



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i7/14251>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i7/14251

**Received:** 13 April 2022, **Revised:** 15 May 2022, **Accepted:** 26 May 2022

**Published Online:** 10 June 2022

**In-Text Citation:** (Noh et al., 2022)

**To Cite this Article:** Noh, M. M., Bakar, A. Y. A. & Nasir, M. K. M. (2022). Relationship between Multicultural Counseling Competency Level with Length of Service and Gender. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*. 12(7), 224 – 236.

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**Vol. 12, No. 7, 2022, Pg. 224 – 236**

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[www.hrmars.com](http://www.hrmars.com)

ISSN: 2222-6990

## Relationship between Multicultural Counseling Competency Level with Length of Service and Gender

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### Abstract

Guidance and counseling services in schools do not only focus on the problems of students but also help the development, rehabilitation and prevention aspects of students who are culturally diverse. This study aimed to identify the relationship of multicultural counseling competency levels with length of service and gender. This study uses a survey design to identify the level of competency in multicultural counseling. A total of 110 school counselors of primary schools in Kuala Lumpur were used as the study sample. The instrument used in the study is the Multicultural Counseling Scale. The findings of the study show that the level of multicultural counseling competency is high. The Pearson correlation analysis showed that there was no significant relationship between the level of multicultural counseling competency with the length of service and gender. The results of ANOVA analysis showed that there was no significant difference in the level of multicultural counseling competency with the length of service, and t test analysis showed that there was no significant difference in the level of multicultural counseling competency with gender. This study has implications for school counselors, the Ministry of Education Malaysia and educational institutions in formulating training plans for school counselors and trainee counselors.

**Keywords:** Counselor Competency, Guidance and Counseling, Multicultural Counseling

### Introduction

Malaysia values unity among its people of various races, religions and cultures. As early as the primary school level, a process of unity takes place among students when they begin to recognize the existence of other races, cultures and religions. Cultural diversity is one of the factors that contributes to the different norms in each individual self. Therefore, a professional counselor should have an awareness and understanding of existing cultural and diversity issues including school counselor in schools. This is because counselors will more easily understand a client's problems by understanding their culture. Cultural understanding, combination of theory and counseling approach will make counselors more efficient in conducting counseling sessions especially when dealing with the cultural diversity of clients (Amat et al., 2020).

Multicultural competency studies in Malaysia are still limited and focus more on professional counselors in general than school counselors. Thus, the competency status of multicultural counseling is also very relevant for school counselors in primary school as they also face various levels of students with different backgrounds. This is also discussed by Shah and Amat (2010); Jaladin (2017) that studies that can be used as a reference on the efficiency of multicultural counseling in Malaysia is still not much compared to studies in the West while this efficiency should be part of the personal and professional qualities of teachers and counselors. Furthermore, it has an impact on the self-efficacy and efficiency of school counselors in conducting effective guidance and counseling services. The contemporary status of the field of multicultural counseling in Malaysia is still unclear as there is limited research in this field as there are still some issues that need to be addressed in relation to the understanding and practice of multicultural counseling (Jaladin et al., 2020).

Any cultural sensitivities, colours of racial diversity, gender, ethnicity, religion or issues of discrimination that could affect the relationship between school counselors and students can be avoided if they have qualities in the multicultural counseling competency. A professional school counselor must not violate the ethics and professionalism of its services as well as understanding the question of value brought up by its students. Limitations in carrying out services in schools can be reduced if these competencies can be improved. School counselor who lacks in understanding students' culture will affect the counseling session from run smoothly especially from the aspect of the helping relationship between students and school counselors. A combination of counseling skills, a theoretical approach and multicultural competencies can help counselors acquire the skills needed in engaging with diverse clients. Concomitantly, school counselors of a particular secondary school in Selangor agreed that this competency is important in counseling services because it can help the the counseling process, build a therapeutic relationships, understand the clients' worldview and increase the effectiveness of counseling sessions (Shah & Amat, 2010).

### **Research Background**

Sue and Sue (2008) define the multicultural counseling competency as a means of interpretation made by counselors in issues that brought up by clients in which a competent counselors should work effectively and be sensitive to a wide range of clients from different cultures. Shah et al (2017) stated that the multicultural counseling competency can be linked to the ability of counselors in integrating various theories, approaches as well as evaluations of counseling involving clients from various cultures. These multicultural characteristics include race, religion, age, gender, culture, sexual identity, socioeconomic status and disability. Multicultural counseling competency is associated with the ability of counselors to understand the uniqueness of each client coming from different cultures where it influences different views or perspectives for each individual (Stuart, 2004).

Amat et al (2020) also state that the multicultural counseling competency is more related to the way interpretations are made by counselors on issues or problems that brought up by clients. Clearly, competent counselors should work effectively and be sensitive to a wide range of clients from different cultures. Through the given definitions and views, Multicultural Counseling competency can be defined as the competence of a counselor who has qualities in terms of awareness, knowledge and skills to handle clients with different backgrounds and cultures. Among the existing multicultural models, the model by Sue, Arredondo and McDavis

(1992) are most widely used by researchers worldwide. Professional counselors need to have the multicultural counseling competency through the following domains:

- a. Awareness of the worldview by counselors and clients and how they become accustomed to the various cultures between the two. Counselors are seen to be able to differentiate between cultural and traditional value approaches that how they affect client behavior, relationships, and beliefs.
- b. Knowledge of cultural group background and socio-political influence on clients. This knowledge also involves how counselors view the background effects of discrimination, labeling, stigma or oppression.
- c. Skills and strategies for dealing with clients. Counselors actively enhance and practice approaches and expertise that can be applied to a variety of cultures.

This model asserts that a competent counselor is one who is sensitive to one's own assumptions, biases, values, perceptions, prejudices, individual limitations and so on. Secondly, understanding counselors always strive to understand the worldview of culturally different clients without bias or negative judgments. Finally, counselors actively constantly develop and practice appropriate and sensitive strategies and skills when working with culturally different clients.

In assessing multicultural counseling competency among counselors and trainees, there are instruments such as the Multicultural Counseling Inventory (MCI), Multicultural Counseling and Training Survey-Revised (MCCTS-R) and Multicultural Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills Survey-Counselor Form (MAKSS-C). There are many multicultural instruments produced according to Western culture but now there are improvements of instruments such as Multicultural Counseling Competencies Scale which is adapted according to culture in Malaysia (Amat et al., 2020; Amat et al., 2013). Among other instrument used by researchers is the Multicultural Counseling Survey-Malaysian Counselor Edition (Jaladin, 2017).

The study of the multicultural counseling competency for counselors in agencies under the administration of the Ministry of Education Malaysia is at a high level that has not yet reached the highest level (Shah, 2019). The results of a study on counselors in Malaysia also show that they have a high knowledge of multicultural counseling but still lack in terms of awareness and skills (Shah, 2019; Jaladin, 2017). Studies on school counselor in secondary schools show that the competency for their skill domains is high compared to the awareness domain which is at a moderate level (Shah et al., 2017). In another study, registered counselors in Malaysia considered themselves competent in handling multicultural counseling. However, the practice in multicultural counseling is still lacking especially involving unique cultural groups such as gays, lesbians, people with disabilities, and seniors even if they are willing and confident (Jaladin et al., 2021).

Holcomb-McCoy (2005); Holcomb-McCoy and Myers (1999) found that gender had no significant relationship with the multicultural counseling competency. Murtha, Bowens-MacCarthy, Morote and Tatum (2006) found that gender affects the willingness to develop cultural competencies when women were found to have a higher willingness to engage in multicultural training than men. The level of education has significant differences with the multicultural counseling competency but not significant in terms of gender, race and

experience in service (Shah et al., 2017). Jaladin (2017) also found no significant differences between the multicultural education received by counselors but there were differences on race, level of education and involvement in multicultural counseling training. Shah's (2019) study on counselors working with agencies under the Ministry of Education Malaysia also shows there was no significant difference in the level of multicultural counseling competency with the gender, level of education, and duration of professional experience of the counselors. On the other hand, Jaladin, Simmonds and Joseph (2020) in a qualitative study found that respondents expressed an understanding of the concept of multicultural counseling competency by having personal experience and continuous practice of multicultural counseling specifically throughout the service.

Thus, this study aims to identify the relationship between the level of school counselors' competency in multicultural counseling with the length of service and gender. Based on the purpose of the study, the research questions are as follow:

- a. is there a significant relationship between the level of Multicultural Counseling competency and length of service?
- b. is there a significant relationship between the level of Multicultural Counseling competency and gender?
- c. is there a significant difference between the level of Multicultural Counseling competency and length of service?
- d. is there a significant difference between the level of Multicultural Counseling competency and gender?

## **Methodology**

### *Respondents*

This study's respondents are recruited uses a purposive sampling from the population of full-time counselor of primary schools in Kuala Lumpur. A total of 110 respondents participated to represent the school counselor population, as suggested by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) in the sample size determination table.

### *Instruments*

This study uses the Multicultural Counseling Competency (MCC) Scale which is modified according to the suitability of Malaysian society (Shah, 2014; Amat et al., 2013). At the initial stage, this instrument contains 42 items that were identified to measure the multicultural counseling competency after being evaluated by experts, and finally 26 items after going through the validation process. Currently, only 19 items are used after going through the construct validation process that forms the multicultural competency domain where the validity and reliability of this instrument is obtained through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) with Cronbach Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) have been met (Amat et al., 2020).

Table 1 shows the content of the study's instrument. This questionnaire consists of two sections. The first section contains the demographic information of the respondents, namely position, gender, age, race, religion, highest level of education in the field of counseling, length of service and status of registered counselor. The second section is the Multicultural Counseling Competency Scale questionnaires.

Table 1

*Content of Research Instrument*

Section	Content	Total Item
A	Respondents' Demographics	8
B	Multicultural Counseling Competency Scale	19

The Multicultural Counseling Competency Scale has 19 items and all items are scored using an 11-point Likert scale format; higher score indicates a higher multicultural competency level with a minimum score of 1 and a maximum score of 11 (Amat et al., 2020). The domains measured were awareness, knowledge and skills with item division as shown in Table 2, and interpretation of mean scores for multicultural competency was illustrated in Table 3.

Table 2

*Items Division (by domain) of Multicultural Counseling Competency Scale*

Construct / Domain	Item No.
Awareness	1,2,3,4,5,6
Knowledge	7,8,9,10,11
Skills	12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19

Table 3

*Interpretation of Mean Scores for Multicultural Counseling Competency*

Mean Score	Interpretation of Mean Score
1.00 to 3.00	Very Low
3.01 to 5.00	Low
5.01 to 7.00	Moderate
7.01 to 9.00	High
9.01 to 11.00	Very High

*Data Analysis*

IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 software was used to analyze the data. Descriptive analysis, t-test, ANOVA and correlation were used to answer the research questions. A pilot study was conducted on school counselors randomly via Google Form to assess the validity and reliability of the instrument before the actual study was conducted. Table 4 shows the values of Cronbach Alpha coefficients that have been obtained through the pilot study.

Table 4

*Cronbach Alpha Value Obtained From Pilot Study*

Variables	Cronbach Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) Value	Total Item
Awareness	.920	6
Knowledge	.929	5
Skills	.960	8
MCC	.961	19

**Results and Discussion***Descriptive Analysis*

The following are the results of descriptive analysis involving the demographics of the respondents and the variables involved for this study. Table 5 describes the demographic information of the respondents studied, namely gender and length of service. A total of 110 respondents involved consist of 89 female respondents (80.9%) and only 21 male respondents (19.1%). Next, school counselor service duration is divided into four phases, namely between 1 to 5 years, 6 to 10 years, 11 to 20 years and 21 to 30 years. The service period of most respondents is between 11 to 20 years which is 69 respondents (62.7%), followed by 6 to 10 years of 18 respondents (16.4%), 1 to 5 years of 15 respondents (13.6%) and the least is between 21 to 30 years, which is 8 respondents only (7.3%).

Table 5

*Demographic Analysis of Study Respondents*

Category		<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	21	19.1
	Female	89	80.9
Length of Service	1 to 5 years	15	13.6
	6 to 10 years	18	16.4
	11 to 20 years	69	62.7
	21 to 30 years	8	7.3

*Multicultural Counseling Competency Level*

Table 6 shows that the level of competency in multicultural counseling as a whole is high which is 60.9% (67 respondents), followed by 22 respondents (20%) in moderate level, 20 respondents (18.2%) at very high and only 0.9% respondent (one person) represents a very low level. There are three domains in the competencies of multicultural counseling namely knowledge, awareness and skills.

Table 6  
*Analysis of Multicultural Counseling Competency Levels*

Variables	Level	<i>n</i>	%
MCC	Very Low	1	0.9
	Moderate	22	20.0
	High	67	60.9
	Very High	20	18.2
	Total	110	100.0
Knowledge	Very Low	5	4.5
	Low	5	4.5
	Moderate	31	28.2
	High	48	43.6
	Very High	21	19.1
	Total	110	100.0
Awareness	Very Low	1	0.9
	Low	3	2.7
	Moderate	17	15.5
	High	53	48.2
	Very High	36	32.7
	Total	110	100.0
Skills	Low	2	1.8
	Moderate	24	21.8
	High	59	53.6
	Very High	25	22.7
	Total	110	100.0

For the domain of knowledge, a total of 48 respondents showed to be at a high level of 43.6%, a total of 31 respondents (28.2%) at a moderate level, very high 19.1% (21 respondents), while low and very low levels represent 4.5% respectively (5 respondents). Next, the domain of



awareness showed 48.2% (53 respondents) were at high level, 32.7% (36 respondents) at very high level, followed by 15.5% (17 respondents) at moderate level, whereas three respondents at Low level (2.7%) and only one respondent at very low level (0.9%). Finally, the skills domain showed 59 respondents were at a high level (53.6%), 25 respondents (22.7%) at a very high level, 24 respondents (21.8%) at a moderate level, and only 1.8% (2 respondents) were at low level.

The results of this descriptive analysis show the competency level of school counselor in multicultural counseling dimension. Table 7 shows the mean values and standard deviations of school counselor competency levels.

Table 7

*Analysis of School Counselor Multicultural Counseling Competency Level*

Variables	Mean	SD	Skewness	Level
Knowledge	3.68	.986	-.785	Moderate
Awareness	4.09	.819	-.885	High
Skills	3.97	.723	-.256	High
MCC	3.95	.683	-.649	High

Findings in Table 7 shows that the overall level of school counselor competency is at a high level, with a mean value of 3.95 and a standard deviation value of .683.

*Relationship of Multicultural Counseling Competency Level and Length of Service*

Research Question 1: Is there a significant relationship between the level of multicultural counseling competency and length of service? Table 8 below describes the findings for the relationship between the level of multicultural counseling competency and length of service.

Table 8

*Relationship between Multicultural Counseling Competency and Length of Service*

Variables	N	M	SD	MCC	Length of Service
MCC	110	7.93	1.36	-	
Length of Service	110	2.65	.797	.144	-

Pearson correlation analysis was performed to measure the relationship of multicultural counseling competency level and length of service. The results of the analysis showed that there was no significant relationship between the level of multicultural counseling competency and length of service,  $r = .144$ ,  $p > .05$ . The resulting level of correlation between the variables is high.

*Relationship of Multicultural Counseling Competency Level and Gender*

Research Question 2: Is there a significant relationship between the level of multicultural counseling competency and gender? Table 9 below describes the findings for the relationship between the level of multicultural counseling competency and gender.

Table 9

*Relationship between Multicultural Counseling Competency and Gender*

Variables	N	Mean	SD	MCC	Gender
MCC	110	7.93	.1.36	-	
Gender	110	1.81	.395	.119	-

Pearson correlation analysis was performed to measure the relationship of multicultural counseling competency level and gender. The results of the analysis showed that there was no significant relationship between the level of multicultural counseling competency and gender,  $r = .119$ ,  $p > .05$ . The resulting level of correlation between the variables is high.

*Difference in Level of Multicultural Counseling Competency based on Length of Service*

Research Question 3: Is there a significant difference between the level of multicultural counseling competency and length of service? Table 10 below describes the findings for differences in the level of multicultural counseling competency based on length of service.

Table 10

*Difference in Level of Multicultural Counseling Competency based on Length of Service*

Length of Service	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between Groups	8.72	3	2.907	1.60	.194
In Group	192.44	106	1.815		
Total	201.16	109			

One way ANOVA analysis found that there was no significant difference for the level of multicultural counseling competency and length of service,  $F(3,106) = 1.60$ ,  $p > .05$ .

*Difference in Level of Multicultural Counseling Competency based on Gender*

Research Question 4: Is there a significant difference between the level of multicultural counseling competency and gender? Table 11 below describes the findings for differences in the level of multicultural counseling competency based on gender.

Table 11

*Difference in Level of Multicultural Counseling Competency based on Gender*

Gender	N	M	SD	t-value	Sig.
Male	21	8.35	1.35	1.57	.788
Female	89	7.83	1.35	1.57	

The results of the inferential analysis for the independent t-test showed that there was no significant difference in the difference in the level of Multicultural Counseling competency based on gender,  $t(110) = .788, p > .05$ . Based on the results of the t-test, it can be seen that the mean value for the level of multicultural counseling competency for male counselors is higher than female counselors. It clearly shows that there is no significant difference between the differences in the level of multicultural counseling competency based on gender.

This study was conducted to look at the relationship between the level multicultural counseling competency with length of service and gender. This multicultural counseling competency status is very relevant for school counselors as they also deal with various students with different cultural backgrounds. The results showed that the overall mean score of the school counselors' multicultural counseling competency level was at a high level of 60.9%. The results of this study are in line with the findings of Kamarul (2019); Shah et al (2017); Jaladin (2017) which showed that respondents have a high competency in multicultural counseling. Although these findings show that their competency is still at a good level, efforts need to be made to achieve a very high level because only 18.2% of school counselors reached this level.

In addition, the school counselors' awareness is at the highest level compared to the knowledge and the skills domains. This finding contradicts the research findings of school counselors in secondary schools, whereby the competence level for their skills domain is high compared to the domain of awareness which is at a moderate level (Shah et al., 2017) while the knowledge for counselors in Malaysia is high but still less in terms of awareness and skills (Shah, 2019; Jaladin, 2017). Furthermore, the results of the study show that there is no significant relationship between the level of multicultural counseling competency and length of service. The results of this study are in line with the findings of the respondents who stated competency will be improved through personal experience and continuous multicultural counseling practice especially throughout the service (Jaladin et al., 2020). This means that the duration of professional experience has nothing to do with the level of competency. This can be attributed to the exposure received by school counselor whether the training received before serving was effective or the experience and ongoing training while serving in the school.

The findings also show that there is no significant difference in the level of multicultural counseling competency with length of service. This finding is in line with a study (Shah, 2019) which showed no difference in multicultural counseling competency with the professional service period of counselors instead the counseling training received has more impact on efficiency. This is also stated by Jaladin (2017) who found that there is a significant difference in the level of competence when counselor involves in multicultural counseling training. In addition, the longer school counselor do the counseling services, the level of competency might be improved as the experience gained is able to enhance their knowledge and skills. However, it depends on the variousity of clients in which involve multicultural issues.

The result of the study also found that there was no significant relationship between the level of multicultural counseling competency and gender. This finding is in line with Holcomb-McCoy (2005); Holcomb-McCoy and Myers (1999) research works which found that gender had no significant relationship with multicultural counseling competency. It shows

that a person's different level of the competence does not relies on gender but it involves other factors such as experience, practice and ongoing training received by counselor. However, there are studies that state gender affects readiness to develop cultural competencies when women are found to have a higher readiness to engage in multicultural training than men, while male students feel themselves to be more culturally competent than females (Murtha et al., 2006). Attitudes and awareness in helping relationships as well as unconditional accepting clients in counseling services may contribute to the scenario of not having significant differences between multicultural counseling competency and gender.

### Conclusion

Effective guidance and counseling services require school counselor to have counseling competencies that help the well-being of their clients including multicultural counseling competency. This competency needs to be improved along their services so that the profession remains effective, trusted and acceptable for its role in helping students. The multicultural counseling competency among school counselor can be enhanced through their readiness to gain knowledge, continuous training and increase the experience of conducting counseling services with clients from various cultures. It may enhance their skills by using approaches and interventions that are suitable to the client's cultural diversity.

All in all, this study has implications for school counselors, the Ministry of Education Malaysia, and educational institutions in formulating appropriate training plan for school counselors and trainee counselors. It is suggested for future research to examine other variables such as the level of education in counseling, multicultural counseling training and the status of Counselor Registration to see its relationship with the competency domains of multicultural counseling.

### Acknowledgement

Authors are grateful to Faculty of Education, University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) for its' support on research works leading to the publication of this article.

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