysia need Iranian counselors?
- 2- How can Iranian counselors help Iranian undergraduate students?

The present study investigated the need for Iranian counselors among Iranian undergraduate students. This research focused on undergraduate female students. The rationale for studying female participants was that the first author of this article conducted psychological classes for Iranians at the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in

Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia). The number of females willing to attend these classes was more than the males. The female participants were more interested in counseling programs provided by the embassy.

When students enroll in an undergraduate course in a foreign university, they enter a new environment different from their country and different from their schools. Also, their age is different from Masters and Ph.D students. As Woolf, Dryden and Strawbridge (2003) have cited, international undergraduate students especially those who are in their first year of study, experience some problems such as homesickness and culture shock. Therefore, their perspectives could develop new insights on the issue of counseling.

To the authors' knowledge, the issue of the existence of an Iranian counselor for Iranian students living abroad has not been addressed in previous studies, especially in Malaysia. The results of the study can help policy makers to provide counseling for undergraduate students living abroad, and help undergraduate students to make use of counseling programs provided by counselors who are from the same culture. This may help students cope with their present situation and prevent future problems. Therefore, with the help of counselors from the same culture, international students may study in a better situation and eventually have more productive lives.

Methodology

Participants

Five female undergraduate Iranian students (named Sara, Maryam, Mina, Zahra and Minoo, not their real names) were participants of the study. They had finished their high school in Iran and had come to Malaysia for study in the university. The participants had been living in Malaysia for less than one year. Their fields of study were different. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and each participant understood they were free to withdraw at any time. Moreover, participants were assured that their identity would remain confidential and that anonymity would be maintained by the use of pseudonyms.

Instrument

The data of qualitative inquiry most often use peoples' words and actions. Qualitative research is a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants; asks broad, general questions; collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants; describes and analyzes these words for themes (Creswell, 2008).

To have an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon, we used one-on-one interview using open-ended questions with each participant at a time and place of her choice. One-on-one is a popular approach in educational research in which the researcher asks questions, and records answers from only one participant in the study at a time (Creswell, 2008).

Procedure

This study aimed at understanding the perspectives of Iranian female undergraduate students on the existence of Iranian counselors in Malaysia. This means that the researchers aimed at exploring how Iranian female undergraduate students perceive the role of Iranian counselors while studying at university. These students entered a new environment different from their country and different from their schools. Also, the age of this group was different from Masters and Ph.D students. Therefore, their perspectives could develop new insights on the issue of counseling.

After purposeful sampling, five Iranian undergraduate students were interviewed. The interviews were tape-recorded and later, the data were transcribed to verbatim. Through this study, the participants' perspectives on the topic were explored.

Interview questions were as follow:

- 1- Why do you need a counselor?
- 2- How can an "Iranian" counselor help you?
- 3- Why do not you talk to someone else?

Results

After obtaining words through interviewing the participants, the taped recordings were converted into text data. Then, the data were analyzed and coded. Through analyzing the data some themes emerged from this study. These themes are as follow: psychological needs, trust, guidance, comfort, educational needs, and cultural needs. Verbatim examples were used to illustrate the main aspects of the themes, and participants are identified by their pseudonyms in order to preserve their anonymity.

Themes

Psychological Needs

One important issue cited by the participants was the need for Iranian counselors for the purpose of psychological counseling. With transition to higher education in a foreign country, students may face psychological challenges. This is due to facing stressful situations: one is the new country with different culture, climate, language, and so on; and two the new educational setting which is the university. As Salehi (2009) cited, what is common among all immigrant youth, regardless of the issue of immigration, is that they leave behind some type of familiar belongings.

Asking why they needed a counselor, Sara said:

When you come abroad you are not the same person you were in your country. Your situation has been changed, and you live in a different condition. You do not have the same resources in your country. When you were in your country, you had old friends. You could trust them, because you knew them. When I came here I felt that I lost many things which I had in my country. Things like my relatives and friends, hobbies and favorites. I was sad. I wished a counselor who could help me feel better.

Maryam confirmed these words and said:

When I came here I needed guidance. A trustable person could be a good guide for first year students who have just come abroad.

Asking how can an Iranian counselor help them? Zahra replied:

Actually, when I came here I could not speak English well. It is better to talk to a country mate speaking the same language and having the same culture. He/she can understand me and I can understand him/her. While talking to a country mate you feel more comfortable.

Asking why they do not talk to someone else, Minoos replied:

I feel more comfortable talking to a person from the same language.

Mina confirmed these words, and said:

When I came abroad, I really could not trust others, even my country mates. I never knew them already, so how could I trust them in a short time? I can trust a counselor who is officially responsible for helping students.

These comments showed the participants' need for an Iranian counselor who could help them in feeling good, while staying in a foreign country for the purpose of study.

Trust

Trust is regarded as an essential issue in the field of counseling. Without trust it is impossible to have proper counseling. Everybody has uncertainty about whom to trust, how much to trust, and when not to trust. This is more important when a person needs help for more personal and private concerns.

As cited by all of the participants, a counselor who is officially responsible for helping students can be trusted. In the Iranian society, official persons are regarded as trustworthy people. According to the participants, official counselors can be trusted by students. Therefore, the issue of formality plays an important role.

Guidance

All participants referred to the issue of guidance. Guidance is needed by a large number of first year students, especially undergraduate students who live in a foreign country. There are too many students who live in foreign countries. Without appropriate guidance these students are unable to make proper decisions. Some of them would have to change their fields of study or their faculties and even their universities. Through appropriate guidance their questions could be answered, and they could make proper decisions.

Comfort

The official language of Malaysia is Bahasa Melayu, and English is its second language. English is also official for some purposes. On the other hand, Persian is the official language of Iranians and English is considered as a foreign language in Iran. Therefore, speaking English is not easy for many students who have just entered a foreign country. Some of the undergraduate students have just enrolled in English courses and could not speak English fluently. Speaking Bahasa Malau was not easy for a majority of Iranians, because they communicated with people in Malaysia just in English. Maryam said:

I actually can not speak English fluently. Even I do not understand some words which are spoken by the lecturers. This is not easy for me to do counseling with a person who speaks English. I can not speak Bahasa Malau. I just know some words of this language.

Speaking and listening play important roles in the process of counseling. Having difficulty in speaking English is a barrier in seeking help from a person who speaks English. Talking to a person in the same language seems to be more comfortable for a majority of people. Speaking the mother language is easier than speaking a foreign one.

Sara said:

When I speak Persian (the language of our country) I feel that the other person understands what I do mean. I do not have this feeling when I speak English.

When a young person enters a foreign country, there might be some unfamiliar words, issues, procedures, and so on which need enough explanation. This could be more understandable through speaking to a person in the same language. For international students who have just entered a country this issue seems to be more apparent.

Educational Needs

The issue of having Iranian counselors in Malaysia was important for all participants. An important issue cited by the students was the need for educational counseling. Two participants cited that due to the need for choosing or changing the field of study, they needed someone who was aware of different fields of study in Malaysian universities, and could help them choose or change their fields of study based on their interests and abilities. Zahra said:

My parents were unable to help me in choosing the best. I needed a person who was aware of the fields and the universities in Malaysia.

Supporting this idea, and also citing that entering a foreign university needs enough information and understanding, Minoo said:

When I came here, I was confused. I actually did not know how to choose the best field of study. I was interested in some fields, but I did not know that which one was more suitable for me.

Transition to higher education is challenging for a majority of first-year university students due to educational needs. This is more challenging especially for international students. They face a new environment with a different situation. All participants referred their educational needs to an Iranian counselor.

Cultural Needs

Paying attention to cultural issues is important in the field of counseling. As cited by the participants, counseling a person from the same culture is easier, and more understandable. The counselee can make decision based on his/her culture. Moreover, counseling a person from the same culture may help the counselee prevent culture shock.

There are student counseling services in Malaysia which help all students to cope with their problems, but Iranian students do not utilize these services. Some of them were not aware of the presence of these services and many of them believed that counselors of these centers are not Iranians and have different cultures. Therefore, they preferred not to refer to them.

Previous research indicated this issue. For example, Ang and Liamputtong (2008) found an underutilization of counseling services by international students attending an Australian university. One of the reasons was this belief that counselors would not have adequate cultural knowledge.

Discussion

According to the literature, transition to higher education is challenging for a majority of first year university students. This is more challenging, especially for international students, because they face an environment different from their country. The purpose of this research was to study the need for Iranian counselors among Iranian undergraduate female students in Malaysia. This study aimed to answer the following questions:

- 1- Why do Iranian undergraduate students living in Malaysia need Iranian counselors?
- 2- How can Iranian counselors help Iranian undergraduate students?

Through purposeful sampling, five Iranian undergraduate students were interviewed. After obtaining the words of the participants, the taped recordings were converted into text data. Then, the data were analyzed and coded. Based on the analyzed data, six major categories were identified: psychological needs, trust, guidance, comfort, educational, and cultural needs.

Although to the authors' knowledge, the issue of the need for counselors from the same culture and the same language for undergraduate students living abroad has not been addressed in the previous studies, but findings of the present study agreed with the results of some of them. For example, Malaklolu and Selan (2011) found that international students had adjustment problems in Malaysian private higher education institutions. Based on the findings of their study, some recommendations were provided to help international students get adjusted to the Malaysian environment and achieve academic success.

Elias, Wong and Abdullah (2011) investigated the stress and academic achievement of undergraduate students in Malaysia. The findings showed that overall, the undergraduate students experienced moderate levels of stress. The medical students had the highest stress level among the students. Most of the sources of stress were from students' academic life. It was also found that there is a significant but weak negative relationship between undergraduate students' stress level and their academic achievement.

One of the issues which were addressed by the participants in the present study was the problem of language. English is considered as a foreign language for the Iranian students. Therefore, speaking English for describing emotional issues was not easy for many of them. When students do not know suitable English words to describe their internal world, they may face difficulty to articulate adequately their emotional state. This is the same for speaking Bahasa Malau which is the official language of Malaysia. Iranian students have just become familiar with this language and could not communicate to a counselor by using this language.

Ang and Liamputtong (2008) found that the participants' level of spoken English was an important theme that influenced every major academic and social interaction. Also, Mahmud, Amat, Rahman and Mohd Ishak (2010) concluded from their study that a few factors were found to help international students better adjust, amongst them language ability.

Another theme which emerged from the present study was guidance. This is needed by students, especially undergraduate students who have entered a foreign country. With the lack of proper guidance, students are unable to make proper decisions. Sentinkaya-Yildiz, Cakir and Kondacki (2011) examined predictors of psychological

distress in international students studying at different public universities in Turkey. They concluded that guidance and orientation programs need to be provided in the host country for the international students.

Based on the present study, undergraduate students have adjustment needs which require counseling intervention. This finding agreed with the results of a study by Olofintoye (2011). This study investigated the adjustment needs of undergraduates of a university in Nigeria. Based on the results, students' needs ranged from study habits, personal concerns, examination schedule, orientation, security needs, financial needs, examination offenses, sexual relationship, low academic performance, future concerns, religious needs, to health needs. There were significant gender differences in some need areas. The researcher of the cited study suggested the need for counselling activities for students on coping skills in the identified needs areas with more attention on female students.

Findings of the present study also indicate that international students face new challenges due to different environment in the host countries which can be stressful for them. This finding agreed with the results of a study by Desa, Yusoff, and Abd Kadir (2012). Results indicated that the top two sources of acculturative stress were: environment and attitude. The findings provided some knowledge and understanding of the sources of stress among international postgraduate university students which are crucial for implementing stress reduction strategies, because stress may reduce motivation and decrease academic performance. In our opinion, the participants of the cited study were postgraduate students. The conditions could be more challenging for undergraduate students due to their youth and lack of experiences.

In general, the students emphasized that they had psychological, educational, and cultural needs. Also, they cited that counselors who are from their own country could help them in a more proper way. Therefore, they felt they had the need for the counselor's guidance. In other words, the participants of the present study provided information which indicates their special needs, one of which counselors from the same culture. Therefore, the participants had a strong desire for having Iranian counselors in Malaysia.

In fact, counselors may help undergraduate students cope with their psychological and educational problems. This means that based on the present study, it would be beneficial for Iranian undergraduate students to have Iranian counselors in order to choose the more suitable fields of study, and also have better psychological conditions while staying and studying abroad.

Providing such helping process needs enough consideration. At first, an essential question needs to be answered: Which official organization-(s) would be responsible and eligible for providing counseling service for Iranian undergraduate students in Malaysia? Is it the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran; the university administration; and/or the cooperation of both of them?

Based on the present study and the experiences of the first author as a university counselor, and as one who has done her Ph.D in Malaysia, the following suggestions will assist the authorities in the preparation of proper service:

- 1- It is suggested to provide counseling services for Iranian undergraduate students with the cooperation of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the administration of Malaysian universities and/or other official organizations which are concerned in Malaysia. The issue of helping undergraduate students through counseling in a foreign country needs administrative procedures.
- 2- Competent and qualified persons need to be hired to work as counselors for these counseling services.
- 3- Since publicity plays an essential role in making students aware of such organizations offering these services, it would be beneficial to provide adequate information through different ways. One is by providing leaflets about the service and giving them to the students at the time of registration. Also, information could be sent to students through their emails or Internet groups.

For further research, the following suggestions will assist the researchers:

- 1- It is suggested that other researchers doing the same study use a larger number of participants.
- 2- The participants of this study were female Iranian undergraduate students. It is suggested that a similar research be conducted with male undergraduate students as participants in order to explore their views on the issue of the need for Iranian counselors among Iranian undergraduate students in Malaysia.
- 3- Comparing males and females on this topic would provide a better understanding of the issue.
- 4- Similar studies could be done on post graduate students to explore their perspectives on the issue of counseling while studying abroad.

Findings of the present study can serve as a facilitator for further research on international students. In general, what is obvious is that the research on providing a service by Iranian counselors for Iranian students may open new horizons for undergraduate students in Malaysia.

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