

## Relationship between multicultural experiences and multicultural counseling competencies among Malaysian counselor trainees



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### ABSTRACT

The multicultural counseling course attended by counselor trainees is expected to enrich their multicultural experience through the academic environment, as they come from different backgrounds and personal multicultural experiences. While most multicultural counseling courses focus on the three components of multicultural counseling competence, counselor trainees should be provided with more multicultural exposure and interactions during classes to develop skills to work with diverse clients. Therefore, this descriptive-correlational study explores the relationship between multicultural experiences (personal and academic) and multicultural counseling competencies (self-reported and observer-rated) among Malaysian counselor trainees. All four instruments had been adapted and translated into the Malay language before being completed by 208 randomly selected counselor trainees. This study reported that counselor trainees scored at low levels of personal multicultural experience, high levels of academic multicultural experience, moderate levels of self-perceived multicultural counseling competence, and high levels of observed multicultural counseling competence. The findings showed no significant relationships between personal and academic multicultural experience and self-perceived and observed multicultural counseling competence. In conclusion, the findings imply that there are practices of experiential pedagogy in delivering multicultural counseling courses in counselor education programs. However, more research is needed to identify the underlying variables, such as counseling self-efficacy or self-introspectiveness, which may link the study variables, as this will serve as the most critical aspect in sustaining the counselor trainees' multicultural counseling competencies.

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### 1. Introduction

In the era of growing globalization, the demand for training in multicultural awareness (multicultural counseling competence) is anticipated to increase (Tanaka-Matsumi, 2022). Chappell (2014) and Utomo et al. (2022) maintained that studies regarding multicultural counseling competence reflect the effectiveness of multicultural training in preparing counselors to meet the

challenges of diverse societies in the 21st century. Multicultural training helps prepare counselors with multicultural counseling competence to lower racial and ethnic inequalities in mental health services (Sue et al., 2019; Tao et al., 2015), practice counseling ethically (Arredondo and Toporek, 2004), facilitate counselor trainees to deal with legal and ethical issues in counseling confidently (Subarimaniam et al., 2020), and reduce the risk of adverse effects from culturally inappropriate conceptualization of client issues (Wendt et al., 2015). Despite its importance in multicultural training, multicultural counseling competence research suffers from criticism regarding its lack of focus. See and Ng (2010) claimed that training in multicultural counseling competence is lacking in most counseling training programs. Moreover, Aga Mohd Jaladin et al. (2020) asserted that the

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multicultural focus is limited, which leads to a lack of infusion of multicultural components into the overall teaching and learning processes (Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2017), which results in a lack of exposure to and experience with diverse cultures (Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2013). Thus, this could hinder the contribution of multicultural training to the development of multicultural counseling competence. In addition, Hays (2020) maintained that most research on perceived changes in multicultural and/or social justice counseling competency focused on how trainees' curricular experiences—particularly their involvement in multicultural counseling courses or other discrete learning experiences—have affected those perceptions. Therefore, the call to explore the counselor trainees' experiences during multicultural training is pertinent.

Multicultural experience is conceptualized by Vora et al. (2019) as “the degree to which someone has knowledge of, identification with, and internalization of more than one societal culture” (p. 500). Recently, Maddux et al. (2020) defined multicultural experiences as exposure to or interactions with elements and/or members of a different culture(s). Based on their newly developed model, multicultural experiences will impact intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organizational outcomes such as creativity, psychological adjustment, and individual/firm performance. In this paper, two types of multicultural experiences are studied, personal and academic multicultural experiences. The personal multicultural experience refers to counselor trainees' multicultural encounters during their formative years that come with lived experience in their community. Meanwhile, the academic multicultural experience is the multicultural exposure and interaction counselor trainees experience during multicultural counseling courses. The multicultural counseling course attended by counselor trainees is expected to allow them to enrich their multicultural experience, as they come from different backgrounds and have various personal multicultural experiences. While most multicultural counseling courses focus on the three components of multicultural counseling competence, counselor trainees should be provided with more multicultural exposure and interactions during classes to develop skills to work with diverse clients.

## 2. Literature review

Experience as a variable in multicultural counseling research has a specific connotation based on its name. For example, there are cultural immersion experiences, multicultural training experiences, and multicultural experiences. Compared to other forms of experience, studies about multicultural experiences are limited in multicultural counseling research. This experience has only been found in Chaichanasakul's (2011) work. Meanwhile, Guzman et al. (2013), Barden et al. (2014), Johnson and Williams (2015), Harris et al.

(2019), and Kuo et al. (2020) studied different forms of experiences as they are related to multicultural counseling competence. However, their studies will still be included in this paper to support the hypothesis regarding the relationship between multicultural experiences and multicultural counseling competence. Chaichanasakul (2011) hypothesized that multicultural experiences, cognitive flexibility, cultural flexibility, and personality would predict multicultural counseling competence.

The researcher used the California Brief Multicultural Competence Scale (CBMCS) to assess the counselor trainees' multicultural counseling competence. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was done to examine his proposed model. The findings showed that multicultural experiences did predict multicultural counseling competence, with cognitive and cultural flexibility as mediators. In his study, Chaichanasakul (2011) also found a relationship between the number of years in a training program and multicultural counseling competence. This finding implied that more extended training and greater multicultural experiences did relate to the development of multicultural counseling competence. Guzman et al. (2013) observed that school counselors with fewer teaching and counseling experiences scored higher levels in demonstrated multicultural counseling competence but not in self-reported multicultural counseling competence. Their findings suggested that ongoing practice in a person's formative years, which comes with lived experience in a society that values diversity and works towards racial equality, influences demonstrated multicultural counseling competence. Therefore, this underscores the importance of measuring multicultural experience in understanding the development of multicultural counseling competence.

To examine differences in multicultural self-efficacy and multicultural counseling competence between counselor trainees based on involvement in an international immersion experience, Barden et al. (2014) undertook an empirical quasi-experimental study. The trainee counselors were enrolled in a university in Southeast America's full-time counselor training curriculum, which CACREP approved. They were split into two groups for the experiment and two for comparison. Participants in cultural immersion programs had the opportunity to interact directly with individuals from various backgrounds and engage in cross-cultural learning. The participants' abilities, self-efficacy, and capacity to think critically and conceptualize the cultural contexts of others all improved because of this exposure and engagement (Barden et al., 2014). According to Barden et al.'s (2014) findings, the outcomes had no significant differences between groups. The fact that participants had little to no opportunity for actual counseling practice due to cultural immersion may account for the lack of a discernible difference in this regard. According to Barden et al. (2014), this result may also highlight

the possible obstacles to evaluating competence and the potential difficulties associated with growing competence over relatively short periods.

Johnson and Williams (2015) conducted an ex post facto study investigating the effects of White Racial Identity and Colour-Blind Racial Attitude as potential predictors of multicultural counseling competence among 487 white doctoral students. The doctoral students were studying clinical, counseling, and school psychology. They used the Multicultural Counseling Inventory to measure multicultural counseling competence. Part of their research also studied multicultural training experiences and examined predictors of multicultural counseling competence. Johnson and Williams (2015) constructed a measure of multicultural training experiences. It was a self-report questionnaire that contained items regarding a) multicultural/diversity courses completed at the doctoral level, (b) multicultural research projects, and (c) multicultural workshop attendance. The results indicated that multicultural training experiences, social desirability, doctoral program type, participants' age, and months of practicum experience together accounted for most of the variance in predicting multicultural counseling knowledge (17%), awareness (20%), and skills (21%). In terms of specific forms of experience, this study suggested that multicultural training experience was a significant predictor of increased multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. On the other hand, the number of months of practicum experience received was a significant predictor of multicultural skills and knowledge, but not awareness.

In a study by Harris et al. (2019), the Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale was used to assess the impact of an abroad experience on students' multicultural competence (i.e., knowledge and awareness) in two study abroad courses throughout four distinct yearly excursions. The inaugural study abroad plan included two courses taught over five weeks in Germany and cultural immersion. The second, five-week study abroad program's main topics were non-governmental organizations, Indian development, and multiculturalism. The results of the effect size analysis showed that exposing students to various immersive multicultural perspectives, norms, rituals, and practices can be accomplished through both direct and indirect methods of enhancing multicultural competence.

All these studies suggested that continuous involvement in multicultural activities or attending multicultural counseling courses will be beneficial in improving counselor trainees' multicultural counseling competence. In addition, these studies proposed that a more extended period may be needed to develop multicultural counseling competence, as less counseling experience and months of practicum experience resulted in lower multicultural counseling competence for both practicing counselors and counselor trainees. However, certain forms of experience react

differently to multicultural counseling competence, depending on how multicultural counseling competence is measured. For example, those with less teaching and counseling experience scored higher in demonstrated multicultural counseling competence but not in self-reported multicultural counseling competence. Multicultural experience through interaction and tasks related to multicultural counseling role-play and experience from a person's formative years may allow counselor trainees to nurture their multicultural knowledge, awareness, and skills. This strengthens the need for multicultural experience to be further investigated as part of counselor trainees' multicultural experience to understand better its role in developing multicultural counseling competence.

Only Guzman et al. (2013) conducted a correlational study to measure self-reported and demonstrated multicultural counseling competence. Guzman et al. (2013) hypothesized that self-reported multicultural counseling competence may predict school counselors' demonstrated multicultural competence. They also hypothesized that prior training in multicultural issues, age, race, and professional experience in a school setting might be associated with self-reported and demonstrated multicultural counseling competence. The self-reported multicultural counseling competence was measured using Multicultural Counseling Competence Training and Skills-Revised (MCCTS-R). In contrast, multicultural counseling competence was measured using the Multicultural Critical Incident Vignette (MCIV). Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MCSDS) was also used as a control for biased responses in the MCCTS-R. A total of 227 questionnaires were completed and analyzed. Multiple linear regression (MLR) results showed that self-reported multicultural counseling competence did not predict demonstrated multicultural counseling competence. Age, race, and professional experience in a school setting reacted differently toward self-reported multicultural counseling competence and demonstrated multicultural counseling competence. Age, race, and professional experience in a school setting were not found to be related to self-reported multicultural counseling competence.

In contrast, age, race, and professional experience in school significantly predicted the demonstrated multicultural counseling competence. Thus, this finding can be interpreted as for the counselor's multicultural counseling competence to be visible, more experience is needed. In conclusion, multicultural training should be the medium through which the counselor trainees can experience multicultural exposure and interaction, especially in the Malaysian context, where counselors graduate with their first degree at a young age.

## 2.1. Purpose of study

Counseling is a face-to-face communication process where counselors face cultural challenges

such as maintaining eye contact and verbal and non-verbal language connotations. Conventional theoretical paradigms might need to be adapted to reconsider counseling practice from a one-to-one relationship between a counselor and client to a more inclusive community perspective (Singh et al., 2020, Keklik, 2022) in fulfilling clients' needs. Otherwise, the counselor fails to perform his or her duties ethically. Therefore, counselors must have the knowledge, sensitivity, and skills to conduct counseling sessions efficiently with clients from various cultures. Multiculturalism in counseling has long been embedded across the curriculum and established as a subject known as multicultural training to develop counselor trainees' multicultural counseling competence to ensure they work effectively with diverse clients. Studies measuring counselors' multicultural counseling competence reported that the participants scored high (Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2017; Shah, 2019). However, there is an open question of whether these findings reflect the current generation of counselors.

In line with the passage of time and technology, the current generation of counselors is born from the generation known as digital natives, who are believed to be more comfortable communicating through technology, especially smartphones and social media networks (Hasmawati et al., 2020). It is expected that trainee counselors today have limited personal multicultural experience, likely related to identifying academic multicultural experiences in multicultural training and developing their multicultural knowledge, awareness, and skills. For instance, a study by García et al. (2022) reported that some therapists in online sessions mentioned how challenging it is to sustain moments of silence. As in a psychotherapy session, silence can be clinically beneficial; mishandling this situation due to a lack of multicultural experience may backfire on the counselor trainees and harm the clients. Therefore, this study sought to explore the relationship between multicultural experiences (personal and academic) and multicultural counseling competencies (self-reported and observer-rated) among Malaysian counselor trainees. This study outlines two research objectives that are to (a) identify the level of multicultural experiences (personal and academic) and multicultural counseling competencies (self-reported and observer-rated) among Malaysian counselor trainees and (b) explore the relationship between multicultural experiences (personal and academic) and multicultural counseling competencies (self-reported and observer-rated) among Malaysian counselor trainees.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Population and sample size

In this correlational study, the population of interest is the local undergraduate counselor trainees completing their internship training. The

total number of people in the population was 265 counselor trainees. For Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), there was no consensus on the best formula to determine the sample size. Iacobucci (2010) recommended a minimum of 50 participants. Meanwhile, Kline (2023) maintained that SEM required a substantial sample size, and as a rule of thumb, most studies involved 200 cases. On the other hand, the statistical power analysis recommended 166 respondents at a statistical significance of .05, statistical power rejecting the null hypothesis of .95, and an effect size of .30. Nevertheless, this study cautiously took into consideration the assertions by Yung and Bentler (1996), Byrne (2010), and Koopman et al. (2015) of a moderate sample size of 100 to 200 (Kline, 2023) for bootstrapping. Thus, the final sample size used in this study was 208 (1.25% x 166) after considering the suggestion by Mitchell and Jolley (2010) for 25% more participants to ensure the returned questionnaires are sufficient for analysis.

#### 3.2. Instruments

The questionnaire used in the present study is a combination of four measurements and a demographic sheet, as described below:

- Multicultural Experience Inventory (MEI; Ramirez, 1998): The MEI was used to measure participants' degree of multicultural experience. The items were then divided into Type A and Type B, according to two types of scoring. This study used Type A items, which comprised 17 items. In this study, the MEI was translated, adapted, and validated to fit its use in the Malaysian context. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) confirmed seven items in the adapted MEI. The ratings ranged from 1 (mostly my ethnic group) to 5 (mostly entirely other ethnic groups) on a five-point Likert scale. The responses to the questions were scored as follows: 1 (mostly my ethnic group) or 5 (mostly entirely other ethnic groups) received one point; 2 (mostly my ethnic group with a few people of other ethnic groups) or 4 (primarily other ethnic groups with a few people of my ethnic group) received two points; and 3 (my ethnic group, other ethnic groups, and other minorities, about equally) received three points. The aggregate of all item scores yielded a Multicultural Experience Score, which ranged from 7 to 21, reflecting an individual's level of multicultural experience (Ramirez, 1998). The adapted MEI possessed fair psychometric properties and had high internal consistency,  $\alpha = .875$ , and sufficient convergent validity, AVE = .520 (Harun et al., 2022a).
- Multicultural Course Racial Experiences Inventory (MCREI; Pieterse et al., 2016): MCREI was established by Pieterse et al. (2016) to assess several aspects of students' experiences in multicultural courses related to their racial group membership. The instrument was developed based on the literature review on multicultural

counseling training and the authors' personal experiences as instructors and students in multicultural courses. The MCREI comprised 19 items, and all items were scored in a positive direction. In this study, the MCREI was translated, adapted, and validated to fit its use in the Malaysian context. Twelve items in the adapted MCREI were confirmed through CFA. The response options ranged from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree), with a total score that ranged from 12 to 60. The overall score of the MCREI was calculated by adding the responses to all items. It reflected the degree of intercultural experience the individual receives from attending a multicultural counseling course. The adapted MCREI possessed fair psychometric properties, high internal consistency,  $\alpha = .842$ , and sufficient convergent validity, AVE = .574 (Harun et al., 2021).

- Multicultural Counseling Competence Training and Survey-Revised (MCCTS-R; Holcomb-McCoy and Day-Vines, 2004): Holcomb-McCoy and Day-Vines (2004) developed the MCCTS-R to measure counselors' perceived multicultural counseling competence based on the American Multicultural Development (AMCD) multicultural competencies. The MCCTS-R originally had 32 items. The MCCTS-R was translated, adapted, and validated in this study to fit its use in the Malaysian context. Twelve items in the adapted MCCTS-R were confirmed through CFA and used a 4-point scale representing the level of agreement (1 to 4 score), with a range of 0 to 80 for the total score. The total score of the MCCTS-R represented an individual's perception of their ability to demonstrate multicultural skills or behaviors during counseling sessions. The adapted MCCTS-R possessed fair psychometric properties and had excellent internal consistency,  $\alpha = .952$ , and convergent validity, AVE = .714 (Harun et al., 2020).
- Cross-Cultural Counseling Inventory-Revised (CCCI-R; LaFromboise et al., 1991): The CCCI-R was a 20-item questionnaire measuring cross-cultural counseling competence, assessing counseling effectiveness with culturally diverse clients. It was initially developed by LaFromboise et al. (1991) to be completed by trained observers or counseling supervisors. In this study, the CCCI-R was translated, adapted, and validated to fit its use in the Malaysian context. 16 items in the adapted CCCI-R were confirmed through CFA. The overall score range is 13 to 48, with each item represented by a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The overall score reflected the counselors' level of multicultural counseling competency and the extent to which they could effectively counsel clients from varied cultural backgrounds. The adapted CCCI-R possessed fair psychometric properties and had excellent internal consistency,  $\alpha = .944$ , and convergent validity, AVE = .909. The adapted CCCI-R possessed fair psychometric properties and had excellent internal consistency,

$\alpha = .944$ , and convergent validity, AVE = .909 (Harun et al., 2022b).

- Demographic Data: Information on the respondent's age, gender, ethnicity, and religion was provided on a demographic sheet attached to the questionnaire's final page.

### 3.3. Procedure

Data collection commenced after the grant of ethical clearance from Universiti Putra Malaysia's Ethical Committee and permission from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of selected universities to conduct the study involving their counselor trainees. Additionally, formal letters were addressed to the department head, dean, and internship coordinators to request help accessing the supervisors' and counselor trainees' data. The relevant data were the total number of counselor trainees, counselor trainees' names, student numbers, email addresses, and addresses of internship locations, as well as the supervisors' names and email addresses. A sampling frame was built with a code for each counselor trainee based on the information collected. The code was written on folded paper and placed in a bowl. The researcher drew upon it until the total number of samples reached 208 participants.

A cover letter and consent form were attached to the questionnaire booklets. Questionnaire Set A was for the counselor trainees, and Set B was for the supervisor, and they were mailed individually to the respondents. In addition, the questionnaires for counselor trainees and supervisors were coded to maintain confidentiality. The code represented a counselor trainee under their supervision. If a particular supervisor had three counselor trainees under supervision, the supervisor would receive three sets of coded questionnaires. The supervisor's cover letter featured the code for each trainee counselor. Five weeks before the internship period ended, the questionnaires were emailed out. 205 trainee counselors and 38 supervisors successfully responded.

### 3.4. Data analysis

The data was analyzed by computing and organizing the scores based on the specific variables studied. The 205 usable responses were analyzed using descriptive analysis and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS. Then, AMOS was used to assess the hypothesized and inter-relationships between the studied variables.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Level of multicultural experiences and multicultural counseling competencies

As presented in Table 1, the mean score of personal multicultural experience was 1.87, lower

than mid-point 2. Therefore, the counselor trainees' overall level of personal multicultural experience was low. Meanwhile, counselor trainees' overall academic multicultural experience level was high, as the mean score was 3.87 and higher than the midpoint of 3. Similarly, the counselor trainees' overall level of self-perceived multicultural counseling competence was moderate, with a mean score of 2.55, equivalent to the mid-point of 2.5. In addition, the mean score of observed multicultural counseling competence was 4.85, higher than the midpoint of 3.5. This finding evidenced the counselor trainees' overall level of observed multicultural counseling competence was high.

**Table 1:** Mean and standard deviation of each variable

Constructs	Mid-point	Mean	Standard deviation
PME	2.00	1.87	.60
AME	3.00	3.87	.57
PERMCC	2.50	2.55	.50
OBSMCC	3.50	4.85	.61

PME: Personal multicultural experience; AME: Academic multicultural experience; PERMCC: Self-perceived multicultural counseling competence; OBSMCC: Observed multicultural counseling competence

#### 4.2. Relationship between multicultural experiences and multicultural counseling competencies

As illustrated in Table 2, both personal and academic multicultural experiences were found to have no significant relationships with observed multicultural counseling competence ( $\beta = -.099$ ,  $p > .05$ ;  $\beta = -.164$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Similarly, the results indicated that self-perceived multicultural counseling competence was found to have no significant relationship with observed multicultural counseling competence ( $\beta = -.047$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

**Table 2:** Relationships between variables

Hypothesized relationship	Beta	S. E.	C. R.	p-value
OBSMCC $\leftarrow$ PME	-.099	.186	-1.190	.234
OBSMCC $\leftarrow$ AME	-.164	.190	-1.426	.154
OBSMCC $\leftarrow$ PERMCC	-.047	.066	-.512	.608

## 5. Discussion

In this study, personal multicultural experience referred to counselor trainees' multicultural encounters during formative years, which came with lived experience in their community. The descriptive analysis results showed that the counselor trainees obtained low scores for items on their personal multicultural experience. This finding indicated that the counselor trainees had low multicultural exposure and interactions during their formative years. This result was inconsistent with Chaichanasakul (2011), who found that the counselor trainees scored highly for their personal multicultural experience. This contradictory finding can be explained by the different demographic backgrounds of the counselor trainees involved in the two studies. The respondents in Chaichanasakul's (2011) study were mainly Europeans or Americans who were studying for their

Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology and Clinical Psychology at the time of the study. The respondents were in the fourth year of their studies and aged between 21 to 53 years old. These characteristics of his sample, especially in terms of age and the fact that they were Ph.D. students, may have contributed to the high scores in their multicultural experience. The more comprehensive age ranges implied higher cognitive maturity and more cultural resources. On the other hand, the respondents in this study were undergraduate counselor trainees from a predominantly homogenous background. They came from a homogenous group of 22 to 24-year-olds. One would expect older doctoral candidates to have more life experience and more chances for multicultural exposure and interactions.

Academic multicultural experience measured in this study referred to counselor trainees' multicultural experience during a multicultural counseling course (Harun et al., 2021). The descriptive analysis results proved that counselor trainees scored highly for items on their academic multicultural experience. This implied that counselor trainees had had high multicultural exposure and interactions in the multicultural counseling course. Established studies on multicultural training or multicultural counseling course experiences, such as Johnson and Williams (2015) and Pieterse et al. (2016), involved counselor education students. They believed that experience during the multicultural counseling course or training reflected the activities in the multicultural counseling course and the various aspects of student experiences while attending the course. These activities triggered more multicultural exposure and interaction, increasing the counselor trainees' multicultural experience, which could lead to personal change. Despite their low personal multicultural experience, the counselor trainees showed high academic multicultural experience after attending the multicultural counseling course. This suggested that the current multicultural counseling course has sufficient content and activities that provide a medium for counselor trainees to experience multicultural exposure and interactions. Earlier studies like Johnson and Williams (2015) and Pieterse et al. (2016) maintained that activities in multicultural courses are essential in developing multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills.

Perceived multicultural counseling competence refers to how one sees oneself as competent in multicultural counseling. This study used a self-report measurement that covered two components of multicultural counseling competence: multicultural knowledge and multicultural awareness. In this study, the counselor trainees obtained moderate scores for items on self-perceived multicultural counseling competence. This implied that the counselor trainees perceived themselves as having moderate multicultural knowledge and awareness of collaborating with multicultural clients. Abdul Malek et al. (2014) reported similar findings. Their study involved

counseling teachers in schools and found that the respondents obtained moderate scores for items on perceived multicultural counseling competence. In this regard, the school counseling teachers might have had the same level of exposure to cultural resources as the counselor trainees in this study. School counseling teachers have limited opportunities to widen their cultural resources due to the homogenous working setting where most clients come from the same age group. Thus, their cultural resources may have been limited to what they gained from the multicultural counseling course they attended during the counselor education program, even when they might have had more working experience.

Most studies focused on measuring self-perceived multicultural counseling competence. On the other hand, [Guzman et al. \(2013\)](#), [Owen et al. \(2011\)](#), and [Dillon et al. \(2016\)](#) were some of the studies that measured observed multicultural counseling competence. For instance, [Owen et al. \(2011\)](#) and [Dillon et al. \(2016\)](#) used the CCCI-R in their studies. They measured the counselors' observed multicultural counseling competence from the client's perspective. However, neither study reported their respondents' observed multicultural counseling competence level. Furthermore, only [Guzman et al. \(2013\)](#) used a similar type of multicultural counseling competence measurement procedure, where they measured their participants' multicultural counseling competence based on experts' evaluation of participants' responses to the multicultural critical incident vignettes (MCIV). Their findings showed that younger respondents and people of color responded better and scored higher on observed multicultural counseling competence.

Similarly, in this study, the supervisors gave the counselor trainees a high rating on observed multicultural counseling competence, and they dealt with clients from a younger age group and different ethnic groups. The supervisors rated them highly, as the counselor trainees had more opportunities to practice multicultural counseling competence during ongoing counseling sessions in their respective internship locations and everyday experiences as they adjusted to their new environment. Some of the counselor trainees had undergone their internship in a setting and location different from their home environment; for example, a counselor trainee from a state in East Malaysia did his internship training at a school in one of the states in Peninsular Malaysia. The counselor trainee needed to adapt his behavior or skills while attending to younger clients from different ethnic groups. This behavior adaptation, translated into skills during the counseling sessions, was observable to the supervisors.

Besides personal and academic multicultural experiences, counselor trainees' self-perceived multicultural counseling competence, which comprises multicultural knowledge and multicultural awareness, is essential for counselor trainees to develop and sharpen their multicultural skills. A multicultural skill scan is not acquired

without a good knowledge of the culture. Moreover, [Shah \(2019\)](#) maintained that multicultural knowledge without multicultural awareness might lead to unhealthy behaviors such as stereotypes and discrimination. Multicultural knowledge, multicultural awareness, and multicultural skills are interdependent, as [Sue et al. \(1992\)](#) maintained that an effective counselor requires all three domains ([Shah, 2019](#)). However, the findings revealed no significant relationships between personal multicultural experience, academic multicultural experience, and self-perceived multicultural counseling competence with observed multicultural counseling competence. These findings were supported by studies conducted by [Dillon et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Owen et al. \(2011\)](#). To date, the study by [Guzman et al. \(2013\)](#) measured a similar perspective of multicultural counseling competence through supervisors' observation and rating of the manifest multicultural counseling skills. Nevertheless, the current findings contradicted [Guzman et al. \(2013\)](#).

In terms of the relationship between personal multicultural experience and observed multicultural counseling competence, [Guzman et al. \(2013\)](#) reported the opposite findings; they found that experience has a significant relationship with observed multicultural counseling competence. This relationship was possible due to ongoing exposure and interaction in a person's formative years that come with lived experience in a society that values diversity, which is effective in observed multicultural counseling competence. The nature of the findings can also be explained by referring to other related studies. For instance, the lack of relationships between personal and academic multicultural experience with observed multicultural counseling competence may be related to color-blind racial attitudes. [Chao et al. \(2011\)](#) referred to color blindness as the "denial of the social significance regarding race and the existence of racism in the United States today ([Neville et al., 2006](#)). This concept may be applicable in this study to explain an individual's tendency to recognize the differences between individuals and their groups. This lower tendency may be due to the lack of opportunities to experience different cultures, as the counselor trainees grew up in a homogenous environment.

The homogenous environment in which the counselor trainees grew up could be traced back to the British colonialism era. The British adopted a capitalist system that divided economic activities based on ethnicity to create a plural society. The British ensured that the ethnic groups did not have much contact with one another. Hence, the Malays were present in the unwaged peasant sector, and non-Malays (a term used collectively for Chinese and Indians in Malaysia) in the waged capitalist sector ([Noor and Leong, 2013](#)). This landscape has shaped the mind and nurtured the tendency to live and socialize within a homogenous group. This scenario, in turn, limited the multicultural exposure and interaction among the counselor trainees. Even though decades have passed, homogenous

associations persist in some geographical settings due to the influence of hegemony and social media, which often highlight racial matters. This has an impact on intergroup relations among Malaysians. In addition, the study sample in their 20s belongs to Generation Y or the millennials, the digital natives who tend to interact virtually rather than physically, and they are believed to frequently utilize modern technology like social media and smartphones more than other age groups (Hasmawati et al., 2022). Virtual interaction through social media limits the process of social identification and inhibits the development of diverse cultural experiences.

In addition, Donohue (2020) maintained that “being embedded within one’s culture provides scripts and routines for behavior; if a person experiences just their own culture, they begin to take for granted that their way of life is the way things are. However, once these experiences occur within a distinct culture or with someone from a different cultural perspective, they can be viewed differently” (p. 2). Unfortunately, multicultural counseling competence is impossible without the ability to address race and racism (Dune et al., 2022). Therefore, with limited multicultural experience, counselor trainees may stay in their comfort zone and be unable to experience some form of cognitive and cultural dissonance, which contributes to shifting their worldviews and cultural schemas (Barden et al., 2014). In other words, their multicultural resources were not growing. Chao et al. (2011) found that respondents with high color-blind racial attitudes obtained lower scores on multicultural knowledge. Without appropriate and sufficient knowledge, counselor trainees may not be aware or sure whether they portray behaviors/skills that are effective during a counseling session with multicultural clients.

The lack of relationships between self-perceived and observed multicultural counseling competence is consistent with Dillon et al. (2016) and Owen et al. (2011). They measured observed multicultural counseling competence using the CCCI-R but from the client’s perspective. Dillon et al. (2016) discovered that counselors’ self-report/perceived multicultural counseling competence did not correlate with observed multicultural counseling competence as rated by clients. Owen et al. (2011) explained that this phenomenon might be related to clients’ cultural sensitivity. In this light, the lack of relationship could be explained by the fact that counselor trainees observed multicultural counseling competence had more to do with a specific supervisor than a generalized counselor trainee characteristic. The supervisors’ rating of the counselor trainees observed that multicultural counseling competence was more related to their perceptions of what occurred during the supervision sessions. Some counselor trainees might have been more accustomed to supervisors than others when cultural approaches were incorporated into a supervised counseling session. The supervisors’ awareness of cultural issues might be related to their

ethnic identity or past experiences related to their cultural identity (Owen et al., 2011).

The findings of this study implicated that the multicultural course or training delivered by the counselor educators contained experiential activities allowing the counselor trainees to experience multicultural exposure and interaction during lectures. As practical knowledge of multicultural counseling is also essential, counselor trainees must be taught how to dissect and infuse cultural information during the session to incorporate it in choosing assessments and planning interventions for the client. Thus, class instructors should enlighten counselor trainees on how knowledge and awareness can be transformed into visible action through experiential learning activities such as case studies, role-plays, fishbowl exercises, problem-based learning, and fieldwork. This effort will then improve the relationship between one’s knowledge and awareness of skills.

In addition, counselor educators might maintain or improve self-reflection activities so that counselor trainees become more aware of their personal multicultural experience and can link it to their academic multicultural experience. Counselor trainees should be encouraged to practice self-reflection as recommended by researchers (Knapp et al., 2017; Dorn-Medeiros et al., 2020) as one of the methods to improve awareness among mental health practitioners (Posluns and Gall, 2020) as well as to encourage multicultural counseling competence growth (Killian and Floren, 2020; Sacco and Amende, 2021). Counselor trainees can translate their experience into new knowledge and in-depth awareness through self-reflection. Many class instructors have set self-reflection writing as one of the assignments. However, it will be more profitable if other subject instructors set up the same assignments. At the end of the process, counselor trainees will gain a holistic insight into themselves, counseling, and life. According to Kim et al. (2019), consistently reflecting on our cultural values, traditions, and privileges helps us critically assess our attitudes and ideas about our culture. Simultaneously, it enables an understanding of how many sociocultural variables affect our psychological experiences and behaviors. The process of self-reflection should be nurtured so that it becomes a routine that works as active self-care, which benefits counselor trainees professionally and personally (Alis et al., 2018).

In terms of future research, this study additionally addresses the need for longitudinal studies (Tao et al., 2015; Dillon et al., 2016) to capture the specific training factors such as instructor training and competence, cultural immersion experiences, and classroom activities that may influence the development of counselor trainees’ multicultural counseling self-efficacy and multicultural counseling competencies (Gonzalez-Voller et al., 2020). In addition, since this study only involved local undergraduate counselor trainees at the end of their internship, the findings might not be



generalizable to experienced counselors. Future research should involve other groups of samples from the counseling population, such as counselor educators or professional counselors. Lastly, this study recommends further study identifying the underlying variables, such as counseling self-efficacy or self-introspectiveness, which may link multicultural experiences and multicultural counseling competencies.

## 6. Conclusion

This study found that personal and academic multicultural experience and self-perceived multicultural counseling competence had no significant relationship with observed multicultural counseling competence. In addition, this study also reported that counselor trainees scored low levels of personal multicultural experience, high levels of academic multicultural experience, moderate levels of self-perceived multicultural counseling competence, and high levels of observed multicultural counseling competence. All in all, based on the findings, this study encouraged and supported the continuous efforts of multicultural counseling course instructors to maintain their practice of experiential pedagogy, as well as recommended future research to study further the underlying variables such as counseling self-efficacy or self-introspectiveness that may link multicultural experiences and multicultural counseling competencies.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

## Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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