

# MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCE AMONG COUNSELING STUDENTS: A PRISMA-SCR SCOPING REVIEW OF CORE DIMENSIONS, PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES, AND COUNSELOR EDUCATION IMPLICATIONS

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**Abstract.** Multicultural competence is central to counselor education because counseling students are prepared to serve clients across diverse cultural, religious, social, and identity backgrounds. Although multicultural competence has been widely discussed, studies focusing specifically on counseling students and counselor trainees remain scattered across conceptual models, pedagogical approaches, assessment practices, and training contexts. This scoping review mapped the literature on multicultural competence among counseling students by identifying its core dimensions, pedagogical strategies, assessment patterns, barriers, and implications for counselor education. The review followed PRISMA-ScR and the Population-Concept-Context framework. A focused search was conducted in SAGE Journals and SpringerLink/Springer Nature for peer-reviewed English-language articles published from 2010 to 2026. From 1,026 identified records, 1,024 records were screened, 17 full-text articles were assessed, and 11 articles were included in the final synthesis. The findings indicate that multicultural competence is a multidimensional and developmental construct that extends beyond awareness, knowledge, and skills to include cultural humility, cultural comfort, relational safety, social justice orientation, advocacy, and supervision-based competence. Pedagogical strategies include formal multicultural training, cultural immersion, study abroad, service-learning, intergroup contact, clinical supervision, and assessment-based feedback. The review suggests that counselor education should move beyond single-course instruction toward integrated, reflective, experiential, supervised, and context-sensitive models for developing multicultural competence.

**Keywords:** multicultural competence, counseling students, counselor education, cultural humility, PRISMA-ScR, scoping review

## INTRODUCTION

Socio-cultural diversity is a defining feature of contemporary societies. Migration, educational globalization, digital communication, interreligious contact, and changing patterns of social mobility have increased encounters across ethnicity, language, religion, disability, class, gender, generation, and social identity. In counseling, such encounters are not peripheral. They shape how clients define problems, seek help, interpret distress, understand family and community obligations, and respond to professional assistance. Counselor education, therefore, needs to prepare future counselors to understand cultural meaning, power, identity, and social context as integral parts of ethical counseling practice.

Multicultural counseling competence has commonly been grounded in the awareness-knowledge-skills framework introduced by Sue et al. (1992). This framework positioned competent counselors as professionals who are aware of their own assumptions and biases, knowledgeable about clients' worldviews, and able to use culturally appropriate interventions. Arredondo et al. (1996) later operationalized these competencies into more observable behavioral indicators, while the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies expanded the field

toward advocacy, privilege, oppression, and systemic power relations (Ratts et al., 2016). These developments show that multicultural competence is not merely a cognitive understanding of cultural difference; it is also a professional commitment to ethical, responsive, and equitable counseling practice.

The importance of multicultural competence is particularly strong in counselor preparation. Counseling students and counselor trainees are still developing professional identity, counseling skills, ethical judgment, and assumptions about clients and communities. Their multicultural competence can be shaped by coursework, supervision, reflective practice, cultural immersion, service-learning, clinical experience, and assessment-based feedback. Studies have also shown that experiential pedagogy and multicultural training may strengthen students' multicultural counseling competence and self-efficacy (Barden & Greene, 2015; Greene et al., 2014; Gonzalez-Voller et al., 2020). However, the literature uses diverse terms, including multicultural counseling competence, cultural competence, cultural humility, multicultural orientation, social justice competence, and supervision-based competence.

A key problem is that the evidence base remains conceptually and pedagogically dispersed. Some studies focus on competence dimensions; others examine training effects, cultural immersion, service-learning, supervision, disability competence, religious and spiritual diversity, self-report measures, or performance-based assessment. Existing reviews have tended to address multicultural competence or multicultural orientation in broader psychotherapy, supervision, or professional contexts. In contrast, fewer reviews have specifically mapped how multicultural competence is conceptualized, taught, assessed, and developed among counseling students and counselor trainees. This narrower focus is important because counselor education is the formative period in which future professional dispositions, cultural reflexivity, and applied counseling responses are established.

This review addresses that gap by providing a focused scoping review of multicultural competence among counseling students and related trainees. The novelty of the article lies in its synthesis of four interconnected areas that are often treated separately: core competence dimensions, pedagogical strategies, assessment patterns, and implications for counselor education. Rather than treating multicultural competence as a fixed set of attributes, this review maps it as a developmental, relational, reflective, and justice-oriented process. The review question was: How does the literature map multicultural competence among counseling students in relation to its core dimensions, pedagogical strategies, assessment patterns, barriers, and implications for counselor education?

## **METHODS**

### **Research design and reporting framework**

This article used a scoping review design to map the breadth, characteristics, and conceptual patterns of literature on multicultural competence among counseling students. A scoping review was appropriate because the purpose was not to calculate pooled intervention effects, but to clarify how a field has been conceptualized, what types of evidence are available, and which research gaps remain. The review was guided by the methodological logic of Arksey and O'Malley (2005), Levac et al. (2010), the updated JBI guidance for scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2020), and the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR; Tricco et al., 2018). No review protocol was formally registered; however, the search strategy, eligibility criteria, data charting categories, and synthesis plan were established before article extraction.

### **Population-Concept-Context framework**

The review used the Population-Concept-Context framework to define its scope. The population included counseling students, counselor trainees, pre-service counselors, school counselors-in-training, therapist trainees, psychotherapy trainees, graduate supervisees, and closely related mental health trainees when the article was situated in counselor preparation, counseling psychology training, clinical supervision, or related graduate training. The concept included multicultural competence, multicultural counseling competence, cultural competence, cross-cultural competence, cultural humility, and multicultural orientation. The context included counselor education, counseling training, clinical supervision, counseling-related graduate training, and higher education.

### **Information sources and search strategy**

The search was intentionally restricted to two publisher databases: SAGE Journals and SpringerLink/Springer Nature. This decision was made to produce a focused, publisher-based mapping of peer-reviewed studies from two large publishers that extensively publish in counseling, psychology, education, counselor training, supervision, and the social sciences. The restricted database scope is acknowledged as a limitation because it may exclude relevant studies indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO, Wiley, Taylor & Francis, or ProQuest. Nevertheless, the focused two-database strategy allowed a transparent and replicable mapping of eligible literature within SAGE and Springer sources.

The search covered peer-reviewed English-language journal articles published from 2010 to 2026. The final search was conducted on 14 June 2026. Search terms were organized into three clusters: population, concept, and context. The population cluster was (“counseling students” OR “counseling students” OR “counselor trainees” OR “counselor trainees” OR “pre-service counselors” OR “school counselors-in-training” OR “therapist trainees” OR “psychotherapy trainees” OR “supervisees”). The concept cluster was (“multicultural competence” OR “multicultural counseling competence” OR “cultural competence” OR “cross-cultural competence” OR “cultural humility” OR “multicultural orientation”). The context cluster was (“counselor education” OR “counseling education” OR “counseling training” OR “clinical supervision” OR “higher education”). Boolean operators, quotation marks, and filters were adapted to each database's search interface.

### **Eligibility criteria and selection process**

Articles were included if they were peer-reviewed journal articles written in English, published between 2010 and 2026, available in full text, focused on counseling students or related trainees, addressed multicultural competence or closely related constructs, and were situated in counselor education, counseling training, clinical supervision, or higher education. Articles were excluded if they were editorials, book reviews, theses, dissertations, non-peer-reviewed proceedings, reports, or articles focused only on practicing counselors, teachers, psychologists, or other professionals without a clear connection to counselor education or trainee development.

Records were screened in three stages. First, duplicate records were removed. Second, titles and abstracts were screened against the PCC framework. Third, potentially eligible articles were assessed in full text. Articles excluded at the full-text stage were removed because their population or context did not strictly meet the criteria, particularly when the article focused on practitioner-only samples or did not address counselor education, counseling training, or trainee development.

## Data charting and synthesis

A data charting form was developed to extract article identity, database source, country or educational setting, study design, participants, focal construct, pedagogical strategy, assessment approach, key findings, and implications for counselor education. Data charting was conducted iteratively; when an article did not clearly report a category, the category was recorded conservatively rather than inferred beyond the available information. The synthesis combined descriptive mapping and thematic synthesis. Descriptive mapping summarized the study selection process and the characteristics of included studies. Thematic synthesis organized findings into core competence dimensions, pedagogical strategies, assessment patterns, barriers, implications, and future research directions. Formal critical appraisal was not conducted because the purpose of the review was to map evidence and concepts rather than to determine the effectiveness of interventions or compare study quality.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The database search identified 1,026 records: 26 from SAGE Journals and 1,000 from SpringerLink/Springer Nature. After removing two duplicate records, 1,024 records were screened by title and abstract. A total of 1,007 records were excluded because they did not meet the PCC framework or eligibility criteria. Seventeen full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, and six were excluded because the population or context did not strictly meet the criteria. The final synthesis included 11 articles: seven from SAGE Journals and four from SpringerLink/Springer Nature. The study selection process is summarized in Table 1 and Figure 1.

The 11 included articles were published between 2019 and 2026. They included phenomenological studies, mixed-method or multimethod studies, quantitative studies, instrument or evaluation tool development, a systematic review, and conceptual or programmatic discussions of multicultural and social justice development. The included populations covered school counselors-in-training, therapists or psychotherapy trainees, counselor trainees, graduate supervisees, BIPOC supervisees, students in mental health training programs, master's-level counselor trainees, counselor candidates, and students of color in marriage and family therapy training programs. Although terms varied, all articles were connected to counselor preparation, counseling-related graduate training, supervision, or early professional development.

Table 1. PRISMA-ScR study selection summary

| PRISMA-ScR stage      | Description                                                            | Number    |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Identification        | Records identified from SAGE Journals and SpringerLink/Springer Nature | n = 1,026 |
| Duplicate removal     | Duplicate records removed before screening                             | n = 2     |
| Screening             | Records screened by title and abstract                                 | n = 1,024 |
| Excluded at screening | Records excluded because they did not meet PCC/eligibility criteria    | n = 1,007 |
| Eligibility           | Full-text articles assessed for eligibility                            | n = 17    |

| PRISMA-ScR stage        | Description                              | Number |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------|--------|
| Excluded from full text | Full-text articles excluded with reasons | n = 6  |
| Included                | Articles included in the final synthesis | n = 11 |

Figure 1. PRISMA-ScR flow diagram of study selection

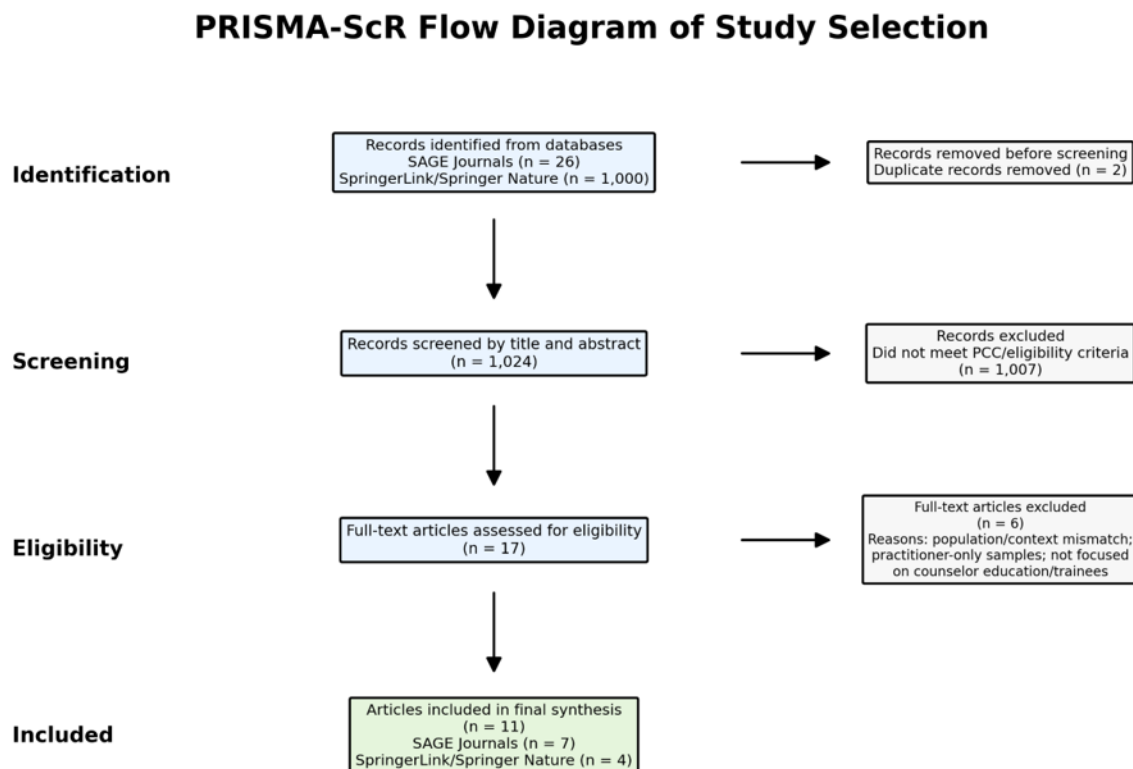


Table 2. Strengthened the data-charting matrix of included studies

| No. | Study                        | Design and participants/setting          | Primary focus          | Key contribution to synthesis                |
|-----|------------------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Peterson et al. (2019), SAGE | Phenomenological study: five U.S. school | Cultural immersion and | Shows that direct international dialogue and |

| No. | Study                                     | Design and participants/setting                                                             | Primary focus                                                                                        | Key contribution to synthesis                                                                                          |
|-----|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|     |                                           | counselors-in-training in cultural immersion in the Netherlands.                            | cultural competence growth.                                                                          | immersion can help trainees interpret cultural values and school counseling practices across contexts.                 |
| 2   | Winkeljohn Black and Gold (2019), SAGE    | Mixed-method investigation; therapist/psychotherapy trainees.                               | Cultural humility and implicit associations toward religious, irreligious, and spiritual identities. | Positions religious and spiritual diversity as a multicultural domain requiring humility and reflective awareness.     |
| 3   | Wilcox et al. (2020), SAGE                | Multimethod study; counselor trainees (N = 93) and practicing therapists (N = 107).         | Self-report and performance-based multicultural competence.                                          | Highlights the gap between perceived competence and demonstrated competence.                                           |
| 4   | Wilcox et al. (2023), SAGE                | Quantitative supervision-focused study; BIPOC supervisees/trainees in supervision contexts. | Cultural humility, cultural comfort, disclosure, and supervision outcomes.                           | Shows that multicultural learning is shaped by relational safety and supervisory climate.                              |
| 5   | Davis et al. (2024), SAGE                 | Programmatic/conceptual article on immersion and study abroad in mental health training.    | Multicultural and social justice development through immersion and study abroad.                     | Links multicultural competence with spiritual development, values learning, and social justice advocacy.               |
| 6   | Jadaszewski et al. (2024), SAGE           | Multimethod study; 209 graduate supervisees.                                                | Supervisory cultural rupture and supervisor cultural humility.                                       | Identifies rupture recognition and repair as central to culturally responsive supervision.                             |
| 7   | Sahu et al. (2024), SAGE                  | Instrument/evaluation tool development; clinical supervision context.                       | Multicultural Counseling Skills Evaluation Form.                                                     | Provides a behaviorally anchored approach for assessing supervisees' multicultural counseling skills.                  |
| 8   | Kılıç and Vaněček (2025), Springer Nature | Quantitative study: counseling students/counselor candidates.                               | Demographic correlates of MCC and the role of multicultural training.                                | Shows the continued relevance of multicultural training and demographic/contextual variables in counselor preparation. |
| 9   | Öksüz and Brubaker (2025), Springer       | Quantitative study; 216 master's-level counselor trainees.                                  | Disability counseling competence, training, and intergroup contact.                                  | Extends MCC to disability-specific competence and emphasizes training plus contact.                                    |
| 10  | Mitchell et al. (2026), Springer          | Systematic review: 20-year review of global service-learning in counselor education.        | Global service-learning and counselor education.                                                     | Shows service-learning as a developing pedagogy for competence, advocacy, and community engagement.                    |

| No. | Study                             | Design and participants/setting                                                                | Primary focus                           | Key contribution to synthesis                                                                       |
|-----|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 11  | Holmes and Glass (2025), Springer | Phenomenological study: eight students of color in MFT training and early clinical experience. | Development of MCC among MFTs of color. | Highlights identity-based experiences, cultural humility, and training needs for students of color. |

### Thematic Synthesis

The thematic synthesis indicates that multicultural competence is conceptualized as a multidimensional and developmental construct. The classical awareness-knowledge-skills framework remains foundational, but it is no longer sufficient as a standalone explanatory model. Across the included articles, multicultural competence also included cultural humility, cultural comfort, relational safety, social justice orientation, advocacy, rupture repair, disability-specific competence, religious and spiritual responsiveness, and supervision-based competence.

Self-awareness appeared through reflection on personal assumptions, implicit associations, identity positioning, bias, and power. Cultural knowledge appeared in relation to multicultural terminology, disability, religious and spiritual identity, underserved communities, global learning, and community contexts. Counseling skills were emphasized through performance-based assessment, evaluation of multicultural skills, case responsiveness, and early clinical experience. Cultural humility functioned as a bridge between individual reflection and relational responsiveness because it required openness, accountability, recognition of limits, and readiness to repair cultural mistakes.

Pedagogically, the included literature suggests that competence development depends on an integrated combination of explicit instruction, experiential exposure, supervised practice, and assessment-based feedback. Cultural immersion, study abroad, global service-learning, intergroup contact, disability-focused training, and early clinical experience moved learning beyond abstract knowledge. Clinical supervision was especially important because it provided a space for trainees to discuss culture, identity, bias, discomfort, nondisclosure, and rupture. Assessment-based learning was also important because self-report alone may not capture applied competence.

Table 3. Consolidated thematic synthesis of competence dimensions and pedagogical strategies

| Theme                        | Mapped elements                                                                                                            | Pedagogical/assessment link                             | Implication                                                                                       |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Core competence dimensions   | Self-awareness, cultural knowledge, counseling skills, humility, comfort, relational safety, social justice, and advocacy. | Coursework, reflection, supervision, performance tasks. | MCC should be taught as a developmental and relational competence, not a fixed checklist.         |
| Experiential learning        | Cultural immersion, study abroad, service-learning, global learning, and intergroup contact.                               | Guided reflection and community engagement.             | Experiential pedagogy helps students connect theory with lived social realities.                  |
| Supervision-based competence | Supervisor humility, cultural comfort, disclosure, rupture, working alliance, skills evaluation.                           | Clinical supervision and feedback.                      | Supervisors need training in cultural humility, rupture repair, and identity-responsive feedback. |
| Assessment patterns          | Self-report, performance-based assessment, skills evaluation, supervision indicators, context-specific competence.         | Multimethod assessment.                                 | Programs should combine perceived competence with demonstrated competence.                        |
| Context-specific competence  | Disability, religion/spirituality, rurality, BIPOC experiences, MFT trainees of color.                                     | Identity-specific modules and field learning.           | General MCC content should be expanded into specific diversity domains.                           |

Table 4. Barriers, research gaps, and recommended directions

| <b>Barrier/gap</b>                    | <b>How it appears in the review</b>                                                 | <b>Risk for counselor education</b>                                                  | <b>Recommended direction</b>                                                       |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Limited database scope                | The review is limited to SAGE and Springer.                                         | Relevant articles in Scopus, WoS, ERIC, PsycINFO, and other databases may be missed. | State the review as focused; use broader databases in future reviews.              |
| Perceived-demonstrated competence gap | Self-report and performance-based studies show different evidence of competence.    | Students may overestimate competence without demonstrating applied skills.           | Use self-report, simulation, role play, supervisor ratings, and rubrics.           |
| Limited direct exposure               | Immersion, service-learning, and contact are repeatedly identified.                 | Learning remains cognitive and abstract.                                             | Embed community-based and experiential learning with reflection.                   |
| Cultural discomfort and rupture       | Supervision studies highlight nondisclosure, comfort, humility, and rupture repair. | Trainees may avoid culture-related concerns.                                         | Train supervisors in culturally responsive supervision and repair.                 |
| Curricular fragmentation              | MCC appears across courses, supervision, assessment, and fieldwork.                 | A single course cannot ensure competence development.                                | Integrate MCC across the curriculum, practicum, internship, and assessment system. |
| Limited contextual/spiritual evidence | Few studies address non-Western, Muslim, Indonesian, or Global South contexts.      | Imported models may miss local religious, cultural, and community meanings.          | Develop culturally and spiritually responsive models of counselor education.       |

## Discussion

This scoping review clarifies that multicultural competence among counseling students is increasingly conceptualized as a developmental, relational, reflective, and justice-oriented construct. The findings support the continuing relevance of the awareness-knowledge-skills framework and also show that contemporary counselor education literature extends it through cultural humility, a social justice orientation, relational safety, supervision-based learning, and context-specific competence. This expansion is important because a static checklist model may not capture the complexity of counseling encounters in plural societies.

The first theoretical contribution of this review is to position multicultural competence as an ongoing process of formation. Counseling students do not become culturally competent by completing a single course. Rather, competence develops through repeated cycles of exposure, reflection, practice, feedback, and supervision. Cultural humility is central to this process because it asks students to remain open, accountable, and willing to repair cultural mistakes. Social justice orientation further expands competence beyond interpersonal sensitivity to include ethical awareness of inequity, privilege, power, and systemic barriers.

The second contribution concerns pedagogy. The included literature points toward integrated pedagogy rather than content delivery alone. Formal multicultural courses remain necessary because students need conceptual frameworks, terminology, ethical guidance, and knowledge of client identities. However, formal instruction must be connected to experiential learning, cultural immersion, service-learning, intergroup contact, field learning, and guided reflection. Without experiential and reflective components, multicultural competence can remain abstract. Without explicit instruction, experience can remain unprocessed or superficial. Effective counselor education, therefore, needs to combine knowledge, experience, reflection, and supervised practice.

The third contribution is the identification of supervision and assessment as mechanisms of competence development. Supervision is not only a site for monitoring clinical work; it is also a relational learning environment in which culture, identity, bias, power, discomfort, nondisclosure, and rupture can be explored. The review suggests that supervisor cultural humility and cultural comfort can shape whether trainees disclose cultural concerns and develop applied skills. Assessment also requires improvement. Self-report measures can capture perceived competence, but they should be complemented by performance-based tasks, role-plays, case conceptualization, supervisor ratings, reflective writing, and behaviorally anchored skills evaluation.

The review also has contextual implications. Much of the eligible literature is grounded in Western or internationally oriented training contexts. This creates a gap for Asian, Muslim, Indonesian, and Global South counselor education. In highly plural societies, multicultural competence must consider religion, spirituality, ethnic diversity, local values, language, community norms, social hierarchy, and collective identity. International competence models such as those of Sue et al. (1992), Arredondo et al. (1996), and Ratts et al. (2016) remain valuable foundations. However, they need critical adaptation to local educational and cultural realities.

Several limitations need to be acknowledged. The review intentionally used only SAGE Journals and SpringerLink/Springer Nature. This makes the search transparent and focused but limits comprehensiveness. Relevant studies in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO, Wiley, Taylor & Francis, and other databases may not have been captured. The final synthesis also included only 11 studies under strict PCC criteria; therefore, the findings should be interpreted as a focused mapping rather than a complete account of all multicultural competence literature. In addition, no formal critical appraisal or effect-size synthesis was conducted because the purpose was to map concepts, dimensions, strategies, barriers, and gaps.

## CONCLUSION

This scoping review mapped 11 studies on multicultural competence among counseling students, counselor trainees, supervisees, therapist trainees, and related mental health trainees. The synthesis indicates that multicultural competence is a multidimensional, developmental construct comprising self-awareness, cultural knowledge, counseling skills, cultural humility, cultural comfort, relational safety, social justice orientation, advocacy, and supervision-based relational competence. The classical awareness-knowledge-skills framework remains foundational, but contemporary literature increasingly expands it toward humility, justice, contextual responsiveness, and applied professional practice.

The findings suggest that counselor education should move beyond single-course multicultural instruction. Programs need integrated pedagogical systems that combine formal training, experiential learning, cultural immersion, study abroad, service-learning, intergroup contact, clinical supervision, and assessment-based feedback. Supervision should be treated as a central space for discussing culture, identity, bias, discomfort, rupture, and culturally responsive counseling practice. Assessment should also move beyond self-report by incorporating performance-based measures, skills evaluation, reflective assignments, supervisor ratings, and context-specific evidence.

Future research should expand the scope of the database, use longitudinal and intervention-based designs, strengthen multimethod assessment, and develop culturally contextualized models for non-Western, Asian, Muslim, Indonesian, and Global South counselor education contexts. Overall, multicultural competence should be understood not as a fixed attribute, but as an ongoing process of becoming culturally aware, knowledgeable, skillful, humble, reflective, relationally responsive, and socially responsible.

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