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MULTICULTURALISM IN COUNSELING: COUNSELORS COMPETENCE
IN DEALING WITH CLIENT DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The growing cultural, ethnic, religious, and social diversity in today's society presents new challenges for the counseling profession. Counselors often struggle when they lack adequate understanding of clients' cultural backgrounds, which may result in misinterpretation of problems, ineffective strategies, and difficulties in building strong therapeutic relationships. This paper aims to explore the significance of multicultural competence in counseling, outline the challenges encountered in diverse contexts, and suggest strategies for strengthening these competencies. The study employs a literature review approach, drawing from both international and Indonesian scholarly sources on multicultural counseling. The review indicates that multicultural competence encompasses three interrelated dimensions: self awareness of personal values and biases, knowledge of clients' cultural contexts, and the ability to apply culturally responsive skills and techniques. Several obstacles remain, including stereotypes, language and communication barriers, and value conflicts between counselors and clients. To address these issues, continuous professional training, reflective practice, cross cultural experiences, and the integration of multicultural perspectives into counselor education programs are recommended. The implication of this study is that multicultural competence should be regarded not as an additional skill but as a core element of professional counseling, particularly in Indonesia, where cultural diversity is deeply embedded in everyday life.

Keywords: multicultural counseling, counselor competence, diversity, cultural awareness, counseling skills

INTRODUCTION

A professional helping relationship, counseling is intended to help people better understand themselves, overcome obstacles, and realize their potential to live their best lives. Counseling is not an isolated process; it is impacted by the client's social and cultural surroundings in addition to psychological aspects. Every person interprets their experiences differently due to their own cultural values, beliefs, languages, and social standards. Therefore, rather than being an afterthought, cultural issues must be a fundamental component of counseling.

The demand for counseling services that are equitable, inclusive, and pertinent to increasingly diverse communities gave rise to the idea of multicultural therapy. Therefore, one of the most important skills that professional counselors need to have is multicultural competency. It speaks to the counselor's capacity to provide services that are sensitive to the individual backgrounds of each client and suitable for their culture (Sue & Sue, 2016).

The three main components of these competences are cultural knowledge, self-awareness, and counseling techniques that are sensitive to cultural differences. Given the great diversity in Indonesia more than 1,300 ethnic groups, hundreds of regional languages, and various religions coexist multicultural counseling has become very urgent there. Communication gaps, gaps in individual and family values, as well as possible biases and stereotypes are some of the difficulties that this situation creates. An insensitive counselor risks misinterpreting his client's problems, losing his client's trust, and thus failing to achieve his counseling goals (Maliki, 2016).

According to earlier research, many counselors and counselor candidates still struggle to put multicultural concepts into practice. The lack of intercultural education integration in counselor training programs is one of the contributing factors, which leaves graduates unprepared (Muslimin, 2020; Rosita, 2019). Additionally, counselors are less prepared to deal with real-world situations involving cultural differences when they have little direct contact to culturally varied areas. This emphasizes how important it is to acquire multicultural competency, which calls for methodical integration into professional practice, training, and education.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the idea of multicultural competence, look at the difficulties that counselors encounter, and provide methods for enhancing competence. This study aims to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of inclusive, egalitarian, and culturally sensitive counseling services in Indonesia by combining international theory with Indonesian research.

METHOD

In order to investigate ideas, difficulties, and methods for enhancing counselors' intercultural competency, this study used a methodical literature review strategy.

Sources and Selection of Data

Textbooks, peer reviewed national and international magazines, conference papers, and earlier research on multicultural counseling were among the sources of the literature. Three factors were taken into consideration when choosing materials using purposeful sampling: (1) relevance to multicultural

counseling or counselor competency; (2) publishing within the previous ten years to guarantee current viewpoints; and (3) credibility as demonstrated by peer review or respectable publishers.

Data Collection

The review was conducted in several steps:

Identification: Searching with terms like "cultural diversity in Indonesia," "multicultural counseling," and "counselor competence."

Screening: Using the title and abstract to weed out irrelevant and duplicate articles.

Eligibility: Examining full-text publications to make sure they relate to the topic of the study. Inclusion:

Choosing final sources for in-depth examination is known as inclusion.

Data Analysis

Three main topics emerged from the application of thematic analysis:

1. Multicultural competency in counseling is urgently needed.
2. Difficulties counselors encounter while interacting with diverse populations.
3. Techniques for enhancing intercultural competency.

A thorough and contextually appropriate knowledge was produced by synthesizing the findings and comparing them with worldwide literature.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Definition of Multicultural Competence in Counseling

One of the most important components of good counseling is multicultural knowledge. It may be defined as a counselor's ability to provide services that are appropriate, relevant, and considerate to a range of clients in diverse cultural circumstances. Three crucial components make up this competency in practice: cultural understanding, self-awareness, and counseling abilities. These three factors lay the groundwork for counselors to comprehend cultural differences and modify their methods to suit each client's particular requirements (Sue & Sue, 2022).

The realization that culture has a significant influence on how people perceive the world gives rise to the idea of intercultural competency. Decision-making processes, social conventions, belief systems, and communication patterns are all influenced by culture (Pedersen, 1999). In other words, as people view their life events via the prism of their culture, counseling cannot be divorced from the social context of its clients. Ignoring cultural factors puts counseling at danger of losing its relevance and could result in miscommunications between the client and the counselor.

It is very critical to use multicultural competence in the Indonesian environment. More than 1,300 different ethnic groups, hundreds of regional languages, and a diverse range of religious and cultural practices can all be found in Indonesia. Because of this cultural complexity, multicultural therapy is not only necessary but also a requirement for guidance and counseling procedures. Counselors who are culturally insensitive run the risk of viewing their clients' issues only from their own viewpoints or perhaps unintentionally forcing their ideals on them. During the counseling process, this approach could result in misunderstandings, mistrust, and even failure (Maliki, 2016).

Furthermore, intercultural competence should be viewed as a core professional competency rather

than an add-on or elective skill. By demonstrating this ability, counselors can not only assist clients more effectively but also contribute to the creation of inclusive, equitable, and social justice-based counseling services. In this sense, multicultural competency can be seen as a starting point to enable counseling services genuinely address the requirements of clients who live in a diverse and pluralistic society (Rohiman & Pamuji, 2017).

Dimensions of Multicultural Competence

Three main dimensions of multicultural competence are repeatedly differentiated in the literature, namely self awareness, cultural knowledge, and counseling skills.

1. **Self awareness.** Counselors must recognize their own cultural identities, privileges, values, and potential biases. Without such awareness, counselors risk projecting personal beliefs onto clients, which can distort understanding and reduce empathy (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). For example, a counselor with urban, modern values may unconsciously dismiss the worldview of a client from a rural or traditional background.
2. **Cultural knowledge.** Beyond awareness, counselors need to acquire factual and conceptual knowledge of cultural systems, including religion, customs, language, and social structures (Sue & Sue, 2016). Knowledge does not mean stereotyping; rather, it enables counselors to contextualize client experiences and avoid misinterpretation. For instance, a client's reluctance to make eye contact may not indicate avoidance, but rather reflect cultural norms of respect.
3. **Counseling skills.** Counseling skills are an important ability that counselors need when working with clients from different cultural backgrounds. Counselors should not only understand theories but also be able to adjust their way of communicating and using techniques according to the client's cultural background. This is important because every culture has its own way of thinking, speaking, and expressing feelings. One example is the use of stories or metaphors that fit the client's culture. For instance, in Javanese culture, where proverbs are often used, a counselor may use local sayings to make explanations easier to understand (Sue & Sue, 2016). Counselors also need to pay attention to body language. In some cultures, making eye contact is seen as polite and honest, while in other cultures it can be viewed as rude or challenging. Knowing these differences, counselors will be able to prevent misunderstandings and establish more effective communication (Yuanita and Soejanto, 2020). In communities that value togetherness (collectivist cultures), such as many groups in Indonesia, counseling can be more effective if family members are involved. Family support can strengthen the client's motivation and help achieve the goals of counseling (Rosita, 2019).

Therefore, counseling skills are not just about applying the same methods to everyone, but about being flexible and adaptive. This way, counseling can truly match the client's needs and respect the cultural values they hold. The integration of these three dimensions ensures that counseling practices move beyond a "one size fits all" model toward truly personalized, culturally responsive services.

Challenges in Multicultural Counseling

Although multicultural competence is conceptually clear, it is difficult to implement it in practice.

1. Stereotypes and Prejudice

The biggest weakness is probably the presence of stereotypes or prejudices that can be introduced

during sessions by the counselor. A stereotype happens when a counselor already forms a pre-determined notion about a certain ethnic, religious or cultural group, without even having met the client. Consequently, the counselor will be tempted to make general assumptions about the client and base his treatment on these assumptions, rather than on the experiences and needs of the client. This makes the counselor less willing to express sincere empathy and even to be discriminative. To illustrate this, when a counselor assumes that students in a particular community are lazy or undisciplined, the prejudice will impact how they relate to the client during counseling.

2. Value Conflicts

Value conflict happens when the personal values of the counselor and those of the client are in conflict. This might cause ethical issues particularly where the concern of upholding the values of the client and upholding professional values are at odds. In a school environment, say, some students might be raised by families with very strong conservative traditions, whereas the school requires them to adhere to more liberal regulations. When a counselor lacks tact when dealing with such situations, it can be a stressor to the counseling relationship and interfere with progress.

3. Language and Communication Barriers

The issue of language may also constitute a significant barrier in multicultural counseling, particularly in nations such as Indonesia that have over a thousand regional languages. Misunderstanding can easily occur due to differences in dialect, local expressions or indirect forms of communication. An example of this is a counselor who values direct communication may misunderstand a client who talks in a roundabout or indirect manner, but this may only be a cultural value of being polite. In the absence of awareness of such nuances, the counseling process may be derailed.

4. Insufficient Training and Preparation

Another problem is that multicultural competence is not taught as a formal area in counselor education programs. Multicultural counseling is a subject that is still considered optional in most institutions and not a main curriculum. Therefore, a lot of graduates end up in the profession without the proper tools to address complex multicultural challenges. Counselors can find it hard to respond positively to the variety of needs of clients without necessary training and experience.

Based on these difficulties, it is apparent that multicultural counseling demands not only systemic reinforcement (through training, curriculum development, and institutional policies) but also individual dedication on the part of counselors to remain competent. It is then that counselors can offer effective and culturally sensitive services to any client.

Strategies for Developing Multicultural Competence

Scholars have proposed several strategies to enhance multicultural competence:

1. Professional training and experiential learning. Muslimin (2020) emphasized that multicultural competence cannot be developed solely through theory. Experiential activities such as role plays, cultural immersion, and reflective discussions allow counselors to confront biases and develop practical skills.
2. Curriculum integration. Rohiman & Pamuji (2017) suggested embedding multicultural education

into the formal curriculum of counselor training programs. By making it a compulsory component, universities ensure that future counselors internalize multicultural values from the beginning of their studies.

3. Value based approaches. Sa'idah (2022) introduced guidance rooted in an Nahdliyah moderation values, which emphasize tolerance, inclusivity, and balance. This approach demonstrates how local cultural and religious traditions can serve as resources for developing multicultural awareness.
4. Continuous self reflection. Khoiruddin (2025) argued that self reflection is a lifelong process. Counselors must continuously evaluate how their personal identities influence their practice and remain open to feedback from clients and colleagues.

These strategies suggest that no single approach is sufficient. Instead, the development of multicultural competence requires a holistic effort that combines education, training, reflection, and cultural immersion.

Implications of Multicultural Competence in Counseling Practice

Strengthening multicultural competence carries broad implications for the counseling profession:

1. Inclusive and equitable services. Counselors equipped with multicultural competence can provide services that respect all clients regardless of cultural identity, aligning with the principles of social justice (Maliki, 2016).
2. Enhanced therapeutic alliance. Clients who feel their culture is respected are more likely to build trust with counselors, resulting in more effective counseling outcomes (Sue & Sue, 2016).
3. Conflict prevention and resolution. Counselors with multicultural skills can bridge value differences, thereby preventing misunderstandings and promoting harmony (Yuanita & Soejanto, 2020).
4. Professional growth. Engaging with cultural diversity enriches counselors' perspectives, enhances empathy, and contributes to ongoing personal and professional development.

These implications show that multicultural competence benefits not only clients but also the professional and ethical advancement of counselors themselves.

Findings and Novelty

This study is unusual because it combines real data from Indonesia with global theoretical frameworks. This study emphasizes religious diversity, ethnic stereotypes, language variation, and collectivist norms specific to Indonesia, whereas Western literature frequently concentrates on race, gender, and immigration (Sue & Sue, 2022).

Comparison with Other Research: This study adds local characteristics (language, religion, and family engagement) to the global tripartite theories of competence. It emphasizes the necessity of structured curricular integration and supports bibliometric findings that Indonesian research is still lacking (Roziqi, 2023). The findings emphasize that experiential learning (immersion, supervised practice) is crucial but still uncommon in Indonesia, in line with international reviews (Chu et al., 2022).

Significant Differences and Theoretical Implications:

1. Local knowledge and religion as determining factors While indigenous values and religious traditions predominate in Indonesia, Western study places a strong emphasis on race and ethnicity. This recommends embracing the cultural humility paradigm in order to preserve openness and lifelong learning.
2. Family involvement in counseling: Research indicates that family engagement is essential due to collectivist ideals, which supports Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a framework.
3. Training gaps: According to the results, the current curriculum are too theoretical, and experiential learning that adheres to Kolb's experiential learning cycle must be incorporated.
4. Global South representation: By encouraging a "pluriversal" approach as opposed to a one-size-fits-all Western model, your research helps to diversify global theory.

In order to ensure that theory and practice stay contextually relevant for Indonesia, this research combines these findings to provide a multi-level approach for creating multicultural competency through curriculum design, experiential training, cultural immersion, and ongoing professional reflection.

CONCLUSION

As it is noted in this study, multicultural competence is one of the most important professional competencies that counselors should have in the age of globalization. The results provide evidence that multicultural competence comprises three mutually dependent dimensions, namely: self awareness of personal values and biases, knowledge of cultural diversity of clients, and the expertise to utilize culturally responsive counseling interventions.

There are also a lot of problems that counselors have to deal with such as stereotypes, prejudice, value conflicts, and communication barriers that can deter the effectiveness of counseling services. Hence, to enhance multicultural competence, a program involving a combination of professional training, reflective practice, curriculum integration, and the use of local cultural values as a basis to guide counseling practice is needed.

This research implication is that multicultural competence must be incorporated into counselor education and continuing professional development courses. Without this integration, the counselors cannot be able to provide inclusive, equitable, and culturally appropriate services to clients of diverse backgrounds.

In the future, empirical research, including surveys or experimental design, is proposed to be carried out to quantify the effectiveness of multicultural competence development programs among counselors in Indonesia. This kind of research would take empirical data further to support the theoretical knowledge presented in this literature review.

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