

Personal and Academic Multicultural Experiences, Perceived Multicultural Counselling Competence and Multicultural Counselling Self-efficacy Among Malaysian Counsellor Trainees

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ABSTRACT

The counsellor trainees' self-efficacy is indirectly influenced by what they have experienced in their personal or academic lives, and the experience does contribute to their knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes. Nevertheless, sufficient evidence to elaborate on the reciprocal interactions in the context of counselling is still limited. Therefore, this descriptive-correlational study intends to investigate the connection between Malaysian counsellor trainees' perceived multicultural counselling competence and self-efficacy and their personal and academic multicultural experiences. All four instruments had been adapted and translated into Malay before being completed by 208 randomly selected counsellor trainees. According to the study's findings, counsellor trainees scored high on academic multicultural experience but low on personal multicultural experience. They also gained high scores for multicultural counselling self-efficacy and moderate perceived multicultural counselling competence. Importantly, findings revealed substantial correlations between perceived multicultural counselling competence and self-efficacy with academic multicultural experience. Overall, the finding highlights the practice of experiential pedagogy in the multicultural counselling course and

encourages collaborative efforts involving faculty members and programme providers in developing and sustaining students' or counsellor trainees' multicultural counselling competency and self-efficacy growth.

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INTRODUCTION

Behaviourists believe human functioning primarily results from external stimuli and internal processes that transmit behaviour (Nabi & Prestin, 2017). Bandura (1990), on the other hand, disagreed with the behaviourists' reduction of human potential. The importance of cognition roles in humans' ability to construct reality, self-regulate, encode information, and act has differentiated the Social Learning Theory from the re-labelled Social Cognitive Theory (Nabi & Prestin, 2017). The SCT views humans as self-organising, proactive, self-reflecting, and self-regulating. Contrary to behaviourists who focused more on biological factors, Bandura (1986) emphasised the introspection mechanism. This mechanism relates to how people make sense of their psychological processes, which predict the influence of environmental factors on behaviour. Empirically, individuals from distinct cultural origins experience self-related constructs differently (Gebauer et al., 2021). What counsellor trainees experience in their environment may relate to their behaviours in counselling.

The SCT also posits that environmental factors such as economic conditions, socioeconomic status, and educational and familial structures do not affect human behaviour directly. Instead, they influence human behaviour through psychological mechanisms of the self-system. The degree to which these factors influence behaviour can be observed in people's aspirations, self-efficacy beliefs, personal standards, emotional states, and other self-regulatory

influences (Pajares & Urdan, 2008). The reciprocal interaction between personal behaviours and environmental factors produces human functioning (Bandura, 1986). Personal factors include cognition, affection, and biological events (e.g., learned experiences, self-belief such as self-efficacy beliefs, and intervening affective, cognitive, and motivational processes) (Bandura, 1989). Behaviour or action refers to individuals' responses to stimuli, and environmental factors refer to the external social context (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, as an example of the interchange in a counselling context, the counsellor trainees' self-efficacy is indirectly influenced by what they have experienced in their personal or academic lives, which the experience contributed to their knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes.

Nevertheless, sufficient evidence to elaborate on the reciprocal interactions in the context of counselling is still limited. The extent of multicultural counselling competence components infusion in current training is still vague. The evidence is important as it will provide insight into the learning and teaching practices in multicultural training. It is assumed that if there is a significant correlation between counsellor trainees' experiences, perceived multicultural counselling competence, and multicultural counselling self-efficacy, it implies that multicultural training is conducted using experiential strategies that align with the Association for Counsellor Education and Supervision's (2016) recommendation. However, knowledge

of the exposure or experience counsellor trainees receive from multicultural training is limited. The pedagogical methods for multicultural training are also in question (Daud et al., 2021; Sumari et al., 2021). Thus, the evidence will also motivate multicultural training instructors, counsellor educators, and faculty members. This study attempts to assess the connection between local counsellor trainees' personal multicultural experience, academic multicultural experience, and perceived multicultural counselling competence with multicultural counselling self-efficacy.

Literature Review

To date, 12 empirical research papers focus mainly on multicultural counselling competence in Malaysia, which are accessible through Scopus, Ebscohost, and Google Scholar (e.g., Amat et al., 2013, 2020; Baharuddin, 2012; Dagang et al., 2013; Harun et al., 2021b; 2022b; Jaladin, 2013; Kamarul et al., 2017, 2019; Noor et al., 2018; Ping & Jaladin, 2013; 2017). The ten papers are about multicultural counselling competence with different focuses, and two relate to multicultural counselling self-efficacy. Among the 12 papers, two focused on the perception of multicultural counselling and the barriers and challenges to practising multicultural counselling. Seven papers measured multicultural counselling competence and its correlation with other variables such as age, ethnicity, years of working experience, client satisfaction, spiritual competence, and multicultural counselling self-efficacy.

Three papers reported on the multicultural counselling competence instrument for school counselling teachers and counsellor trainees.

In terms of research design, most of the studies embodied a quantitative paradigm, in which survey and correlational research designs were frequently reported (e.g., Amat et al., 2013, 2020; Dagang et al., 2013; Harun et al., 2021b; 2022b; Jaladin, 2017; Kamarul et al., 2017, 2019; Noor et al., 2018; Ping & Jaladin, 2013). Except for two papers, each by Baharudin (2011) and Jaladin (2013), they were conducted using the qualitative paradigm. School counsellors were the most frequently studied population, followed by professional counsellors, and the least studied population was the counsellor trainees. In short, most multicultural counselling competence studies in Malaysia were conducted using survey and correlational research designs, and school counselling teachers gained the most attention from the researchers. This analysis suggests that although the framework for comprehending multicultural counselling competence is continuous, the development of multicultural counselling competence is significant, which can be easily observed through associations between related variables. Historically, counselling has been stronger in educational institutions like schools, and efforts are mostly concentrated on school counselling teachers serving as frontline mental health providers.

The ten quantitative studies used a self-report instrument to measure multicultural

counselling competence. For instance, the Multicultural Counselling Inventory, the Multicultural Counselling Competence Survey-Malaysian Counsellor Edition, the Multicultural Counselling Competencies Scale for Malaysian School Counsellors, and the Cross-Cultural Counselling Inventory-Revised were used in the studies. Findings from studies by Ping and Jaladin (2013) and Dagang et al. (2013) reported that poor to moderate levels of multicultural counselling competence reflect that multicultural training needs to be enhanced to improve the practising counsellors' multicultural counselling competence. Moreover, studies have reported that professional experience did not significantly impact counselling teachers' multicultural counselling competence (Kamarul et al., 2017, 2019; Noor et al., 2018). These studies also consistently found that the level of education significantly impacted counselling teachers' multicultural counselling competence. These findings showed that counsellors who attended only one multicultural counselling course tended to score low levels of multicultural counselling competence, even though they had years of working experience.

In conclusion, multicultural counselling competence is consensually perceived as an important variable in local multicultural counselling research. Nevertheless, research endeavours to holistically understand this construct need to involve more counsellor trainees in either correlational research design, qualitative, or mixed methods approaches. The synthesis of the findings

implies that a multicultural counselling course is important in developing multicultural counselling competence as it provides a medium for trainees to engage with meaningful multicultural experiences in an academic setting.

According to reports, local research demonstrates that measuring the experience construct—a variable examined alongside multicultural counselling competence—is restricted to working experience. As a result, searches for literature about the experience construct are typically conducted in a global context. Still, literature on personal and academic multicultural experiences in the context of multicultural counselling research is limited, especially research that studies their relationship with multicultural counselling self-efficacy. Most literature examined different kinds of experiences, such as cultural immersion experience (Barden et al., 2014; Kuo et al., 2020), direct clinical experience (Haktanir et al., 2022; Rigali-Oiler, 2013), years of working experience (Adams, 2015; Gori et al., 2022; Nice et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2023), or teaching experience and caseload diversity (Adams, 2015). Most recent studies focus only on exploring the relationship between experiences and self-efficacy (Gori et al., 2022; Haktanir et al., 2022; Nice et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2023).

Most of the studies were conducted according to a correlational research design (Rigali-Oiler, 2013; Subarimaniyam et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2023), with one study conducted using a mixed-methods research design (Kuo et al., 2020). In terms of

the sample, similar to the local situation, most studies involved school counsellors, compared to counselling education students and counsellor trainees. The difference between counselling students and counsellor trainees was their level of graduate study (Barden et al., 2014; Pieterse et al., 2016). The counselling students were still going through their graduate studies, while the counsellor trainees had almost finished theirs and were already in the counselling internship (Chaichanasakul, 2011; Rigali-Oiler, 2013). However, counsellor trainees in most literature were in their postgraduate studies. These studies also mostly used self-report instruments such as the Multicultural Counselling Inventory, the Multicultural Counselling Knowledge and Awareness Scale, and the Multicultural Counselling Self-Efficacy Scale-Racial Diversity Form.

Besides multicultural counselling competence and self-efficacy, the exploration of counsellor trainees' multicultural experience is also noteworthy, as counsellor trainees' cultural empathy may improve through training in the class or practicum/internship (Lu et al., 2020). In fact, according to Levitt et al. (2022), counsellors' empathy experiences and expressions may vary depending on their culture of origin. The multicultural experience refers to counsellor trainees' perceptions of multicultural exposure and interaction in their personal lives and during multicultural counselling courses.

Literature showed a wide range of distinctive experiences correlated with multicultural counselling self-efficacy. Direct

clinical experience (Rigali-Oiler, 2013) and cultural immersion experience (Barden et al., 2014; Kuo et al., 2020) were the forms of multicultural experiences studied with multicultural counselling self-efficacy. For instance, Barden et al. (2014) hypothesised that cultural immersion experiences might increase overall multicultural counselling self-efficacy compared to conventional and clinical training. Similarly, Kuo et al. (2020) found that trainees scored higher levels of multicultural efficacy after participating in a supervised multicultural practicum dealing with culturally diverse refugee clients during a cultural immersion programme.

Interestingly, Adams (2015), who also studied a few forms of experience, including years of experience, teaching experience, and caseload diversity, found that general forms of experience did not contribute to multicultural counselling self-efficacy compared to teaching experience and caseload diversity. Therefore, it seems that cultural immersion experience, teaching experience, and caseload diversity, which are specific experiences, can contribute better to multicultural counselling self-efficacy. Perhaps, in measuring specific self-efficacy, a specific type of experience is also needed as an independent variable.

A growing body of literature currently discusses the relationship between multicultural counselling self-efficacy and competence. Only Barden and Greene (2015) examined the association between multicultural counselling competence and self-efficacy. However, most articles or academic writings examined the correlation

between self-efficacy (some authors referred to it as general or counselling self-efficacy) and multicultural counselling competence (e.g., Bakioglu & Turkum, 2020; Subarimaniyam et al., 2020). Bakioglu and Turkum (2020) and Subarimaniyam et al. (2020) conducted correlational research on counsellor trainees and found a positive correlation between multicultural counselling competency and counselling self-efficacy. Barden and Greene's (2015) research on the correlation between multicultural counselling self-efficacy and competence is the most comparable.

According to Barden and Greene (2015), research is needed to understand better self-reported multicultural counselling competence, self-efficacy, and the factors that affect these variables because self-reported multicultural counselling competence has limitations, and there are conflicting empirical findings about the relationship between self-reported multicultural counselling competence and multicultural counselling self-efficacy. Findings showed a statistically significant positive association between multicultural counselling self-efficacy and self-reported multicultural counselling competence scores. This result implied that when multicultural counselling self-efficacy ratings of counsellor education students rose, so did self-reported multicultural counselling competence scores.

All reviewed studies discovered a substantial relationship between experiences, multicultural counselling self-efficacy, and multicultural counselling competence.

In other words, a person with certain experience levels may exhibit stronger self-efficacy and higher skills in multicultural counselling. It suggests that before one believes they can accomplish an array of knowledge, awareness, and skills, they must first be convinced of their capacity and digest their experience.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Population and Sample Size

The local undergraduate counsellor trainees doing their internship training in both education (secondary and tertiary education institutions) and non-education settings (government organisations such as the Social Welfare Department) constitute the population of interest in this descriptive-correlational study. Through cluster random selection (Figure 1), the counsellor trainees were randomly chosen from six local universities that offered undergraduate counselling programmes. At the beginning of their years of study, they participated in a multicultural counselling course that met the qualifications and standards for counsellor training authorised by the Malaysian Board of Counsellors.

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

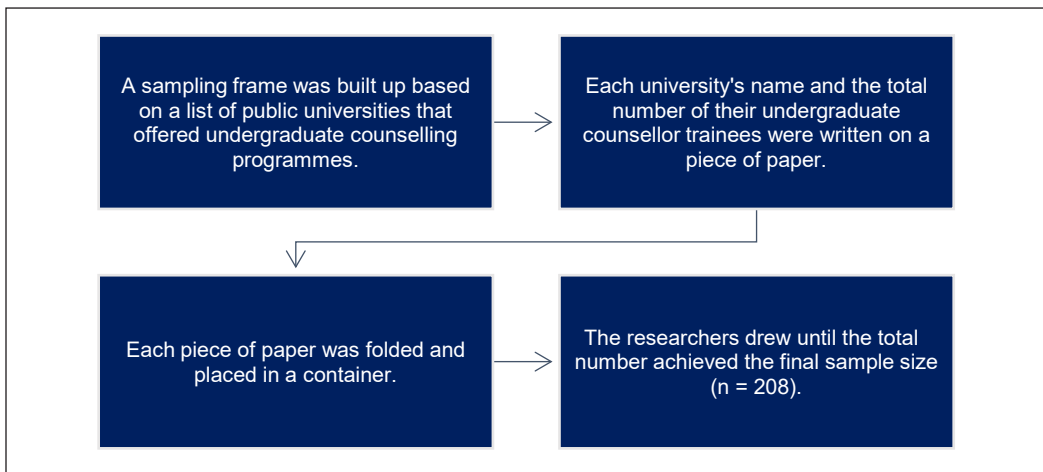


Figure 1. Cluster random sampling process

with a statistical significance of .05, an effect size of .30 and statistical power rejecting the null hypothesis of .95. Nevertheless, this study cautiously took into consideration the assertions by Yung and Bentler (1996), Byrne (2016), and Koopman et al. (2015) of a moderate sample size of 100–200 (Kline, 2023) for Bootstrapping. Thus, the final sample size used in this study is 208 (1.25% × 166) after considering the suggestion by Mitchell and Jolley (2012) for 25% more

names to ensure the returned questionnaires are sufficient for analysis.

After the data collection procedure, 205 responses were prepared for the following stage. Following data cleaning, the final 200 data were obtained. Table 1 displays the distribution of 200 trainee counsellors. The majority were between the ages of 22 and 24 (n=159, 79.5%), Malay (n=154, 77.0%), female (n=159, 79.5%), and Muslim (n=167, 83.5%).

Table 1
Distribution of respondent's demographic

Demographic variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Age (years)	22–24	159	79.5
	25–27	36	18.0
	28–30	5	2.5
Ethnicity	Malay	154	77.0
	Non-Malay	56	33.0
Gender	Male	41	20.5
	Female	159	79.5
Religion	Muslim	167	83.5
	Non-Muslim	32	16.0
	No Religion	1	0.50

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). The MEI (Ramirez, 1998) measures participants' degree of multicultural experience. The items were then divided into Type A and Type B, according to two types of scoring. This study particularly used the Type A items, which comprised 17 items. For instance, the sample item of the instrument is "My childhood friends who visited my home and related well to my parents were of..." 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. On a five-point Likert scale, the ratings ranged from 1 (primarily my ethnic group) to 5 (primarily all other ethnic groups). The following criteria were used to rate the respondents' answers: A rating of 1 or 5 was awarded one point; a rating of 2 or 4 was awarded two points; and a rating of 3 was awarded 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, 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) developed the MCREI to evaluate several features of students' experiences in multicultural counselling courses connected to their racial group membership. The instrument was created in light of the author's individual experiences as multicultural course instructors and students, as well as a review of the literature on intercultural counselling training. The MCREI comprised 19 items, and all items were scored in a positive direction. One sample item of the MCREI is "My racial identity has been more positive as a consequence of my multicultural course." 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 is calculated by adding the responses to all items. It reflects the degree of intercultural experience the individual receives from attending a multicultural counselling course. The adapted MCREI possessed fair psychometric properties, high internal consistency, $\alpha = .842$, and sufficient convergent validity, $AVE = .574$ (Harun et al., 2021a).

Multicultural Counselling Competence Training and Survey-Revised (MCCTS-R).

Based on the American Multicultural Development (AMCD) multicultural competencies, Holcomb-McCoy and Day-Vines (2004) used the MCCTS-R to evaluate counsellors' perceived multicultural

counselling competence. 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. One sample item from MCCTS-R is “Giving examples of how stereotypical beliefs impact the counselling relationship.” Twelve items in the adapted MCCTS-R were confirmed through CFA, and a 4-point scale representing the level of agreement (1 to 4 score) was utilised, with a range of 0 to 80 for the total score. The total score of the MCCTS-R represents an individual’s perception of their ability to demonstrate multicultural skills or behaviours during counselling sessions. The adapted MCCTS-R possessed fair psychometric properties and had excellent internal consistency, $\alpha = .952$, and convergent validity, $AVE = .714$ (Harun et al., 2021b).

Multicultural Counselling Self-Efficacy-Racial Diverse Scale

(MCSE-RD). The MCSE-RD is a 37-item questionnaire designed to assess counsellors’ perceived ability to work with diverse clients, exclusively to measure counsellors’ multicultural skills (Sheu, 2005). Sample items include “help the client clarify how cultural factors (e.g., racism, acculturation, racial identity) may relate to her or his maladaptive beliefs and conflicted feelings”. In this study, the MCSE-RD was translated, adapted, and validated to fit its use in the Malaysian context. Sixteen items in the adapted CCCI-R were confirmed through CFA. It utilised a score of 0 (No confidence) to 9 (Complete Confidence). The total score

of the MCSE-RD represents individual perceptions of their ability, with an overall score range of 0 to 112. The adapted MCSE-RD possessed fair psychometric properties and had excellent internal consistency, $\alpha = .984$ and convergent validity, $AVE = .859$ (Harun et al., 2020).

Demographic Sheet. The demographic sheet attached to the last page of the questionnaire included details on the respondents’ age, gender, race, and religion.

Procedure

Data collection commenced after the grant of ethical clearance from Universiti Putra Malaysia’s Ethical Committee and permission approved by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of selected universities to conduct the study involving their counsellor trainees. Additionally, formal letters were addressed to the department head, dean, and internship coordinators to request help accessing the supervisors’ and counsellor trainees’ data. The relevant data were the total number of counsellor trainees, counsellor 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 upon the universities that offered counselling programmes at the degree level. The university name was written on folded paper and placed in a bowl. The researcher drew upon it until the total number of samples achieved was 208 participants.

A cover letter and consent form were attached to the questionnaire booklets.

Questionnaire Set A was for the counsellor trainees and Set B for the supervisor, and they were mailed individually to the respondents. The questionnaires for supervisors and trainee counsellors were coded to guarantee confidentiality. Three sets of coded questionnaires would be sent to the supervisor if that supervisor was in charge of three counsellor trainees. The supervisor's cover letter listed the code for each trainee counsellor. Five weeks before the internship period ended, the questionnaires were emailed out. There were 205 trainee counsellors, and 38 supervisors successfully responded. Finally, the data was analysed by computing and organising the scores based on the specific variables studied. Inferential statistics and descriptive analysis were used to analyse the 200 viable responses. The descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS 25. Then, the SEM through AMOS 23 was used to test the hypothesised relationships and inter-relationships between the studied variables. The SEM is preferred as it is an affirmative approach whose principal function is determining and validating a proposed causal process and model based on a priori model. It also could explain how much of the variance in the dependent variables, manifest or latent, is accounted for by the independent variables.

RESULTS

There are two research objectives derived from the main purpose of the study: (1) to measure the level of personal multicultural experience, academic, multicultural

experience, and perceived multicultural counselling competence with multicultural counselling self-efficacy, and (2) to assess the relationship between local counsellor trainees' personal multicultural experience, academic, multicultural experience, and perceived multicultural counselling competence with multicultural counselling self-efficacy. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilised to achieve the research objectives. The findings are exhibited in Tables 1 and 2.

As presented in Table 2, the mean score of personal multicultural experience was 1.869, lower than mid-point 2. Therefore, the overall personal multicultural experience among the counsellor trainees was low. According to the mean score of 3.873, greater than the midpoint of 3, the general degree of academic, multicultural experience among counsellor trainees was high. With a mean score of 2.545 or the midpoint of 2.5, the counsellor trainees' overall perceived multicultural counselling competence was moderate. In addition, the mean score of multicultural counselling self-efficacy was 5.850, higher than the midpoint of 3.5. Overall, counsellor trainees have a high mean score for academic, multicultural experience and multicultural counselling self-efficacy. As illustrated in Table 3, there was no significant relationship between personal academic, multicultural experience and multicultural counselling self-efficacy ($\beta = .074$, $p > .05$). Instead, the academic, multicultural experience was found to have a significant relationship with multicultural counselling self-efficacy

Table 2

The mean and standard deviation of each variable

Constructs	Mid-point	Mean	Standard Deviation
PME	2	1.869	.602
AME	3	3.873	.565
PERMCC	2.5	2.545	.501
MCSE	4.5	5.850	1.301

Note. PME - Personal Multicultural Experience; AME – Academic Multicultural Experience; PERMCC – Perceived Multicultural Counselling Competence; MCSE – Multicultural Counselling Self-Efficacy

Table 3

Relationships between variables

Hypothesised Relationship	Beta	S.E.	C.R	p-value
MCSE PME	.074	.614	1.105	.269
MCSE AME	.514	.693	5.064	***
MCSE PERMCC	.333	.211	4.614	***

Note. PME - Personal Multicultural Experience; AME – Academic Multicultural Experience; PERMCC – Perceived Multicultural Counselling Competence; MCSE – Multicultural Counselling Self-Efficacy

($\beta = .514$, $p < .05$). Similarly, the results indicated that the perceived multicultural counselling competence was found to have a significant relationship with multicultural counselling self-efficacy ($\beta = .333$, $p < .05$). To summarise, only academic, multicultural experience and perceived multicultural counselling competence were found to have a significant relationship with multicultural counselling self-efficacy.

DISCUSSION

This study found no significant relationship between personal multicultural experience and multicultural counselling self-efficacy. This finding contradicts Barden et al. (2014), who reported that immersion experience moderately affects counsellor trainees' multicultural counselling self-efficacy. Even though immersion experience occurs during the counsellor trainees' in-training

programme, the process occurs outside the classroom and involves personal internalisation. It is somehow similar to the concept of personal multicultural experience. This study measured personal multicultural experience as a natural process around the counsellor trainees' microenvironment. In contrast, in Barden et al.'s (2014) study, immersion experience happened in a selected culture different from that of the counsellor trainees. Thus, in a planned and structured experience, counsellor trainees may become more mentally prepared and better able to recognise and digest differences as they immerse themselves in a different culture.

As noted, a counsellor trainee's multicultural experience echoes their early multicultural experiences. This study found no correlation between the participants' self-belief in working with diverse clients and their lived experience

in their neighbourhood. Even though there is little research on a similar variable in the counselling literature, the study's findings are compatible with Strickland's study on multicultural education (2018). Strickland (2018) reported no connection between personal multicultural experience and multicultural self-efficacy, often known as experience with diversity. Because self-efficacy or confidence to adapt to a new culture requires cognitive flexibility, there may not be a substantial association between these two variables (Ramirez, 1991).

Cognitive flexibility develops from social cognition processes that make individuals aware of choices and alternatives. Those processes of social cognition will provide them with a reason to adapt and motivation to do so, as well as a strong sense of self-efficacy to act appropriately in a particular circumstance (Chaichanasakul, 2011). Nevertheless, as Aydin and Odaci (2020) reported, there is a significant relationship between cognitive flexibility and counselling self-efficacy; the personal multicultural experience is assumed to be a moderator between the two variables. This relationship is worth further examination.

The findings of this study revealed a significant and positive relationship between academic multicultural experience and multicultural counselling self-efficacy. It implies that multicultural exposure and interactions, due to class activities, assist in developing better confidence of counsellor trainees in working with multicultural clients. Sheu and Lent's (2007) and Sheu et al.'s (2012) findings

support this finding. Sheu and Lent (2007) found a significant and positive correlation between multicultural training experiences and multicultural counselling self-efficacy among counsellor trainees. They concluded that their finding supports the assumption of SCT that multicultural training experience, particularly based on direct mastery, helps to develop multicultural counselling self-efficacy. In a more recent study, training significantly contributed to trainees' multicultural counselling self-efficacy in helping clients experiencing homelessness (Camp et al., 2019). A positive relationship between the two variables was also found in non-counselling literature. For instance, a positive correlation exists between pre-service Finnish teachers' self-efficacy in multicultural classrooms and their study-abroad experiences (Mo et al., 2021).

Multicultural exposure and interaction in the classroom give counsellor trainees mastery experience, particularly in verbal and nonverbal communication, which are part of basic counselling skills. For instance, counsellor trainees can learn verbal and non-verbal communication styles through classroom discussions regarding their ethnicity and heritage. Other activities, such as role-playing with multicultural clients or field assignments, also facilitate a higher academic multicultural experience. Through the experience, counsellor trainees will develop confidence in interacting with and dealing with future multicultural clients. It is in line with Sheu et al. (2012), who reported that prior multicultural experience (contact with diverse clients) positively

correlated with self-efficacy in performing multicultural counselling behaviours. They maintained that higher multicultural experience would help counsellor trainees feel more confident, even though prior exposure and interaction are not an ideal proxy for performance accomplishments (mastery experiences).

According to this study, self-efficacy and perceived multicultural counselling competence correlate positively and significantly. Therefore, it is evident that the multicultural knowledge and awareness learned in the classroom also help aspiring counsellors feel more confident while counselling clients with different backgrounds. As was already mentioned, the terms perceived multicultural counselling competence and multicultural knowledge and awareness correspond to the two elements of the multicultural counselling competence model (Sue et al., 1992; 2019). In contrast, multicultural counselling self-efficacy refers to counsellor trainees' confidence in applying multicultural skills to achieve counselling goals with diverse clients. In addition, multicultural skills manifest counsellor trainees' multicultural knowledge and awareness that the supervisor can observe.

This finding aligns with a study by Barden and Greene (2015), which found a significant relationship between perceived multicultural counselling competence and multicultural counselling self-efficacy. The respondents in their study and this current study shared similar characteristics, specifically, their age (between 23 and 27),

and most of the respondents were female. Thus, they share the same level of maturity and experience related to multiculturalism. In light of these facts, counsellor trainees with wider multicultural knowledge are more alert to cultural differences and similarities among clients. They know and understand that every client has a unique worldview and values. This acknowledgement leads to counsellor trainees' effort to integrate them into intervention planning, assessment, and session management. By implementing a culturally sensitive counselling session, counsellor trainees can do counselling effectively, and clients will feel more committed to the counselling relationship.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE SUGGESTIONS

The counsellor trainees' high academic and multicultural experience scores indicated that their multicultural counselling course had provided them with sufficient multicultural exposure and interaction. As mentioned earlier, through academic multicultural experience, counsellor trainees can develop multicultural knowledge and awareness, especially about their cultural group. It, in turn, will catalyse the development of multicultural knowledge and awareness of other cultural groups. Besides relevant content and activities, this kind of experience can only be achieved through in-depth and safe discussion during class activities. In addition, Greene et al. (2014) mentioned that it is highly complex, potentially unpredictable, and can also be transformative in teaching multicultural

awareness. Thus, it is important to actively encourage counselling students to discuss the difficult aspects of diversity, such as oppression and discrimination, in an environment of appreciation and acceptance during the course.

Experiencing life in a similar context may lead counsellor trainees to assume that their approach to life is how things are (Donohue, 2022), resulting in a low personal multicultural experience and raising concerns about their knowledge and awareness of their culture and heritage. Counsellor trainees need to be aware and embrace the cultural identity that could allow them to recognise and acknowledge cultural elements affecting the client's issues. It is in line with the positive relationship between ethnic identity and counselling self-efficacy, as Interiano-Shiverdecker et al. (2019) reported. Moreover, counsellor cultural awareness significantly predicted multicultural case conceptualisation ability (Rigali-Oiler, 2013). The counsellor trainee's multicultural knowledge and awareness can be increased through academic, multicultural experience from multicultural counselling courses by including experiential pedagogies (Barden et al., 2014). Experiential pedagogies get students acquainted with diverse worldviews and encourage cultural sensitivity (Barden et al., 2014; Greene et al., 2014). Recently, scholars have also recommended more experiential learning activities such as digital storytelling (Parikh-Fox et al., 2020), historical site visits, and photography (Duffey, 2022).

The Malaysian Board of Counsellor's Code of Ethics (2016) addressed the importance of considering the clients' cultural backgrounds. For example, Section C.5 (Discrimination) is maintained so that counsellors can consider their client's cultural elements, such as age, disabilities, ethnicity, religion, gender, marital status, language, or socioeconomic status. Thus, counsellors need to have the ability to be sensitive and consider these elements together with the generation gaps that may affect the outcomes when working with 21st-century clients, especially for school counselling teachers, the closest mental health professionals for vulnerable clients in primary or secondary schools. Thus, being culturally competent and ethically sound is imperative to ensure the effectiveness of the counselling sessions. The Registered Counsellor Continuous Professional Development Programme Guidelines (*Garis Panduan Program Perkembangan Profesional Berterusan Kaunselor Berdaftar*) was established by the Malaysian Board of Counsellors in 2019. This guideline is an integrative effort to make sure registered counsellors provide themselves with knowledge, skills, and professional practice to provide their best services professionally and ethically to the community. The study's findings also reflect the importance of teaching multiculturalism in continuous professional development (CPD) programmes.

As a suggestion to increase and enrich counsellor trainees' multicultural experiences, departments and faculty can

also play an important role. Basma and Chen (2022) reported that counselling students who already have the confidence to work with clients still need more institutional and programmatic support and a curriculum that includes various cultures. Thus, the department and faculty members should encourage student club activities to focus on recognising, understanding, and appreciating culture. It would supplement or address the lack of personal multicultural experience due to the counsellor trainees' ethnic homogeneous environments. The planned programme should challenge their stereotypes and help them to feel more comfortable with differences. The ongoing external programmes or activities involving faculty members significantly impact how students perceive their faculty's multicultural counselling and social justice competence (Koch et al., 2018). Therefore, counsellor trainees' confidence will be more intact and more prepared when facing possible cultural impasses when working with diverse clients.

Since this study only involved local undergraduate counsellor trainees at the end of their internship, the findings might not be generalised to experienced counsellors. Therefore, future research is suggested to be conducted on experienced counsellors, such as school counsellors or professional counsellors. Since they comprise a larger population, future studies could strive for a more diverse demographic representation, including a more balanced gender ratio and broader ethnic representation. In addition, mixed methods or qualitative components for future studies could provide richer

insights, particularly regarding personal multicultural experiences. Furthermore, this study also agrees with Gonzalez-Voller et al. (2020) in addressing the need to measure specific training factors such as instructor training and competence, cultural immersion experiences, and classroom activities. These factors may influence the development of counsellor trainees' multicultural counselling self-efficacy and multicultural counselling competencies.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms the significant relationship between the variables, which are academic, multicultural experience, perceived multicultural counselling competence, and multicultural counselling self-efficacy among counsellor trainees. In addition, this study also reported that counsellor trainees scored at a low level of personal multicultural experience and a high level for both academic multicultural experience and multicultural counselling self-efficacy. All in all, based on the findings, this study highlights the practice of experiential learning in the multicultural counselling course as well as encouraging collaborative efforts involving faculty members and programme providers in developing and sustaining students' or counsellor trainees' multicultural counselling competency and self-efficacy growth.

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