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## Interventions to Improve Multicultural Counseling Competence: A Systematic Review

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** To evaluate the effectiveness of counselor training interventions in improving multicultural competence of counseling professionals.

**Methods:** A systematic review of studies published between 2010 and 2016 was conducted and the Scopus electronic database was searched.

**Results:** 245 articles were identified in the initial search and twelve articles met the inclusion / exclusion criteria which are then extracted for analysis. There were four main categories of interventions found: service learning, cultural immersion, culturally tailored program and traditional counseling graduate program. All of the studies except traditional training programs showed positive effects on the multicultural competence of the participants.

**Conclusions:** The findings of this review indicate that experiential learning and culturally tailored programs resulted to improvement on the multicultural competence of the participants. Due to heterogeneity in the reviewed studies, it is difficult to compare the studies and evaluate for the most feasible and effective intervention. Future research should focus on developing a standardize framework for multicultural competence and measure for both counsellor and client outcomes.

**Keywords:** Multicultural Competence, Cultural Sensitivity, Multicultural Training

### Introduction

One of the critical skills to become an effective counsellor is the ability to adapt counseling skills to clients come from diverse cultural background. The Code of Ethics of American Counseling Association (ACA; 2014) highlights the responsibility of counsellors to conduct themselves in a culturally competent manner when working with a diverse client population. Therefore, it is an ethical obligation for counsellors to develop

sensitivity on the cultural differences that shape the clients' worldview and take approaches that are consistent with the values of the client (Corey, 2013).

Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis (1992) describe cultural competence in three dimensions: (a) beliefs and attitudes, (b) knowledge, and (c) skills. The first component refers to the awareness of one's own assumptions, values and biases about human behaviour, especially towards racial and ethnic minorities. The second is the understanding and knowledge of the worldviews of culturally diverse clients and the last component is the ability to make intervention strategies that are culturally appropriate and relevant to the clients (Sue & Sue, 2008).

Malaysia is well known for its cultural diversity. The Department of Statistics Malaysia (2016) estimated a total population of 31.7 million persons in 2016, in which 68.6% is ethnic Bumiputera, followed by 23.4% Chinese, 7.0% Indian and other ethnics at 1.0%. Non-Malaysian citizen was at 10.3 % out of total population in Malaysia. Therefore, cultural competence is essential for Malaysian counsellor to work effectively with this diverse population. However, a recent study indicated that Malaysian counsellors generally perceived their multicultural counseling competence to be poor (Ping & Jaladin, 2013). This indicates the needs to improve on multicultural counseling training in Malaysia by referring and applying existing interventions that are proven to be effective. There were a few existing systematic reviews conducted on cultural competence interventions in health care setting. Beach et al (2005) conducted a systematic review to assess the interventions including lectures, group discussions, cultural immersion and role play in improving the cultural competence of health professionals. Almost all evaluated studies reported a positive effect on the multicultural competence of the health care practitioners, suggesting employing any intervention may be effective (Beach et al., 2005). A systematic review of reviews done by Truong, Paradies and Priest (2014) on the interventions to improve cultural competence in health care outcomes suggested moderate improvement evidences in health care provider outcomes in terms of knowledge, attitudes and skills on multiculturalism. The interventions reviewed included training, workshop, cultural specific education program, interpreter services and peer education (Truong et al., 2014).

However, review on cultural competence interventions for counseling professionals seems to be lacking. Thus, the objective of the following systematic review is to evaluate the effectiveness of recent counsellor training interventions in improving the multicultural competence of counseling professionals

## **Methods**

### **Search Strategy**

This systematic review was conducted following Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Figure 1). A systematic search of the Scopus electronic database from 2010 to 2016 was conducted in October 2016. The following combination of terms was used during the searching: "multicultural competence" or "cultural competence" or "cultural sensitivity" and "counseling".

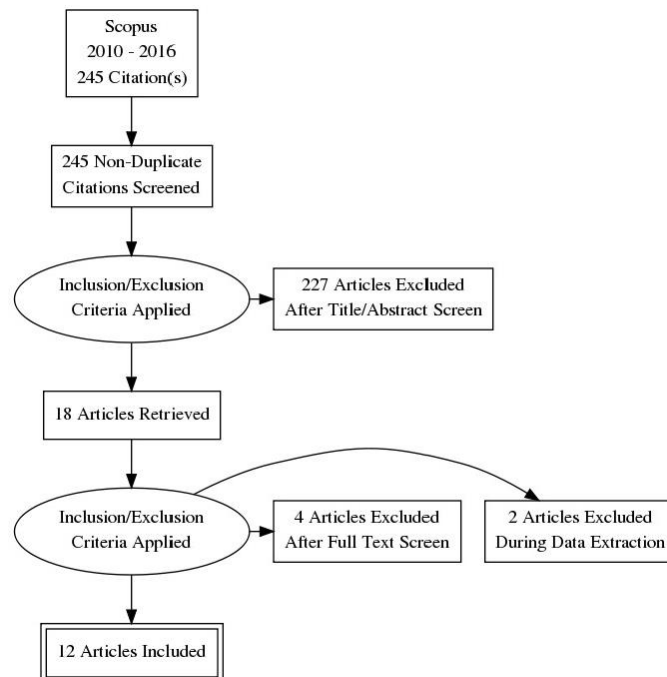


Figure 1: PRISMA diagram of study selection.

### Inclusion Criteria

The criteria for including studies were: i) published between January 2010 to December 2016, ii) in relation to counseling practitioners or students, iii) involves the study of any cultural competence intervention or strategy, iv) written in English, and v) included quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods studies.

### Exclusion Criteria

Articles were excluded if they did not present any empirical data or not relevant to counseling setting. Besides, items that did not have a full text available for review were also excluded.

### Quality Appraisal

In this review, the quality of quantitative studies was critically appraised using the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI, 2014) Quality Assessment tool for Controlled Intervention Studies, Observational Cohort and Cross-Sectional Studies, or Before-After (Pre-Post) Studies With No Control Group according to the research design of each study. On the other hand, qualitative studies included in this review were assessed using Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2013) Qualitative Checklist. Each study was then given an overall rating for the quality as "Poor", "Fair" or "Good".

### Data Extraction

Data were extracted using a self-developed form that included fields for study design, quality rating of the study, intervention/ program studied, outcome measures and major findings.

## Results

### Results of the Search

The initial electronic search yielded a total of 245 references, of which 227 articles were rejected on initial title or abstract screening. Four articles were excluded after full text screening and another two articles were excluded during data extraction. Majority of the articles were excluded because the studies were not conducted in counseling setting, did not include empirical data or did not involve multicultural competence training or education. Overall, there were twelve articles meeting final inclusion and exclusion criteria which were extracted for data analysis (Table 1).

### Study Characteristics and Samples

All the studies were based in the USA. The participants of 11 articles involved graduate counseling students, while the remaining one study involved practicing genetic counsellors. Six out of the 12 studies were quantitative design, while four studies were qualitative design and the other two studies were mixed- method design. Almost all studies used relatively small sample sizes, while there are only two studies had sample size more than 100 participants. Four major categories of multicultural competence training were reported among the 12 studies: service learning (6 articles), cultural immersion (3 articles), culturally tailored programs (2 articles), traditional graduate program / workshop / training (3 articles). The quality of the studies ranged from fair to good. There are two articles that studied interventions combining cultural immersion and service learning.

### Service Learning

Service learning is an experience teaching strategy that involves the direct expose of the students to community by working on social, political, cultural and environmental aspects (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). A total of six papers presented on the impact of service learning on multicultural competence. Three studies conducted by Hipolito-delgado et al (2011); Koch et al (2014) and Smith-Augustine, Dowden, Wiggins, and Hall (2014) were qualitative design, while Midgett, Hausheer, and Dumas (2016); Midgett and Dumas (2016) conducted quantitative studies and Lee, Rosen, and McWhirter (2014) conducted mixed-method study.

Hipolito-delgado et al (2011) investigated on the impact of Multicultural Action Project (MAP), a project whereby participants were required to volunteer with homeless people, elderly, and women who were incarcerated. The findings indicated an increased level of self-reported multicultural, awareness and skills in the participants. The participants also experienced affective, empathic and cognitive reactions throughout the experience, which contribute to the enhanced multicultural competence.

Koch et al (2014); Smith-Augustine et al (2014) conducted similar studies on multicultural competence programs that combined cultural immersion and service learning in Belize. Both studies reported positive changes in multicultural attitudes, knowledge, and awareness in the participants.

On the other hand, the participants of Lee et al.'s study (2014) were required to facilitated two curricular programs at a middle school with predominantly low income, ethnic minority youth. The quantitative survey showed inconsistent changes in the trainees' self-reported multicultural competence. Nevertheless, participants reported that they were benefited from the service learning cognitively, behaviourally, and



effectively in relation to their multicultural competence. In the study of Midgett et al. (2016), the participants facilitated debriefing groups for members that had participated in the production of a social justice and awareness related theater. The results indicated a significant increase in terms of the participants' group leadership self efficacy and multicultural knowledge after the project. However, there was no significant change in multicultural awareness of the participants.

Midgett and Doumas (2016) studied on a service-learning project whereby participants were assigned as job coaches to refugee families. The participants reported an increase in multicultural knowledge and social justice advocacy skill, but with no significant change in multicultural awareness.

### **Cultural Immersion**

Cultural immersion is an experience whereby students immerse themselves by direct interactions with persons or communities of different culture to open up deeper understanding on the diverse culture. Three articles reviewed in this systematic review investigated on cultural immersion.

Both Koch et al (2014); Smith-Augustine et al (2014) studied on the impact of international cultural immersion in Belize on multicultural competence of counselling students. Belize is a country of multi-culture, multilingual and multi-ethnic, which is a suitable country for cultural immersion program. McDowell et al (2012) also did a similar study where the students participated international immersion in a country in Middle East or Asia. All these three studies were qualitatively design to examine the growth and experience of the students and they reported increase in the participants' multicultural awareness and skills.

### **Culturally Tailored Programs**

Some studies made an effort to integrate multicultural aspects in traditional training of counsellors and studied the outcome of the programs. Jones et al (2016) conducted a mixed-method study on the impact of integrating direct training with culturally responsive treatment and case consultation. The treatment group in this study reported a significant improvement in self-perceptions of cultural competence compared to the control group.

The quantitative survey conducted by Swan, Schottelkorb, and Lancaster (2015) studied a multicultural skills-based curriculum (MSBC) that included training modules and supervision focused on using expressive art and multicultural awareness and competency. The participants reported improvement in perceptions of therapeutic relationship conditions as well as multicultural competence after the training intervention.

### **Traditional graduate program / workshop / training**

In this review, there are also studies that investigated the impact of counsellor training in traditional graduate studies on multicultural competence. The quantitative study conducted by Hill, Vereen, McNeal, and Stotesbury (2013) showed no difference in self-perceived multicultural competence for students who attended CACREP and non-CACREP accredited programs.

In addition, Kozina, Grabovari, Stefano, and Drapeau (2010) did a quantitative survey on the changes in students' counseling self-efficacy belief in 8 weeks of a master's counselling

psychology program that includes ongoing weekly academic instruction and supervision. Although the findings reported significant increases in the overall counsellor self-efficacy, there is no significant difference found in perceived cultural competence.

On the hand, Nagakura et al (2015) study addressed deaf awareness training (DAT) in graduate education. The results showed that there is no significant difference in terms of knowledge of deafness and Deaf culture and attitudes towards deaf people between those with and without DAT.

Table 1

*Interventions to improve multicultural counseling competence*

<b>Author (Year) [Quality Rating]</b>	<b>Study design</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Intervention program studied</b>	<b>/Outcome measures</b>	<b>Major findings</b>
Hill et al (2013) [Fair]	Quantitative: causal-comparative	Registered student members of the American Counseling Association (ACA) (n=201)	Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and non-CACREP accredited programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-assessment inventory of awareness receptivity cultural diversity (Quick Discrimination Index)</li> <li>Self-perceived multicultural competency (Multicultural Awareness-Knowledge-Skills Survey)</li> </ul>	The participants self-reported fair level of knowledge and awareness of multicultural competence. However, there is no significant distinction in self-perceived multicultural competence for those who attended CACREP and non-CACREP programs.
Hipolito-delgado al (2011) [Good]	Qualitative: etnarrative analysis	First-year graduate counseling students (n=3)	Service learning: Multicultural Action Project (MAP) – participants were required to work with culturally diverse clients (approximately 10 hours over 2 months)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-reported awareness, knowledge and skills</li> <li>Cognitive and emotional reactions to the immersion experience</li> </ul>	The participants self-reported gain in multicultural knowledge, awareness and skills. Through multiple and interpersonal interactions during the immersion project, the participants experienced

affective, empathic, and cognitive reactions which lead to enhanced multicultural competence and ability to work with culturally diverse communities.

Jones et al (2016)	Mixed-method: pre-counseling and post-test students (with control group) & case study	Graduate students (n=5)	Integration of culturally responsive model traditional cognitive behaviour therapy training	• Self-perceptions of competence (California Brief Multicultural Counseling Scale)	The culturally responsive training group reported an increase in self-perceptions of cultural competence with most significant improvement in the domain of nonethnic skills. This treatment group who initially scored lower in self-reported cultural competence ended up scored higher compared to control group after the intervention training. The treatment group also showed a relatively high focus on cultural factors in their counseling sessions.
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Table 1  
*Continued*

Author (Year) [Quality Rating]	Study design	Sample	Intervention program studied	Outcome measures	Major findings
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Koch et al (2014)	Qualitative: Graduate semi-structured interview and narrative analysis	Graduate counseling students (n=9)	Combination of immersion and service learning in Belize (for about 8 hours each day for 10 days)	• Interpersonal development and skill building in terms of cultural competence and social justice activism	The participants reported for positive changes in diversity of attitudes, knowledge, professional development and personal development in terms of cultural competency and social justice activism. They showed a gain in sensitivity to cultural differences and improvement in their multicultural counseling knowledge, competence and skills.
Kozina et al. (2010)	Quantitative: pre- and post-test	First-year and master students counseling psychology (n=20)	Training program of a first-year master's counseling program psychology in a North American university (includes ongoing weekly academic instruction and supervision)	• Self-efficacy beliefs counseling inability (Counseling Self-Estimate Inventory, COSE)	The findings reported insignificant increases in the overall counsellor self-efficacy, especially in terms of counseling micro skills. However, there is no significant improvement found in perceived cultural competence.
Lee et al.	Mixed- and	Master's and	Service learning :	• Self-reported	Inconsistent changes

(2014) [Fair]	method: pre-doctoral- and post-level intervention counsellor study & trainees narrative enquiry (n=32)	Participants facilitated curricular programs at middle school with Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills Survey) Learning experience weekly for 2 hours over a period of 8 weeks)	multicultural twoawareness, knowledge and skills (Multicultural Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills Survey) • Learning experience	were reported in trainees' self-reported multicultural competence. Nevertheless, participants reported that they were benefited from the service learning cognitively, behaviourally, and affectively in relation to their multicultural competence.
McDowell et al. (2012) [Good]	Qualitative: First or second year Master's counseling students (n=8)	International immersion of where participants travelled to a country in Middle East or in Asia and gained formal, informal and experiential learning (for 12 – 17 days)	• Learning outcomes of the participants	The participants reported increased awareness of social difference, personal transformation in terms of increased sense of social responsibility and impact on professional development including improved ability to work cross-culturally.

Table 1  
Continued

Author (Year) [Quality Rating]	Study design	Sample	Intervention program studied	/Outcome measures	Major findings
Midgett & Doumas (2016) [Good]	Quantitative: pre- and post-intervention study	First and second-year counsellor education master's	Service-learning project where participants were assigned as job coaches	• Multicultural competence (Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and	The results showed an improvement in multicultural knowledge and social justice advocacy skills with

			refugee students (n=38)	families. Each participant spent a minimum of 30 hours working on this project.	Awareness Scale) • Social justice advocacy skills (Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment Survey)	both 1st and 2nd-year participants. However, there was no significant change in multicultural awareness. Findings also indicated that 1st-year students had more significant improvement than 2nd-year students.
Midgett al. (2016)	Quantitative: pre- and posttest	Counselor education Master's students (n=20)	Group debriefing service-learning project (3 weeks)		• Perceived efficacy as a counseling group leader (Group Leader Self-Efficacy Instrument) • Multicultural competence (Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale)	The findings indicated a statistically significant gain in students' group leadership self-efficacy and multicultural knowledge after the project. However, there was no significant improvement in multicultural awareness.
Nagakura et al. (2015)	Quantitative: causal-comparative	Genetic counsellors who graduated within	Deaf awareness training (DAT) in graduate education		• Knowledge of Deaf culture • Attitudes towards deaf people	The majority of the participants reported they received 1 to 2 hours of DAT during their graduate

			th		program.
		e			
		last	5		However, there is
		years			no
		(n=135)			significant
					difference in
					terms of knowledge
					of
					deafness and Deaf
					culture and
					attitudes
					towards deaf
					people
					between those with
					and
					without DAT.
Smith-	Qualitative:	Master's	International	• Learning	The results
Augustine	narrative	level	cultural	experience	demonstrated
et	analysis	graduate	immersion	• The impact on	higher level of
al. (2014)		counseling	to Belize for 3	weeks that	students' and
		students	include	cultural self-	other-
[Fair]		(n=5)	community-	awareness	awareness. The
			service		students
			learning,		became more
			interactions		aware of
			with		own discrimination
			local		and
			representative		prejudicial
			and		attitudes, and
			participation in		made an effort to
					overcome them.
					They
					also reported
					increase in
					self-awareness in
					terms
					of cultural
					background,
					self-advocacy and
					self-
					acceptance.

Table 1  
Continued

Author (Year) [Quality Rating]	Study design	Sample	Intervention program studied	/Outcome measures	Major findings
Swan et al. (2015) case research [Fair]	Quantitative: single-design	Graduate students (n=3)	Multicultural skills-based curriculum (MSBC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-perceptions of therapeutic relationship (Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory)</li> <li>Self-reported multicultural competency (Multicultural Counseling Inventory)</li> </ul>	<p>The participants reported improvement in perceptions of therapeutic relationship conditions and multicultural competence after the training intervention. The participants showed increases in all subscales of the Multicultural Counseling Inventory, indicating enhanced multicultural skills, awareness, relationships and knowledge.</p>

### Discussion

Multicultural training is gaining importance in the counseling profession to address culturally diverse clients. There were different types of multicultural interventions or training reviewed in this study. In overall, experiential learning and culturally tailored training programs lead to positive effects on participants' self-reported multicultural competence. Interestingly, there are two studies (Midgett et al., 2016; Midgett & Doumas, 2016) that reported increase in multicultural knowledge, but no significant change in multicultural awareness. The authors suggested that this is probably because awareness is more difficult to change compared to knowledge. On the other hand, the mixed method study conducted by Lee et al (2014) reported inconsistent changes in self-reported multicultural competence. While some participants presented some improvement in multicultural competence, some expressed that they did not learn anything about cultural diversity from the service learning intervention (Lee et al., 2014). Although the exact cause for these discrepancies was not identified, this could indicate the presence of complexity in multicultural competence training.

A key issue identified in this review is that all the studies that investigated on the impact of traditional

counseling graduate programs (Hill et al., 2013; Kozina, et al., 2010; Nagakura et al., 2015) showed no significant difference in terms of multicultural competence among participants who had and had not attended the programs. This might indicate that traditional counseling training is insufficient to improve multicultural competence of graduate students. The programs might be designed such that they merely meet the accreditation standards without providing enough experiential learning exposure to the students to give them significant impact on multiculturalism. Nevertheless, the studies gave less information on which components of the education programs that resulted to positive or no effect on the cultural competence of the students. Future research may focus on examining the curricular components of counselling graduate education programs and its effectiveness.

The outcome analysis of all the quantitative studies as well as qualitative studies included in this review rely on self-assessment. Although self-assessment tool is a common instrument used to measure multicultural competence, there is possible short-coming of self-report tools that individuals tend to report self-perceived competence at higher level than the actual performance, probably as a result of social desirability bias and low awareness (Moleiro et al., 2011). Besides that, all these empirical studies measure only counseling providers' cultural competence outcome, none of the study consider whether cultural competence translates to therapy or clients' outcome. To achieve more reliable measurement of actual cultural competence performance, it is suggested to employ objective assessments that integrate triangulation assessment, such as including evaluation of experts and patients' satisfaction besides assessment of counselors' self-perceived competence.

The heterogeneity of the empirical studies makes it difficult to compare individual studies and determine the most effective intervention in this systematic review. Each paper studied on different interventions and population, and different instruments were also used to measure cultural competence. For instance, some studies used Multicultural Awareness-Knowledge-Skills Survey (MAKSS) (Hill, 2013; Lee, 2014) which measures the participants' self-perceived awareness, knowledge and skills, while some used Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale (MCKAS) (Midgett & Dumas, 2016; Midgett et al., 2016) which measure only knowledge and skills of the participants. On the other hand, although qualitative research allows for in-depth investigation on the impact of the interventions, the absence of statistical result and diversity of qualitative data analysis methods also prohibit the comparison of individual studies. Future studies may focus on developing a consensus in terms of defining and evaluating multicultural competence and comparison of different interventions.

All of the studies included in this review were conducted in the United States. As each country usually has different social and cultural values, the findings from these studies may not appropriate to be generalized to Malaysia context. Despite of good evidences on the positive impact of multicultural competence training to participants' self-perceived multicultural competence, there are several methodological weaknesses in the studies reviewed, such as small sample size, lack of control groups and lack of outcome measurement over time. Most of the studies studied sample size ranged from 3 to 40 participants, which could not represent the population studied. In addition, the lacking of control groups affects the reliability of the findings as there is possibility of other



factors that may influence the outcome of the study besides the interventions studied. Multiple outcome measurements over time with the same result can increase the confidence level of the findings, however, most studies in this review measure at only one or two time points. These methodological weaknesses further limit the generalizability of the findings.

### Limitations

The limitations of this systematic review include the small number of studies that met the inclusion criteria. Setting the criteria that only English articles and published between 2010 to 2016 may possibly cause some related studies, such as those studies conducted in non-English countries or published earlier than 2010, were excluded from the analysis. Besides that, the results of all the studies were based on self-reported performance, which are subjected to social desirability bias. There is also lack of client outcome measures in the studies to determine whether the increased cultural competence translate to improved counseling outcome. Future research may include objective evaluation on the cultural competency of the counseling professionals as well as therapeutic outcome, such as clients' satisfaction and adherence to therapy. In addition, the qualitative design and heterogeneity of the empirical studies cause difficulty in analyzing and comparing the results of the individual studies. In addition, the small sample size taken by the studies also make it difficult to generalize the findings.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this systematic review was to investigate the effectiveness of recent interventions to improve multicultural counseling competence and thus provide a basis for future research in this area. However, the heterogeneity of the studies prohibits the comparison of each study in order to determine the most effective intervention. Nevertheless, service learning, cultural immersion and culturally tailored programs showed good evidences on improved cultural competence of counseling provider. On the hand, traditional counseling graduate trainings or programs seemed to show not much influence on the counsellors' multicultural competence. Future researches are suggested to examine the curricular of these programs and consider integrating experiential learning in the programs to improve cultural competence of the students. Future study should consider on the development of standard framework to measure cultural competence to permit the comparison between studies and include the evaluation of client outcome, such as client adherence and client satisfaction, to give a more comprehensive assessment of multicultural competence outcome.

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