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MULTICULTURAL COUNSELORS: ADAPTIVE SKILLS AND ETHICS IN
HANDLING CLIENT DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the important role of multicultural counselors in handling the diversity of clients. The main focus is on adaptive skills that enable counselors to adjust approaches and communication according to clients' backgrounds, aiming for more effective counseling. Additionally, professional ethics play a key role, especially in respecting cultural values, maintaining confidentiality, and avoiding discrimination. The article also addresses challenges counselors face when working with diverse clients, such as potential conflicts or unconscious biases during counseling. To provide practical insight, real case examples of cultural conflicts in counseling sessions and counselor strategies to resolve them are presented. By understanding and implementing these adaptive skills and ethical principles, counselors are expected to offer inclusive services, manage cultural differences, and support clients' overall well-being. Thus, a deep understanding and application of adaptive skills and ethics form a foundation for multicultural counselors to provide effective and meaningful support.

Keywords: counseling, multicultural, ethics, diversity, skills

INTRODUCTION

The impact of globalization demands individuals to have high skills or competencies. In this global era, a coherent strategy is also required to manage all aspects and issues of life. In this regard, Indonesia, rich in cultural diversity, requires counselors to develop adaptive skills and professional ethics aimed at reaching cross-cultural clients. In the 21st century, it is highly likely for a person to meet others from diverse multicultural backgrounds. As is known, every person differs in ethnographic, demographic, and status variables. Ethnographic variables include nationality, ethnicity, language, and religion. Demographic variables include gender, age, and place of residence. Status variables include economic background, education, and formal or informal affiliations (Zakiyah, Rahmat, & Sa'adah, 2022).. Based on these differences, counselors must adjust counseling approaches according to local norms, traditions, and values, while upholding respect, confidentiality, and fairness without discrimination. Counselors are not only facilitators but also cultural mediators who recognize and manage value differences that often potentially cause conflicts or unconscious biases during counseling.

The multicultural counseling approach integrates deep cultural understanding with adaptive skills and strict ethical principles to create a responsive and inclusive therapeutic relationship. Client issues can stem from many factors, including culture, which in society is broad—covering values, perspectives, attitudes, customs, and habits. Traditions shape individual behavior patterns like thinking, acting, and expressing emotions, not all of which are accepted by society. Such differences can lead to conflict and division (Candra & Hidajat, 2020). Therefore, awareness of cultural identity and the ability to manage cultural conflicts in counseling are crucial for successful intervention. This also distinguishes culturally sensitive counseling from technique-based counseling practice. By optimizing adaptive skills and implementing professional ethics, counselors in Indonesia can provide services that are not only effective but also bridge cultural differences. The purpose of this study is to provide in-depth insights into multicultural counseling skills and ethics, as well as provide practical solutions to real-life challenges, so that counseling practice can become more inclusive and aligned with social trends in Indonesia.

Many contemporary case studies show that counselors lack a good understanding of local culture, resulting in communication difficulties and reduced effectiveness (Mazidah, Nelisma, & Silvianetri, 2022) . Multicultural counseling theory emphasizes the importance of cultural competence and adaptation skills in cultural values and communication. Furthermore, unconscious bias can influence counseling outcomes, particularly when stereotypes and prejudices or attitudes toward clients undermine the therapeutic relationship. However, counselors' cultural awareness and ethical practices significantly influence counseling. Researchers have also shown that clients' cultural, linguistic, and social contexts must be adapted to be effective. Like adaptive ethical competence theory, this theory considers clients' cultures and identities and offers a personalized approach to multicultural counseling. Furthermore, dilemmas arise when counselors fail to respect and value clients' cultures and confidentiality, which theoretically requires the integration of principles of cultural sensitivity to maintain trust.

This study was conducted due to the need to improve the effectiveness of counseling services in an increasingly multicultural society, especially in Indonesia with different cultures and religions (Apriani , 2024). Many challenges in intercultural counseling, such as value conflicts, unconscious bias, and

communication barriers, remain prevalent and hinder the success of interventions. Through a comprehensive examination of the adaptability and professional ethics of multicultural counseling, this study proposes solutions adapted to societal dynamics. The contribution of the research lies in the development of a competency model and ethical principles that serve as a basis for counselors to provide high-quality services to optimize client well-being.

What is novel about this study is the integration of adaptability and professional ethics, applied contextually to multicultural counseling practice. Beyond theory, this study also presents concrete case studies that illustrate the challenges, strategies, and solutions of intercultural counseling. Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of the role of the counselor as a cultural mediator who understands and actively supports the diverse values of clients—a topic rarely discussed in the Indonesian literature.

METHOD

This article uses a qualitative research method in the form of a literature review, which is mainly based on books or works (Nurrisa, Hermina, & Norlaila, 2025). This type of research is qualitative in nature and provides information in the form of notes and descriptive data within the analyzed articles (Fadli, 2021). The characteristics of qualitative research include: 1) objectivity; 2) direct interaction with research subjects; 3) use of informal language and personal pronouns; 4) inductive paragraphs with a progressive or dynamic structure (Waruwu, 2024). The research method used in this study is a qualitative one with a literature review approach. This research will review and analyze relevant sources, including articles, books, journals, and research documents related to adaptive skills and ethics in multicultural counseling. The data collection process was conducted systematically and with high credibility, in line with the research focus.

The research procedure begins with identifying and searching for literature related to the research theme and specific key areas (Andriani, 2021). The collected data is then selected based on source quality and relevance. Analysis is then conducted to provide a comprehensive overview of strategies, challenges, and the application of multicultural principles in counseling practice.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Definition of Multicultural Counselor

Culture is a valuable heritage that must be preserved and passed down through generations. Through cultural preservation, local cultures develop and gain recognition from the community. Culture functions to regulate behavior so life runs smoothly. Sue (1992) broadly defines culture to include race, ethnicity, social class, affective orientation, religion, gender, age, and more (Trevino, Tao, & Epps, 2022). According to Sue, multicultural counseling and therapy involve supporting clients by considering their life experiences and cultural values. This counseling respects client identity, uses universal healing strategies, and balances individualism and collectivism in assessment, diagnosis, and treatment.

Multicultural counseling is defined as support for individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Differences between counselor and client culture may occur, so multicultural awareness is essential. Understanding cultural differences helps counselors develop empathy and tolerance. Multicultural

counselors must be aware of multiculturalism to create a comfortable, conducive counseling environment. Professional practice requires counselors to consider client culture, such as beliefs, social class, and race, and tailor services accordingly. Effective multicultural counselors understand their own culture, the client's culture, and the social-political context around them. They reject the idea that their cultural values are absolute truths, recognizing clients hold their own cultural values as well (Widyanika, Kurniawan, Firdaus, & Habsy, 2025).

No.	Title	Author	Year	Discussion	Analysis
1.	Memahami Peran Etika dan Kompetensi Konselor dalam Konseling Multibudaya	Firdaus, M. d., Kumariaksy. F.A., & Habsy, B. A.	2025	The important role of ethics and counselor competence in the context of cross-cultural counseling	Strengthening the aspects of meaning and competence as the foundation of effective multicultural counseling, supporting the language of ethics in my articles
2.	Model Bimbingan dan Konseling Multibudaya	Widyanika, I., Kurniawan, T. H., Firdaus. W. R., & Habsy, B. A.	2025	Describes various models of contextual and adaptive multicultural guidance and counseling	Provides a practical model framework related to adaptive skills that aligns with the skills focus of my article.
3.	Pelatihan Konseling Multibudaya dalam Pendidikan Konselor	Yasinta, S. D., Shakila, D. n., Ramadhan, R.M., & Habsy, B. A	2025	Reviewing training and developing counselor competencies in dealing with cultural diversity	Relevant in discussing the importance of developing counselor capacity practically as the training needs proposed in my research.
4.	Strategi Konseling Lintas Agama dan Budaya di Sekolah	Lestari, S. D., & Lessy, Z.	2023	Discussing cross-cultural counseling strategies in school environments with an adaptive approach	In line with the need to develop counseling techniques and strategies by adapting to the characteristics of the client as discussed in the article
5.	Pendekatan Kualitatif dalam Pendidikan: Strategi,	Nurissa, D., Hermina, D., & Norlila	2025	Presenting qualitative approaches and research strategies methodologically	Supporting the validity of the qualitative research methods used in my study, strengthening the

Tahapan, dan	methodological
Analisis Data	framework

Therefore, it is understandable that this study confirms and expands on previous research that emphasized the importance of adaptive skills and ethics in multicultural counseling. However, this study adds to this understanding by incorporating contextual material in the form of real-life challenges in Indonesia, such as cultural bias and language barriers, which have not been thoroughly explored in previous literature (Setiawan, 2025). The integration of concrete case studies would enrich the contribution of this research, highlighting the need for ongoing training and the development of cultural awareness to enable counselors to provide responsive and inclusive services. Therefore, this research provides new perspectives on the practical implementation of multicultural counseling skills and ethics in diverse social contexts.

Adaptive Skills of Multicultural Counselors

The adaptive skills of multicultural counselors are crucial in providing effective counseling services due to their sensitivity to the cultural diversity of clients. First, counselors must possess self-awareness—the ability to recognize personal values, biases, and beliefs that may influence their relationships with clients. This awareness helps them manage their emotions and reduces the risk of making incorrect assumptions during the counseling process. Goleman (1999) also described aspects of self-awareness, including acknowledging emotions, a realistic assessment of strengths and weaknesses, and belief in one's own abilities (Sugiarto & Suhaili, 2022).

Second, cultural awareness: Counselors need to understand the history, values, traditions, and social structures of the client's cultural group in order to tailor their approach. This understanding can help to avoid misconceptions and develop interventions that are tailored to the cultural context (Yasinta, Shakila, Ramadhan, & Habsy, 2025). Through a multicultural perspective, counselors can create a climate in which clients feel valued and understood in their cultural context.

Third, cultural competence involves the ability to adapt counseling techniques and methods to the client's cultural background (Lestari & Lessy, 2023). Counselors must be aware of their own cultural biases and the impact of cultural differences on communication. They must be able to design interventions that take into account different language, value, and tradition to ensure effective counseling. Sue emphasizes the importance of accessibility and responsiveness to ensure that counseling services truly meet clients' cultural needs.

In general, skills such as self-awareness, cultural knowledge, and adaptability are essential foundations for counselors in intercultural therapy. By combining these three elements, counselors can establish safe and comfortable therapeutic relationships, promote effective communication, and provide services that respect client diversity. Competent multicultural counselors are better equipped to help clients achieve optimal recovery and personal growth within a cultural context (Candra & Hidajat, 2020).

Multicultural Counseling Ethics

Ethics in multicultural counseling plays a crucial role in building healthy and effective relationships between counselors and clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. Multicultural counselors must not only possess knowledge and skills but also adopt an ethical perspective that respects the diversity of their clients. By understanding different cultural values and social norms, counselors can bring new perspectives to the counseling process. This allows counselors to conduct counseling sessions with a more inclusive and adaptive approach, respecting each client's unique identity and experiences (Khusnah, 2025)

The ethics that a multicultural counselor must have include: 1) cultural sensitivity, respecting the diverse beliefs, values, and practices of clients; 2) self-awareness, in reflecting to understand one's own assumptions, values, and biases that can influence interactions with clients from different cultures; 3) non-discrimination, treating all clients fairly regardless of cultural background; 4) informed consent, ensuring clients understand the counseling process including cultural implications and in agreeing to the methods used; 5) confidentiality, respecting privacy and cultural norms regarding clients' personal information; 6) competence, continuously improving cultural abilities through diverse knowledge, awareness, and skills; 7) empowerment, encouraging clients to express their identity and experiences so that clients can determine the desired counseling path; 8) ethical decision making, considering the cultural context and its impact on clients in making professional decisions (Firdaus, Kumariaksy, & Habsy, 2025)

By understanding and applying these ethics, multicultural counselors not only uphold professional standards but also strengthen their clients' trust and sense of security throughout the counseling process (Tumanggor, Jumaris, & Solfema, 2022). This is important for creating a supportive environment where clients feel respected and supported and can express themselves freely without fear of discrimination or misunderstanding. Ultimately, multicultural counseling ethics form the foundation of dynamic, quality psychological counseling that attends to the specific needs of each individual in his or her cultural context.

Challenges of Multicultural Counseling

Intercultural counseling undoubtedly presents a number of challenges that impede the implementation of the counseling process. Indeed, the cultural backgrounds of counselors and clients are often quite different. Demographic factors such as gender, age, and place of residence; social status factors such as education, politics, and economics; and ethnographic factors such as religion, customs, and value systems also influence the dynamics of the counseling process. These differences have the potential to give rise to conflict, suspicion, and other negative feelings, which are natural human responses to protecting cultural values (Ardila, 2019)

In interpersonal communication between counselors and clients across cultures, there are five main obstacles according to Pederson, namely: 1) Language differences, lack of mastery of the same language can trigger miscommunication, and the varying meanings of non-verbal language add to the potential for contradiction; 2) stereotypes, counselors may treat clients differently based on social class or cultural backgrounds that are similar to their own. These stereotypes create a false stigma that affects the quality of service and can become a self-fulfilling prophecy for clients; 3) prejudice, attitudes of hatred, suspicion, and irrational dislike of certain groups that are difficult to change even if there is new information. This prejudice still colors many relationships between social, racial, or religious groups; 4) racism, systemic

discriminatory practices and sometimes accompanied by violence against minority groups, pose a major obstacle in building a healthy counseling relationship, 5) differences in cultural understanding, cultural differences cause different perspectives and communication, so counselors must have a high sensitivity to understand the client's cultural context; 6) Multicultural awareness, where counselors must develop awareness of their own biases and understand both their own and other cultures. Additionally, they should be sensitive to social issues such as race, sexism, poverty, and individual diversity in order to develop counseling techniques that bridge cultural differences (Widyanika, Kurniawan, Firdaus, & Habsy, 2025). Developing cross-cultural awareness is an essential first step for counselors before engaging in counseling. Without this awareness, the counseling process can be hindered by the aforementioned barriers. Therefore, an effective counselor must continuously sharpen their multicultural competencies to provide inclusive, adaptive services that appropriately address the client's needs within the context of cultural diversity.

Case Study of Cultural Counseling

Case Study I:

A guidance counselor (A) from the Minang cultural background has been working for 20 years at State Senior High School 1 Prambanan in Yogyakarta. (A) has difficulty communicating with Javanese students (B) who often use bahasa jawa halus (polite Javanese) language, which (A) does not fully understand, forcing (A) to ask for clarification. Furthermore, (A) only has a general understanding of the student's (B) regional background without a deeper cultural understanding, requiring (A) to ask about the student's specific cultural habits and needs during counseling sessions. While (A) tries to approach the client openly, there are still biases that distort the true meaning of what is being communicated, leading to misunderstandings during the counseling process. Despite having worked in a Javanese environment for 20 years, (A) has not gained enough understanding of the local culture, language, and values practiced in the area. (A) did not actively learn about the local majority culture and only asked general questions about the client's culture without understanding its origins. As a result, (A)'s multicultural competence remains lacking in both knowledge and skills. (A) was also unprepared when the client used Javanese, which became a communication barrier in the counseling session.

Case Study II:

A counselor practicing in the Pasaman region of West Sumatra began a group session by singing the song "Balonku ada Lima". However, the session became awkward as the students considered the term "balon" (balloon) to have a different connotation, referring to a woman's body part. This led to silence and expressions of embarrassment from the students, indicating the counselor's lack of adjustment to the local language and cultural context. In this case, the counselor was less responsive and flexible to the use of local language, which led to misunderstandings. Examples of standard language usage that have different meanings in other regions are outlined, such as greetings and words with different meanings.

These two cases emphasize the importance of multicultural counselors possessing deep cultural awareness, language adaptation skills, and sensitivity to their clients' cultures for effective counseling. Sooner or later, cultural and language differences can become major barriers to counseling if counselors

fail to actively understand and adapt. Counselor competencies should include an open attitude, adequate cultural knowledge, and cross-cultural communication skills to build strong relationships with clients from diverse backgrounds (Sucipto, Harlina, & Dewi, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Multicultural counselors are professionals who understand and appreciate the cultural diversity of their clients, possessing strong adaptive skills to interact effectively in diverse cultural contexts. Adaptive skills such as self-awareness, cultural sensitivity, inclusive communication, and the ability to adapt counseling approaches are essential for bridging value and language differences. Multicultural counseling ethics, in this regard, require counselors to be non-discriminatory, maintain confidentiality, empower clients, and make decisions that take cultural context into account. Challenges such as language differences, stereotypes, prejudice, and racism are barriers that must be overcome with cultural sensitivity and competence. This case study demonstrates the importance of preparedness and in-depth cultural knowledge for a smooth and meaningful counseling process. Therefore, cultural competence is key to successful, inclusive and effective counseling for clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. Future research is recommended to examine innovations and improvements in multicultural counselor training to strengthen counseling practices in line with the diversity of our society.

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