

Students Perception about Counselors Communication Skills: The Differences Based on Gender and Grades in Junior High Schools

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Article Information:

Received April 11, 2020

Revised April 27, 2020

Accepted May 3, 2020

Keywords: communication skills; individual counseling; students perception

Abstract

Individual counseling services which are not in line with the procedures and goals may lead to students' negative perceptions. To know this, there are several dimensions to be examined whether the services have been in line with the procedures or not, such as listening skills, techniques used, goal setting, and others. Regarding these preliminary findings, this study aimed at describing students' perceptions of individual counseling services provided by counselors in Semarang, Indonesia and its differences in terms of counselor communication skills based on genders and grades. Survey method with cross-sectional technique (n=709) was employed to investigate this issue. To determine students' perception of the implementation of individual counseling by the counselor, the authors used MANOVA and multidimensional descriptive analysis. The findings showed that according to gender, male students had lower perceptions of the individual counseling given by counselors than female students. Further, differences in perceptions based on grades are also discussed in this article.

INTRODUCTION

Counselor is a profession that has professional standards. These standards cover basic skills and techniques in conducting counseling based on theoretical and practical frameworks to establish a good relationship, advance to work phase, gain assessment and termination (Ridley, Kelly, & Mollen, 2011). Counseling skills and techniques are various, but there are basic skills to accomplish in the beginning of counseling process, namely microskills. The skills usually consist of active listening skills, and will be considered as a determinant factor in the development of counseling processes (Kuntze, Van Der Molen, & Born, 2009). The purpose of basic listening and interviewing skills is to help establish a relationship between the counselor and students (clients), encourage clients' disclosure, and provide services based on clients' needs (Ridley et al., 2011).

There are many competencies counselors should have. One of which is empathy conceptualizations. Some of empathy conceptualizations emphasize relationship with compassion, while the other conceptualizations emphasize clients' perspectives, and focus on how to attentively listen to clients' experiences (Clark, 2004). Notions of empathy identify

How to cite:

Awalya, A., Suharso, S., Rifani, E., Syifa, L., Saputra, F., Susilawati, S., & Anggraini, W. (2020). Students Perception about Counselors Communication Skills: The Differences Based on Gender and Grades in Junior High Schools. *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.25217/igcj.v3i2.847>

E-ISSN:

2614-1566

Published by:

Institut Agama Islam Ma'arif NU (IAIMNU) Metro Lampung

them as improvable skills through trainings, while others see as automatic reactions or innate quality that may or may not be subject to further development beyond what is innately (Gerdes, Segal, & Lietz, 2010; Singer & Lamm, 2009)

Ability to empathize, listen, provide comfort, techniques mastery, gain achievement and knowledge, as well as goal orientation are aspects which can stimulate students' perceptions of a counselor in the process of individual counseling services (Messina, 2005). The way the counselor performs the individual counseling services shapes students' perception of him. Individual counseling is a process where a client enters a relationship therapy with a well-trained counselor who creates safe, humane, secret and professional atmospheres to build an environment to explore the client's feelings, beliefs, and behaviors with the aim of covering client's understanding about himself, and others, organize client's reality, and client's goals as well as proceeding to a better direction indicated by changes (Eremie et al., 2012). The aim of this service for students is to help them be independent, responsible, creative, productive, and honest people so that they can optimally develop.

During the individual counseling process, students need comfort to express their problems, appreciation and respect, and openness to the counselor so that there will be a supportive atmosphere and relationship to achieve counseling goals. To gain such desired objectives, there is a need for the counselor to master communication skills. Communication skills mastery is the basis of counseling. Knapp (2007) asserts that micro-skills facilitate client's understanding which in turn function as a basis for all assistances. Client's understanding is realized by therapeutic awareness gained from clients' statements and the way they deliver the statements. For more, regarding interviewing skills and the main theoretical strength that underlie counseling and therapy activities. Ivey, D'Andrea, Ivey & Simek-Morgan (2009) state that counselors are expected to implement strategies that reflect a high sense of intentionality. Counseling is also called as a process of helping, and has two main skill categories. Communication and action skills or skills that involve external behavior. Second, mental skills or skills that require internal thinking process (Jones, 2009).

The most basic macroskills cover behaviors showing counselor's presence to listen clients are such as eye contact, body language, vocal quality. Once the counselor shows his presence, he proceeds to microskills hierarchy to open and closed questions, give encouragement, paraphrase, summation, feelings reflection, confrontation and other skills. It is important to keep in mind that the foundation for effective interview and skills integration is the ability to listen and understand clients (Ivey, Ivey, Zalaquett, & Quirk, 2012).

Counseling microskills are divided into two. First, listening skills, including: clarification, paraphrase (responding to content), reflection (responding to feelings), and summarizing. Second, influencing skills, such as open and closed questions, advanced interpretation and empathy, information giving, immediacy, self-disclosure, and confrontation (Cormier, Nurius, & Osborn, 2009).

A counselor should have good communication skills so that his counseling can be done effectively. These skills are important in counseling because they provide understanding for counselees. To control this service quality, competency standards should be used to examine the extent that has been achieved and further expectation for performance development. Furthermore, a counselor is also demanded to have personal competencies. Cavanagh (1990) mentions personal competencies that must be owned by a counselor, namely good self-understanding, competent in counseling, healthy personality, trustworthy, honesty, responsive, patient, and having sensitivity towards counselee. These competencies help counselees or clients have good perceptions. Perception is a process that is initially started by sensing as a response of accepting stimulus related to the received messages or information by individuals (Walgito, 2010).

It is important to know students' perception of the counselor in individual counseling services because the information giving by students depends on their high and low perceptions. Once students consider the relationship they build within a counseling service is good, it would contribute positive results to the success of counseling (Bell, Hagedorn, & Robinson, 2016; Norcross & Lambert, 2011). The role of the counselor or school counselor is significant to the success of school counseling services, but previous study revealed that students have not yet felt satisfied with the school counseling given by the counselor. (Kartiko, Hartati, & Saraswati, 2014).

Many previous studies examined the assessment of counselors' competencies and skills in providing individual counseling services. Kuntze et al. (2009) found that counselors who have been working gain higher scores than university students who are still learning competencies and skills in providing services. Their study used communication skills progress test (CSPT) instrument distributed to counselors and university students. Another study gained insignificant differences in competencies and skills seen from gender. Their study used communication skills mastery scale (Bakkar, 2019). Fatchurahman (2016) states that one problem that happens in individual counseling might caused by incomprehensive knowledge about communication skills (counseling interview) by counselor. In fact, the mastery of communication skills is the basis of counseling.

Some studies of counselors' competencies and skills in providing individual counseling have been conducted. To be objective, study study intended to assess counselors based on students' perspectives as counselees. It was because the effectiveness of counseling processes can be seen from counselees' satisfaction.

Studies on students' perceptions of individual counseling regarding their satisfaction during the services actually have ever been conducted. Those studies show that the level of students' satisfaction in having individual counseling at Kebomas Gresik 1 Middle School based on r effective value on students' perceptions variable and individual counseling services gained 45.69% satisfaction, while the rest 54.31% are influenced by other factors (Erawati, 2015). On the other hand, this study intended to find out students' perceptions of the individual counseling services in relation to the counselor' competencies and skills in counseling processes seen from gender and grades in Junior High School throughout Semarang city and regency.

METHODS

This study involved 709 Junior High School students at 7th, 8th, and 9th grades in Semarang city and regency in Central Java province. Sample was taken using simple random sampling from Junior High School students population. Here, the reseachers collaborated with counselors to distribute the instrument and employed survey method with cross-sectional to collect the data.

The instrument used was The Client's Evaluation of Counselor Behavior Short Form (CECB-S) developed by (Messina, 2005). Prior to the distribution, the instrument has passed several adaptation stages, namely 1) Forward translation, 2) Translation review, decentering, and reconciliation of content, 3) Back-translation, 4) Commit or team review and further cultural adaptation, 5) Team Review and Consensus Forming. (CECB-S) Consisting of 29 items with 7 answer choices 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) somewhat disagree, 4) neutral, 5) somewhat agree, 6) agree, and 7) strongly agree. There were 22 valid items out of 29 items, all valid items are used in this study. In addition, one of seven dimensions called knowledge eliminated out of the instrument after pilot validity project by 50 respondents. The dimensions included are a) listening, empathy and skills, b) technique, c) goal setting, d) achievement, e) availability, and f) action. Its validity and reliability levels gained ($r = 0.276 - 0.777$), and cronbach's alpha 0.923 respectively.

Then, to determine students' perception of the implementation of individual counseling by the counselor, through the MANOVA and multidimensional descriptive analysis with the help of statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS. 22) was used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The calculation results of the survey of the students in Semarang city and regency are presented in Table 1.

| Categories | Gender | | | | Grades | | | | | |
|------------|--------|------|--------|------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|
| | Male | | Female | | 7 th | | 8 th | | 9 th | |
| | Total | % | Total | % | Total | % | Total | % | Total | % |
| Low | 108 | 15.2 | 198 | 21.6 | 79 | 11.1 | 103 | 14.5 | 124 | 17.5 |
| High | 153 | 27.9 | 250 | 35.3 | 206 | 29.1 | 77 | 10.9 | 120 | 16.9 |

Table 1. The level of students' perception based on gender and grades

Table 1. shows that the male students who had low perceptions were 108 people (15.2%), while those who had high perceptions were 153 people (27.9%). Next, female students who had low perceptions were 198 people (21.6%), while those who had high perceptions were 250 people (35.3%). Moreover, according to grades there were 79 students (11.1%) having low perceptions, and 206 students (29.1%) having high perceptions at the 7th grade. Further, at the 8th grade, there were 103 students (14.5%) having low perceptions, and 77 (10.9%) students having high perceptions. The last, the 9th grade students who had low perceptions amounted to 124 people (17.5%), while those who had high perceptions amounted to 120 people (16.9%).

| Dimensions | Categories | Gender | | | | Grades | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|------------|--------|------|--------|------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|
| | | Male | | Female | | 7 th | | 8 th | | 9 th | |
| | | Total | % | Total | % | Total | % | Total | % | Total | % |
| Listening, empathy, and skills (1) | Low | 116 | 16.4 | 214 | 30.2 | 90 | 12.7 | 109 | 15.4 | 131 | 18.5 |
| | High | 145 | 20.5 | 234 | 33 | 195 | 27.5 | 71 | 10.0 | 113 | 15.9 |
| Techniques (2) | Low | 115 | 16.2 | 210 | 29.6 | 85 | 12.0 | 109 | 15.4 | 131 | 18.5 |
| | High | 146 | 20.6 | 238 | 33.6 | 200 | 28.2 | 71 | 10.0 | 113 | 15.9 |
| Goal setting (3) | Low | 97 | 13.7 | 196 | 27.6 | 84 | 11.8 | 96 | 13.5 | 113 | 15.9 |
| | High | 164 | 36.8 | 252 | 63.2 | 201 | 28.3 | 84 | 11.8 | 131 | 18.5 |
| Achievement (4) | Low | 120 | 16.9 | 201 | 28.3 | 104 | 14.7 | 107 | 15.1 | 110 | 15.5 |
| | High | 141 | 19.9 | 247 | 34.8 | 181 | 25.5 | 73 | 10.3 | 134 | 18.9 |
| Availability (5) | Low | 129 | 18.2 | 237 | 33.4 | 121 | 17.1 | 105 | 14.8 | 140 | 19.7 |
| | High | 132 | 18.6 | 211 | 29.8 | 164 | 23.1 | 75 | 10.6 | 104 | 14.7 |
| Action (6) | Low | 101 | 14.2 | 190 | 26.8 | 78 | 11.0 | 94 | 13.3 | 119 | 16.8 |
| | High | 160 | 22.6 | 258 | 36.4 | 207 | 29.2 | 86 | 12.1 | 125 | 17.6 |

Table 2. Students' perceptions of individual counseling services per dimension

Based on Table 2, statistical data show that the dimensions of listening, empathy and skills got low perception from 116 male students (16.4%), and high perception from 145 (20.5%) male students. Meanwhile, there were 214 (30.2%) female students having low perception, and 234 (33%) female students having high perception. Based on grades, the 7th grade had 90 students (12.7%) having low perception, and 195 students (27.5) having high perception. Further, the 8th grade had 109 students (15.4%) having low perception, and 71 students (10%) having high perception. The last, the 9th grade had 131 students (18.5%) having low perception, and 113 students (15.9%) having high perception.

The second dimension deals with students' perceptions of the techniques used by the counselors in individual counseling services. Based on the table it is known that there were differences in the number of students' perceptions based on gender. First, the high perception

from female students amounted to 238 people (33.6%), while male students amounted to 146 people (20.6%). Second, the the low perception from male students amounted to 115 people (16.2%), while female students amounted to 210 (29.6%) people. In addition, based on grades, the highest perception was gained by the 7th grade with 200 students (28.2%), followed by the 9th grade with 113 students (15.9%), and the 8th grade with 71 students (10.0%).

The third dimension is goal setting. According to the overall calculations, more than 50% of students had high perceptions of the goal setting performed by the counselors in individual counseling services. There were differences in the number of students' perceptions based on gender. First, the high perception from male students amounted to 164 people (36.8%), while female students amounted to 252 people (63.2%). Second, the the low perception from male students amounted to 97 people (13.7%), while female students amounted to 196 people (27.6%). In addition, based on grades, the highest perception was gained by the 7th grade with 201 students (28.3%), followed by the 9th grade with 131 students (18.5%), and the 8th grade with 84 students (11.8%).

The fourth dimension is achievement. It is related to the way the counselors have orientation to students' achievement. In this dimension, the researchers found that female students who had high perceptions amounted to 247 people (34.8%) or higher than male students' perceptions which amounted to 141 people (19.9%). Meanwhile, at low level of perceptions of this dimension, there were 120 male students (16.9%), and 201 female students (28.3%). For more, based on grades the highest perception was gained by the 7th grade with 181 students (25.5%), followed by the 9th grade with 134 students (18.9%), and the 8th grade with 73 students (10.3%).

In terms of availability dimension, male students who had low perceptions of individual counseling services amounted 129 people (18.2%), while those who had high perceptions amounted 160 people or 22.6%. On the other hand, female students who had low perceptions of availability dimension amounted to 190 people or 26.8%, while those who had high perceptions amounted to 258 people or 36.4%. Then, based on grades, at the 7th grade the number of students who had low perceptions were 121 people with a percentage of 17.1%, while the students who had high perceptions were 164 people or 23.1%. At the 8th grade, the number of students who had low perceptions were 105 people with a percentage of 14.8%, while the students who had high perceptions were 75 people or 10.6%. The last, the 9th grade had students with low perceptions of 140 people with a percentage of 19.7%, and students with high perceptions of 104 people or 14.7%.

Data of students' perceptions of individual counseling services in the dimension of action revealed that according to gender, male students who had low perceptions amounted to 101 people with a percentage of 14.2%, while the ones with high perceptions were 132 people or 18.6%. Further, female students who had low perceptions amounted to 190 people or 33.4%, while the ones with high perceptions were 211 people or 21.8%. Based on grades, there were 78 students or 11.0% having low perceptions, and 207 students or 29.2% having high perceptions at the 7th grade. At the 8th grade there were 94 students or 13.3% having low perceptions, and 86 students or 12.1% having high perceptions. The last, at the 9th grade there were 119 students or 16.8% having low perceptions, and 125 students or 17.6% having high perceptions. Furthermore, this study also found out the level of comparison between gender and grades variables in the [Table 3](#).

Based on the [Table 3](#), the perception of male students of the counselors' competencies has got not significant difference ($F(1)=0,138$, $p>0,05$). Similarly, the results also had no differences in each dimension that dimension 1 ($F(1) =0,497$, $p>0,05$), dimension 2 ($F(1)=0,195$, $p>0,05$), dimension 3 ($F(1)=2,485$, $p>0,05$), dimension 4 ($F(1) =0,028$, $p>0,05$), dimension 5 ($F(1)=2,553$, $p>0,05$) and dimension 6 ($F(1)=1,444$, $p>0,05$). Thus, there was no

significant changes in students' perception of the counselors seen from overall data and each dimension data.

| Dependent Variables | Gender | | | Grades | | |
|--|--------|----|-------|--------|----|-------|
| | f | df | p | f | df | p |
| Perception of Counselors' Competencies (1) | 0.138 | 1 | >0.05 | 21.914 | 2 | <0.05 |
| Listening, empathy, dan skills (2) | 0.497 | 1 | >0.05 | 23.164 | 2 | <0.05 |
| Techniques (3) | 0.195 | 1 | >0.05 | 31.798 | 2 | <0.05 |
| Penetapan Goal Setting (4) | 2.485 | 1 | >0.05 | 11.791 | 2 | <0.05 |
| Achievement (5) | 0.028 | 1 | >0.05 | 12.595 | 2 | <0.05 |
| Availability (6) | 2.553 | 1 | >0.05 | 9.726 | 2 | <0.05 |
| Action (7) | 1.444 | 1 | >0.05 | 19.910 | 2 | <0.05 |

Table 3. The differences in students' perception of each dimension

According to **Table 4**, based on grades, the results showed significant differences in students' perception of the counselors' competencies ($F(2)=21,914$, $p<0,05$). However, the data of each dimension showed no difference, namely dimension 1 ($F(2)=23.164$, $p<0.05$), dimension 2 ($F(2)=31.798$, $p<0.05$), dimension 3 ($F(2)=11.791$, $p<0.05$), dimension 4 ($F(2)=12.595$, $p<0.05$), dimension 5 ($F(2)=9.726$, $p<0.05$) and dimension 6 ($F(2)=19.910$, $p<0.05$). Therefore, the data showed significant differences in students' perception of the counselors seen from overall data and each dimension data.

| Grades Differences | 7 th & 9 th | | 8 th & 9 th | |
|--|-----------------------------------|-------|-----------------------------------|-------|
| | t | p | t | p |
| Perception of Counselors' Competencies (1) | 10.998 | <0.05 | -1.832 | <0.05 |
| Listening, empathy, dan skills (2) | 3.923 | <0.05 | -0.330 | <0.05 |
| Techniques (3) | 3.204 | <0.05 | -0.557 | <0.05 |
| Penetapan Goal Setting (4) | 1.098 | <0.05 | -0.257 | <0.05 |
| Achievement (5) | 0.968 | <0.05 | -0.501 | <0.05 |
| Availability (6) | 0.40 | <0.05 | 0.010 | <0.05 |
| Action (7) | 1.406 | <0.05 | -0.197 | <0.05 |

Table 4. The differences in students' perception based on grades

There were significant differences in students' perception of the counselors' competencies at the 7th and 9th grades by $t=10.998$, $p<0,05$. In this way the 7th grade had higher perception of the counselors' competencies than the 9th. Equally, the results of each dimension were also found out the same, that dimension 1 gained $t=3.923$, $p<0.05$, dimension 2 gained $t=3.204$, $p<0.05$, dimension 3 gained $t=1.098$, $p<0.05$, dimension 4 gained $t=.968$, $p<0.05$, dimension 5 gained $t=.40$, $p<0.05$, and dimension 6 gained $t=1.406$, $p<0.05$. In conclusion, these data indicated that the 7th grade obtained higher perception of the counselors' competencies than the 9th grade seen from both overall data and each dimension data.

The researchers also found significant results of students' perception of the counselors' competencies at grade 8th and 9th by the difference level of $t=-1.832$, $p<0.05$. At this point, the grade 9th gained higher perception of the counselors' competencies than the 8th grade. Accordingly, the results of each dimension showed significant differences that dimension 1 gained $t=-0.330$, $p<0.05$, dimension 2 gained $t=-0.557$, $p<0.05$, dimension 3 gained $t=-0.257$, $p<0.05$, dimension 4 gained $t=-0.501$, $p<0.05$, dimension 5 gained $t=0.10$, $p<0.05$, and dimension 6 gained $t=-0.197$, $p<0.05$. These data revealed that the 9th grade gained higher perception of the counselors' competencies than the 8th grade seen from both overall data and each dimension data. By referring to these grades comparison, the 8th grade gained the lowest perception of the counselors' competencies among all grades.

The objective of this study was to determine the level of students' perceptions of the counselors in individual counseling services. As mentioned earlier in the background of the study, students' perceptions influence the success of the individual counseling services. This is mentioned by one of previous studies finding showing that the level of students' satisfaction in a counseling service at Kebomas Gresik 1 Junior High School gained an effective value of 45.69% on the variable of students' perception, and the individual counseling services, while the rest 54.31% is influenced by other factors. This study also suggests that students' perception can be examined by factors related to satisfaction (Erawati, 2015). With this in mind, the current study examined the students' perception by considering gender and grades factors. It revealed that gender did not affect students' perception, but grades did affect it. Indeed, counselors are required to provide good counseling services for students and determine appropriate programs in accordance with students' grades.

The findings of this study are in line with the results of previous study by Anyanwu, Ileri, & Kitonga (2019) that students have good perceptions of counselors in individual counseling services. However, their study was done using quantitative approach and did not investigate the differences in perceptions seen from gender aspect. In relation to the findings, it could be said that the students had good perceptions of the counselors' performance in conducting the individual counseling services proved by the high average of students' perceptions.

Individual counseling services have an important role in the school guidance and counseling activities so that the services require competent school counselors in performing this counseling. The results of previous studies conclude that students' perceptions of individual counseling can contribute positive effects for students, namely individual counseling features students to form the attitude of interpersonal relationship, and facilitate psychological helps. As a results, students who experience these issues tend to look for professionals who are able to maintain good interpersonal relationships (Anyanwu, Ileri, & Kitonga, 2019).

When students have good perceptions of the counselors' performance in the individual counseling services, their interest in utilizing this counseling to facilitate self-development and problem solving covering personal, social, study or career matters will increase. Therefore, school counselors have high expectations for themselves, students, school and educational system (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011). Hence, the success of an educational system and students lies in how counselors maximize their competencies in providing an assistance service. It is because the purpose of counseling at school is to improve student's achievement (ASCA, 2015).

This study is in line with Mau, Li & Hoetmer (2016) who found that practices that school counselors done has been in accordance with the national model and the best practice by ASCA (2012) that is school counselors are involved in the implementation of counseling services, advocacy, collaboration, and design of service program components activities. The findings also revealed that the individual counseling is conducted by the Junior High School counselors in Semarang city and regency, although there still found some students having low perceptions of counselors' competencies in the individual counseling services. This might be due to the limited time available at school for counselors to provide individual counseling services to students so that not all students can experience individual counseling services.

This study is inseparable from the limitations. The first limitation in this study was related to the one unused indicator in the instrument, so the future studies are expected to use other instruments that have high validity and reliability. The second limitation dealt with the closed questions in the instrument that could not deeply discover obstacles in the process of individual counseling. The third was related to the lack of theoretical basis in form of previous studies with the topic of students' perceptions of counselors' competencies, and

skills in individual counseling. Therefore, the future studies are suggested to conduct studies related to students' perceptions and satisfactions in the services of individual counseling.

The findings of this study contribute implications to school counseling services, especially the individual counseling. They imply that the counselors need to pay attention to the six dimensions of competencies in the provision of individual counseling services, namely listening, and empathy skills, use of suitable counseling techniques in the process of counseling, provision of goal setting and objectives of the individual counseling, having achievements in relation to abilities in providing the individual counseling, having available time and willingness to provide the individual counseling, and provision of actions regarding students' goals in the individual counseling.

CONCLUSIONS

By referring to the data analysis of gender and grades, it can be concluded that the individual counseling conducted by the counselors has been running well, although there were some not optimal perceptions. It was evidenced by the low percentages gained by some dimensions, such as in the availability dimensions which got low perception from the female students and students at the 8th and 9th gradess.

It is suggested to the counselors to improve the individual counseling services, specifically to further clarify the counseling goals and how the counseling processes will be carried out so that the counseling process will lead to the determined goals. Then, the teachers also need to find or identify any weaknesses in providing the individual counseling services so that the services will be better in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Authors would like to sincere their gratitude to everyone who was involved in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENTS

All authors have agreed with the final version of this article.

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