

Relationship Development in Interpersonal Communication Online-Based Peer Counseling

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Abstract. Online-based peer counseling by Halo Jiwa Indonesia is known as Ruang Refleksi Online or Online Reflection Room (RRO). This service is one of the programs initiated to provide emotional support for the community during the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study is to identify the relationship development of interpersonal communication in Halo Jiwa Indonesia's peer counseling using the social penetration theory concept. The research method used is descriptive qualitative method, with data collection techniques in the form of observation and in-depth interviews. There were 3 informants selected by purposive sampling method. This study clearly found that peer counselors are applying the four stages of relationship development concept from social penetration theory. Additionally, the successful online peer counseling of RRO depends on how clients could show their self-disclosure according to the supporting and inhibiting factors. This study suggests that the following research might analyze the self-disclosure from the client's perspective as a user. This will help the e-counseling service to applying strategies in interpersonal approachment with their clients.

Keywords: Interpersonal Communication, Peer Counseling, Online Counseling, Ruang Refleksi Online

1 Introduction

Halo Jiwa Indonesia is a social community engaged in educating and promoting mental health in Indonesia. This online community organizes its community activities and programs by utilizing their social media on Instagram. One of Halo Jiwa programs is an online-based peer counseling service known as Ruang Refleksi Online or Online Reflection Room (RRO).

Halo Jiwa Indonesia sees that during the pandemic, people need psychological aid by creating a counseling service. According to Rahayu (2022) counseling involving counselors and clients in psychological process to help clients solve their problems. Rogers defines a helping relationship aimed at least one side who encourage growth, development, maturity, increased function and improvement in coping with problems. [1]

The Covid-19 pandemic situation in early 2020 caused Halo Jiwa Indonesia to provide Online Reflection Room (RRO) service. The changes that occur globally and suddenly make people difficult to adapt and it has a negative impact not only on their physical health, but also mental health. Based on Nasrullah's research in 2021, Covid-19 had a big impact, causing Indonesian people underwent fear, anxiety, stress and depression. The main risks from mental disorders experienced are due to economic recession, factors of social distance and isolation, stress and trauma.[2]

In particular, adolescents are experiencing a significant impact from the Covid-19 pandemic, because their transitional age. The results of Muhammad Iqbal's research (2020) at Semarang State University found that 63.6% of respondents had mental disorders due to the effects of the pandemic, such as anxiety, tension, sleeping and thinking clearly problems, tired and want to end their life.

Since its implementation of *lockdown*, all community activities and communication styles are changed with the help of various online platforms such as WhatsApp and Zoom meeting. The same thing was felt by various counseling services which were initially held face-to-face, now able to use technology and internet assistance remotely. Based on the utilization of technological developments, this type of counseling model is known as e-counseling or cyber counseling. [3]. Moreover, from Deddy Mulyana's research, interpersonal communication is the process of conveying messages involving two people who carry out the dyadic communication, which are the communicator and the communicant. The communication process is delivered directly or face-to-face where the parties involved are able to capture verbal and non-verbal messages. [4] Verbal messages are defined as the use of words, while non-verbal communication are categorized as behaviours in the form of body postures, face expressions, as well as things that include environmental orientation (space between communicators and physical objects around them) [5] However, the model of interpersonal communication in e-counseling was shifted nowadays into online method which known as computer-mediated communication.

This e-counseling service were implemented in RRO peer counseling of Halo Jiwa Indonesia. RRO is a free and a non-professional psychological service that is easily accessible for everyone, since it is accessed online. The peer counselors who provide counseling are the official members of Halo Jiwa Indonesia community, who have an educational background in psychology and received training in active listening, empathy and basic counseling skills. Their age are close in age to the clients, thus there were no age gap which too far with the clients. This is expected to make the clients more comfortable on telling stories and share experienced in a safe and non-judgemental environment of RRO. The clients who register themselves are the public who obtain information through Halo Jiwa Indonesia's Instagram, with clients ranging in age from teenagers to early adults (around 15-35 years). [6]

According to the data from Muhiddin's research in 2021, this RRO e-counseling service has proven that clients feel positive effects, such as feeling relieved, happy and better after attending the peer counseling session. The problems experienced by the majority of clients are personal problems related to self-management, love, family and individual anxiety. The implementation of interpersonal communication can be seen as well from this RRO online based peer counseling services. The peer counselors and clients have intense communication, which connected through online platforms such as WhatsApp *chat*, *video call*, phone and via Zoom Meeting, regardless of their location.

From this past three years, Halo Jiwa Indonesia's data found several participants are accessed this RRO online peer counseling more than once. It is found that this service is indicating the helpfulness and effectiveness for clients. Furthermore, researchers are interested to analyze how interpersonal communication in peer counseling applies the four stages of developing interpersonal relationships based from social penetration theory concept. In addition, researchers want to explore the supporting and inhibiting factors that clients experience while participating in online peer counseling services in Halo Jiwa Indonesia Online Reflection Room (RRO).

2 Research Method

This study uses a qualitative method with a case study approach. The aim is to investigate and understand existing phenomena, which include what, why and how these phenomena occur. [7] The case study approach looks at a phenomenon in a certain period. Researchers collect various in-depth and detailed information on an activity which can be in the form of activities, events, institutions or social groups. [8]

In this study, researcher explore further and describe the events that occurred in detail through the process of collecting observational data and in-depth interviews with informants. Three informants of this research were selected using the *purposive sampling* technique according to the specified criteria, such as (1) clients of Halo Jiwa Indonesia Online Reflection Room from different age, gender, location, problem categories, (2) have joined RRO online peer counseling. (3) using different online communication platforms in counseling session. The informants who meet these requirements are three clients. Informant HY is a 23 years old in private university student who has accessed RRO services more than once with depression problems, informant NA is a 22 years old in State University student who also works as a freelance teacher with a family problems and informant DA is a 31 years old, she is a master student in State University with the violence of romantic relationships. The data were collected through observations and in-depth interviews in January until April 2023 from offline and online meeting platforms.

The data analysis of data research was conducted by using Miles & Huberman's interactive model analysis based on three components; data reduction, data presentation and conclusion. The validity of the findings in this study used the triangulation concept by interviewing different informants to compare the results of observations and interviews with informants. [9]

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Steps involved in RRO Online Based Peer Counseling

The results of the study show that in terms of process, there are several steps for clients involved of conducting the online counseling peer counseling in Halo Jiwa Indonesia Online Reflection Room (RRO) service. In the first place is the intake and assessment, clients must firstly registered through the RRO registration website from the link on the Halo Jiwa Indonesia Instagram account. Clients input their personal data in the form of name and address, email, age, gender, ethnicity, contact number, and a brief description of their problem. Clients have the opportunity to be able to choose their own peer counselors in RRO according to the category of problems they are experiencing. Likewise, they can freely choose the online communication platforms as they want.

In this case, the communication platforms which available in RRO online peer counseling service are utilizing by online such as telephone, video call and chat of WhatsApp and Zoom Meeting. In intake session, the clients will also get a paper of *informed consent* which is an agreement sheet for the clients and Halo Jiwa team regarding the psychological terms and conditions that apply during the counseling session. Informed consent is to convince and educate clients so they can feel comfortable and safe with the counselors. The client's personal data will be sorted by the RRO team as in the urgency of their problems. The less urgent category of problems will be transferred to the next counseling batch. Therefore, RRO services are divided

into several batch each year according to the concurrence of Halo Jiwa Indonesia team. In general, the batch are opened in April, July, August, November and December.

Secondly, both peer counselors and clients who have registered will be contacted by the RRO team to ensure the schedule on a secure online platform. At the same time, the RRO team will also preparing clients information form for peer counselors before starting the counseling session. It aims to help peer counselors determine their rapport strategy and understand the client's background, concerns and goals. The next step is conducting the online counseling session. At the beginning of the session, the peer counselors focuses on building rapport and trust through interpersonal communication. They give a pre-counseling question to the clients to ensure their readiness, continuing to the practice of client-centred therapy method. This make clients to be more active in talking and sharing experience of their problems. At the same point, the peer counselors demonstrate mindfulness and active listening, giving respond promptly and asking relevant questions as well according to their problem categories. The counseling session duration approximately 90 minutes. Shortly before the counseling session end, the RRO team will give a time warning to the peer counselors. At that time, the counselors will prepare to end their counseling session.

The last step is closure and termination. The counselors and clients reflecting the session, discuss any remaining concerns and asking clients about their future plan. The peer counselors also offers feedback and encouragement to the clients. According to their needs, the counsellors also emphasizing clients' strengths to validate and motivate them. In this step, the peer counselors are able to refer clients to reach help from a qualified therapist or professional counselors if they wanted. In order to create an evaluation form for this service, at the end of the session, the RRO team will then send a link form to both peer counselors and client. It is contain an assessment of RRO's peer counseling service of Halo Jiwa Indonesia.

Furthermore, All these steps are the strategy to give clients emotional support in a safe, easy and comfort environment. Although this counseling service is only available in online term, the clients need is fulfilled enough. They joined the counseling session more than once to meet the peer counselors. This could indicate that RRO is an effective online based peer counseling for people.

3.2 Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

The client's self-disclosure is determined the successful process of the online counseling session on RRO. Clients who being cooperative to be open in explaining their difficulties, make the peer counselors easier to identify the root causes and provide guidance for them. During the counseling session, the informant NA and HY explain that they can easily open in expressing their feeling, while DA was seems hard to open herself and showing defensive act. She considers herself to hide more than telling stories. This happened because she did not have any expectations when attending counseling sessions. She already knew the flow of counseling process, since she had numerous experience of visiting professional therapist or counselors.

In terms of developing the relationship from the stages of social penetration theory, this study observes that there are supporting and inhibiting factors in RRO counseling process. Based on the results of interviews with the counselors informants, the support factors of this peer counseling service can be seen by the counselors skills in showing empathy, providing validation of feelings, positive and polite affirmations. Peer counselors who are using the client-centred therapy also practicing to listen actively. In this case, peer counselors does not give any judgment to the client, however they focusing attention to the clients stories objectively. Secondly, there was no age gap between the counselors and the clients. It would be easier for

clients to share their stories, since it feels like they were talking with a friend. Thirdly, the online platform of communication features which chosen by the clients are able to offers convenience and privacy. This online platforms may help clients to feel more comfortable and less intimidating than a face-to-face counseling method. If clients prefer to choose telephone or video call, non-verbal communication tends to be easier to understand.

Regarding to the inhibiting factors in the interpersonal communication process between peer counselors and clients, there are several factors, such as the technical issues specifically the signal interference. It is inevitably happened in online platfroms. This could make the ineffective communication both for counselor and clients also can disrupt the flow of communication and hinder the session. Sometimes it took long time until the counseling session does not finish according to the appropriate time.

The next obstacle is the long way of administrative process. The RRO team have to sorting the clients data firstly, hence it is making clients feel like they are being ignored since they have to wait the response from the team. Clients would lose their respect and uncomfortable if this frequently happened. Lastly, the close and defensive clients are also become such an inhibitor to develop the relationships between peer counselors and clients. In this study, client DA was hard to open herself to the counselor since she already knew the respons of counselors in general.

For about three years, it cannot be denied that there have been several complaints experienced by the clients. From the results of interviews with NA, she revealed that this online peer-based counseling service makes the atmosphere of the interaction process not as good as when meet face to face personally with the counselor. As a result, NA doesn't feel like telling a story with a friend emotionally, she felt it was quite difficult to express the form of communication to peer counselors. She really hopes that this peer counseling program of Halo Jiwa can be expanded by providing the offline services.

The same thing was felt by HY and DA, they preferred peer counseling sessions which can be conducted to be directly meeting with the counselors. Moreover, the online counseling sessions like this are enough to help them relieve feelings of stress, since it also does not cost any service fee. This online counseling service are suitable for clients to arrange appointments and schedule with peer counselors. In the end, counselors have the essential role to make the clients feel more comfortable and encourage them to share more openly. They have to be such a good friend and companion as well

3.3 Discussions

The existence of RRO online based peer counseling by Halo Jiwa Indonesia can be a beneficial service for people in helping them facing their difficulties. Most of clients in this service are teenagers and early adults who experienced in self-management, love, family and individual anxiety. The evaluation form of clients review said that this counseling service is providing a safe and comfort place for them to express and share stories. Moreover, the important role of RRO peer counselors is to be a good listener and offer emotional support to the clients who has difficult and challenging situations. Peer counselors may guide the clients to explore their emotions by giving new perspective so that they can face their problems with new point of view.

Based on the concept of social penetration theory, there are four stages in the process of developing a relationship. To begin is orientation stages, where at this stage the client's general information background is collected. Through the intake and assessment process, both counselors and clients are recognize each other profile. The orientation stage is also carried out when the peer counselors has opened the counseling session and introduced himself to the

clients. They will start to have an interpersonal communication and grow further. The next is the exploratory affective exchange stage, it is the moment when the peer counselors tries to approach the clients by asking questions and delivering statements that create safe and comfortable environment for the clients. At this stage, the client's trust is the key to be obtained, hence counselor can build rapport with them. This may help counselor to provide psychoeducation in helping clients understand their challenges and develop coping skills as well.

After that is an affective stage. In this moment, the clients has opened up showing their self-disclosure. They started to share stories about the problems intimately because they may feel a sense of counselor trust. Clients feel comfortable and safe, hence there is no more doubt for clients to express their emotions to peer counselors. Lastly is the stable exchange stage. From this stage the client's feelings, thoughts and behaviour are very open and intimate. Expressing the feelings can be such a therapeutic way for clients. This stage letting the peer counselors begin to provide feedback, validate feelings, assessing client's needs and goals.

The result of this research is in line with the previous research of Suasana Aditya which also found that online-based peer counseling for elderly is able to maintain their quality of life during Covid-19. The online communication platforms used is zoom, google meet and video calls.[10] To conclude, RRO online based peer counseling can be a supportive and safe place for clients, from the technique of interpersonal communication, the peer counselor can deliver emotional support and guidance to their peers.

4 Conclusion

Ruang Refleksi Online or Online Reflection Room (RRO) is one of Halo Jiwa Indonesia's community programs to provide psychological support. This online based peer counseling service aimed to be a psychological first aid or PFA for the community at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and still continuing until now. The strength of interpersonal communication is the key in order to develop interpersonal relationships between clients and peer counselors. This study explores the four stages of developing interpersonal relationships in social penetration theory that implemented in RRO services. There are the orientation stage of the administrative processes. Where clients register to choose their own peer counselors. Next is the explorative affective stage is shown from the way of peer counselors approach them by interpersonal communication so that clients are able show their self-disclosure. After that, is the affective stage, when the client's trust has been built, thus they telling the stories without any feelings of doubt, and the last stage is the stable exchange stage. In this stage, the clients and counselor have had an intimate interaction, the counselor provides feedback and the clients gets new input, guidance and insight in order to solve their problems.

Consequently, this study found supporting factors to develop the relationship from interpersonal communication. Those are the counselors who demonstrated positive communication with empathy, active listening and validate client's feelings. Besides that, there is no age gap and the counseling online platforms chosen by clients make it easier for them to express themselves. However, the technical disruption such as signal interference can make unclear information, the long way of administrative processes and closed clients also become obstacles through the online counseling process.

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