

Influence of ethnicity on counseling in the Divisional Secretariats in Sri Lanka

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The study was conducted with 30 participants, ten counselors and twenty clients in five divisional secretariat offices in Sri Lanka. There were three Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim counselors and one Burger counselor. Seven clients were Sinhala, six were Tamil, five were Muslim and two were Burger. There were twenty women and ten men.

Both quantitative and qualitative measures were conducted. Data was collected for quantitative analysis using a questionnaire developed along Toronto Empathy Questionnaire. The total score of the questionnaire measured the overall empathy of the participants. The four subscales measured participant's empathy towards Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and Burger counselors separately. The questionnaire was completed by all 30 participants. Semi structured interviews were conducted with four counselors representing all four ethnic groups and six clients again representing all four ethnic groups to elicit in-depth information using qualitative analysis.

Overall, the participants were positively empathic with a mean score close to the answer 'often' indicating that for most situations they were 'often' empathic. All ethnicities were most empathic towards their own. Preference for their own ethnicity continued for counselors and clients. All four counselors were very clear about being proud of their own ethnicity and seeing it as the most positive. They had positive comments about clients from their own ethnicity and overwhelmingly preferred to work with them. Their comments were not as negative towards clients of other ethnicities compared to their comments about other ethnicities in general. Clients too liked their own ethnicity the best and had mixed or negative reactions towards the other ethnicities. They preferred counselors from their own ethnicity but were willing to work with other ethnicities.

In conclusion, participants were positively empathic overall but were most empathic towards their own ethnicity. All counselors and clients were proud of their own ethnicity and had mixed reaction to other ethnicities. They preferred to work with similar ethnic dyads but were willing to work with an ethnically other.

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