

**[Reaction Paper]**

**Counseling Process and Outcome:  
A Critical Area of Inquiry in Counseling Research**

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Two counseling process and outcome studies are published in this issue of the journal. These two studies demonstrated that the understanding of counseling process and outcome for Chinese clients could be enriched by research that utilized Western theories in a culturally relevant fashion. It is known that empirical examination of the complex counseling process and outcome faces many methodological challenges. These two studies exhibited strengths in choosing the appropriate phenomena to observe and the appropriate method of observing. Using quantitative and qualitative methods respectively, both studies generated meaningful results that can inform clinical practice of counseling for Chinese clients. As it is debated in the United States regarding preferred settings for counseling research, future process and outcome studies of counseling for Chinese clients also should attempt to balance methodological rigor with clinical relevance.

I was very pleased to see that this issue of the journal published a pair of studies (Chen, Tsai, & Lai, 2001; Lin, 2001) that respectively identified a change model for Chinese clients with unmet expectations and examined the effect of counseling styles in the Chinese clients' perceived counselor effectiveness. In counseling research, I can see no other areas of studies that are more important than the studies on counseling process and outcome. In supporting and improving the development of the counseling profession, the empirical demonstration of the efficacy of counseling certainly plays a critical role. These two studies, with their theoretical focuses and methodological complexity, have the potential to push forward the counseling process and outcome research in Asian-Chinese speaking regions.

### **Cultural Relevance of Counseling Process and Outcome Observations**

Psychological counseling and counseling research are both human endeavors that are geared toward helping individuals and communities grow and flourish psychologically. Since all individuals are cultural beings and all communities are cultural entities (Sue & Sue, 1999), the counseling practice and research can only be meaningful if they demonstrate cultural relevance. Being aware of this fact, both studies adopted the theories and methods that were developed in the United States and added the culturally relevant components to them. This appears a promising way of promoting culturally specific counseling process and outcome research outside of the United States. It is imperative that counseling research, as well as counseling practice, be positioned and conducted in the cultural soil where the need for counseling emerges and the counseling outcome is evaluated.

Both studies supported a common theme that the counselor's delivery of interventions in sessions may generate immediate counseling outcome perceived by the client, whether it is the client's favorable perception

of the counselor or the positive step the client takes toward change. These findings support the efficacy of counseling for Chinese clients on the one hand and point to the counselor's in-session performance as a major impetus for change on the other. Although counseling, as a helping profession, was originally developed in a Western cultural context and have only recently been introduced to serve Chinese, it can benefit the Chinese and Chinese communities if the Chinese cultural values are integrated into the practice and research (Duan & Wang, 2000). The findings of the studies seemed to support this insertion. In addition, the studies also seemed to suggest that, in working with Chinese clients, the counselor needed to make therapeutically and culturally appropriate decisions regarding the focus of psychological interventions (e.g., helping clients understand coping learned from family of origin) and the style of delivering the interventions (e.g., using relationship-centered style at the working-through stage). This is apparently informative for our counselor training programs as well as for our counseling practice.

### **Challenges in Counseling Process and Outcome Research**

Some people would argue that counseling is more of an art than science, or at least a combination of art and science. This argument, if nothing else, has contested for the complexity and difficulty involved in the scientific study of counseling process and outcome. It is not always easy to come up with the right topic, find the right setting, and observe the right phenomenon to generate meaningful findings and reach valid conclusions. Various theoretical and methodological constrains often challenge the process and outcome researchers.

Making the complicated change process observable, the change model study (Chen, Tsai, & Lai, 2001) did a good job in testing the contributions and limitations of a Western theoretical model in working with Chinese clients and identifying a modified model that integrates

the unique Chinese cultural characteristics. The author should be commended on basing their study on an established Western theory and a good analysis of the Chinese cultural characteristics. Owing to the cultural differences between the Western and Eastern societies, the Chinese and the American clients' need for and experience of counseling are more likely than not to be different. Therefore the change process they experience is probably different too. With empirical evidence, this study supports this assumption. Such research can not only benefit the counseling profession in Chinese communities with the understanding of how clients go through changes, but also inform the Western helping professions on cultural limitations of their theories. It is not unusual that counseling practitioners find themselves unprepared to help ethnic minority clients in the United States.

Not examining a process variable in isolation is a definite strength of the counseling style study. Counseling is a complex process containing dynamic interpersonal interactions. Many theorists agree that no matter what theoretical orientation the counselor adopts, counseling usually goes through the different stages, such as the beginning, the working-through, and the ending stages (e.g., Beitman, 1987) examined in this study. The significant interaction between the counselor's counseling style and the counseling stages supports the observation of the counseling stages, and further, shed light on the understanding that the counselor faces different challenges at different stages of counseling. The finding of the study certainly has the potential to provide the counselor directions in choosing most effective styles at different stages of counseling when working with female Chinese clients.

One common area of improvement for both of these studies is perhaps related to how the outcome variable was assessed. Both studies used the client's perception and self-report (rather than the counselor's report or judges' report) to assess the outcome. This is an appraisable

effort. After all, counseling is done for the client's welfare and what that matters in counseling is how and what the client feels and sees. However, in choosing an outcome measure, the counseling style study (Lin, 2001) seemed to assume that the client's favorite perception of the counselor (the counselor's trustworthiness, competence, and attractiveness) implied counseling effectiveness. This may or may not be the case. In fact, research has shown that the client positive feelings may not always be a good indicator of effective counseling (e.g., Cummings, Barak, & Hallberg, 1995). The change model study (Chen, Tsai, & Lai, 2001), on the other hand, did not use any established instrument to assess outcome; rather, it focused on what the client said at the end of the session. Using the discovery-oriented approach in this study is a great idea. However, doing no more than relying on the face value of what the client said at the end of the session seemed to leave room for "social desirability," "desire to please," and other confusion to compromise the accuracy of the assessment.

### **Methodological Concerns in Process and Outcome Research**

There are some methodological issues that deserve attention too. Although the two studies used different research methods (one used a quantitative method and one used a qualitative method), the methodological rigor is present in both studies. The change model study (Chen, Tsai, & Lai, 2001) used volunteer clients for data collection, and the counseling style study (Lin, 2001) manipulated the counselor's delivery of intervention by the deliberate use of a particular style at a certain phase of the counseling. Such exercise of research control allows the researcher to examine well-defined counseling process and outcome variables, and contributes to the internal validity of the study findings. The most critical aspect of any process and outcome research is that we know, with confidence, that we are studying what we intended to study and deriving conclusions that are valid. Such research is absolutely necessary for building theories that direct the counseling practice.

However, it should be noted that in the United States, where both professional counseling and counseling research were originated, the debate on the value of methodological rigor versus the value of clinical relevance never stopped (see Gelso & Fretz, 2000). Some theorists feel strongly that without strong methodological rigor or solid internal validity, the research has little scientific value because of its limitations in testing theories (see Gelso & Fretz, 2000). In a similar fashion, other researchers would argue that counseling research that does not have clinical relevance is meaningless because of its inability of informing counseling practice, the ultimate goal of counseling research (Goldfried & Wolfe, 1996). In the more recent literature, there seems to be a renewal of the debate in the context that counseling research has been pressured by external forces, such as managed care in the United States and need for empirically validated treatment, and the research has responded to the pressure by showing more emphasis on research controls rather than clinical relevance. Some critics have pointed out that such emphasis on methodological rigor often sacrifices the clinical relevance of the research and would be “caught up in a research paradigm that does not faithfully reflect clinical reality” (Goldfried & Wolfe, 1996, p. 1007).

Obviously, both of these two studies provided some meaningful results that can help us understand the unique counseling experiences and change processes of Chinese clients. To further this understanding and improve the generalizability of the findings, however, future research will need to consider the issue of balancing methodological rigor and clinical relevance in counseling research. Using naturalistic clinical settings definitely has the advantage of increasing clinical relevance of the research, while research control is without question necessary to keep the methodological rigor. The challenge for the researcher would be to maximize the clinical relevance with as little as possible compromise of the methodological rigor.

## **Conclusion**

As a relatively new phenomenon that is pretty much transplanted from the United States, the professional counseling in Asian Chinese-speaking regions needs to find its way of entering the culture and the life. Counseling process and outcome research will be the mechanism to inform the counseling practice in how to serve Chinese clients effectively, and guide the profession to survive the scrutiny of the culture. The two process and outcome studies published in this issue have taken the lead in conducting research that has theoretical bases, methodological rigor, and cultural relevance. Future studies will need to continue the emphasis on cultural relevance, and also start focusing on the balance of methodological rigor and clinical relevance. Without quality process and outcome research, it will be difficult to further the development of the professional counseling in Asian Chinese-speaking regions.

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**心理輔導的過程與結果：  
心理輔導研究的一個關鍵項目**

本期《亞洲輔導學報》發表了兩篇報道心理輔導與效果的科研文章。這兩篇文章顯示，以西方理論為基礎而兼具中國文化特色的研究，可以增加我們對華人心理輔導過程與效果的理解。用實驗的方法來研究複雜的心理輔導過程與效果，總得面對不少方法學上的難關。這兩篇文章的長處正是選擇了值得觀察的現象，又採用了觀察這些現象的有效方法。不論是用量化分析或質化分析的方法，這兩篇文章的研究結果對提高華人心理輔導的素質都有參考價值。在美國，對心理輔導研究應以嚴謹或實用為重的爭議仍然未有定論，華人心理輔導研究亦應注意這一點，謀求兼顧兩者。