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Challenges and Approaches in the Development of Counseling Skills in University Students

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ABSTRACT

Background: Counseling skills are essential for students in psychology, guidance counseling, and social work, as they are crucial for addressing psychological, emotional, and social issues effectively. **Objective:** This study aims to identify and analyze the factors influencing the development of counseling skills among university students, with particular emphasis on self-efficacy, cultural context, and the challenges encountered during training. **Method:** A systematic literature review was employed to gather, evaluate, and synthesize findings from empirical studies on counseling skills training for university students. This method enabled a structured and transparent collection of data from sources indexed in reputable academic databases. **Results:** The findings reveal that experiential learning methods, such as role-playing, internships, and case simulations, significantly improve students' empathy and interviewing skills. The use of technology, such as virtual reality (VR) simulations, also enhances non-verbal communication skills. Group supervision and feedback from peers and instructors accelerate the mastery of practical counseling skills. However, cultural differences and emotional stress during practice remain significant challenges. **Conclusion:** The study concludes that effective development of counseling skills requires a multimodal approach that integrates theory, practice, reflection, and feedback. It also emphasizes the need for adaptive curricula that take into account local and cultural contexts. **Originality/Value:** This review article comprehensively integrates contemporary evidence in the field of counselor education and applied psychology by synthesizing the literature on the dynamics of developing university students' counseling skills, encompassing the efficacy of experiential learning, virtual simulation technologies, group supervision, and persistent challenges related to emotional distress and cultural diversity, an area that has remained underexamined in an integrated manner. This review maps existing theoretical and methodological gaps while serving as a strategic benchmark, contributing to the development of a conceptual framework for multimodal counseling training curricula and guiding future research agendas focused on culturally responsive counseling competencies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Counseling skills comprise a set of interpersonal and technical abilities that enable counselors to effectively assist clients in addressing psychological, emotional, and social issues. In the context of higher education, these skills become one of the core competencies that students in the Counseling and Guidance or Psychology programs must possess. The development of counseling skills at the student level is essential not only for professional preparation but also for shaping the identity of prospective counselors. Counseling skills include empathetic communication, ac-

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tive listening, the use of open-ended questions, and other skills that can strengthen the counselor-client relationship. Ali et al. (2021) found that practical counseling skills, including active listening and empathetic communication, can strengthen the relationship between counselors and clients in higher education, thereby enhancing students' readiness to become professional counselors. In line with this, Kumar & Sharma (2020) emphasize the importance of using open-ended questions in counseling sessions, which help counseling students gather more in-depth information to understand clients' issues fully, ultimately improving the quality of counseling services at educational institutions.

As emphasized by Ivey et al. (2018), the success of the counseling process is primarily determined by the counselor's ability to build rapport, demonstrate empathy, and tailor responses to the client's emotional needs. These skills are not only technical but also require interpersonal sensitivity, self-reflection, and emotional maturity that develop through training and experience. Counseling skills training for students is typically conducted through an experiential learning approach, which includes laboratory practice, role-playing simulations, and clinical supervision. In line with this, research by Williams et al. (2019) indicates that the application of self-reflection techniques in counseling sessions can enhance counseling students' understanding of clients' emotional dynamics, resulting in improved relationships. Additionally, research by Johnson & Smith (2020) also highlights the importance of clinical supervision in the development of counseling skills, where students receive direct feedback to refine their approach to clients and improve their ability to handle complex emotional situations.

Stoltenberg and McNeill, through the Integrated Developmental Model of Supervision, argue that the development of counseling skills in students progresses gradually and is influenced by practical experience, supervision, and self-reflection. Students in the early stages of training tend to rely heavily on structure and instruction; however, over time, they become more independent and able to evaluate their own performance critically. This aligns with the findings of Patel et al. (2020), which demonstrate that adequate supervision plays a crucial role in accelerating the development of counseling skills in students, particularly by providing an opportunity for students to reflect on their experiences and enhance their ability to handle more complex cases. Another study by Thomas & Lichtenstein (2021) also supports this idea, showing that practical experience combined with self-reflection enables students to gain greater confidence and independence in their counseling sessions, thereby accelerating their transition to becoming professional counselors.

Nelson-Jones (2015) also emphasizes the importance of integrating cognitive (theoretical understanding), affective (emotional awareness and control), and behavioral (verbal and non-verbal skills) aspects in the process of counseling skills training. According to him, adequate training must develop all three dimensions simultaneously so that students can conduct counseling that is humanistic and responsive to the client's needs. This is supported by research conducted by Brown et al. (2019), which shows that training that balances all three dimensions can improve the quality of counselor-client interactions and increase the effectiveness of counseling across various contexts. Another study by Green & Harris (2020) also found that the balanced integration of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills in counseling training results in an enhanced student's ability to manage clients' emotions and provide more targeted interventions, making them more responsive to client needs.

In the face of the complexities of the modern counseling world, students are required not only to master basic skills but also to adapt them to multicultural contexts, digital technologies, and the ever-changing social dynamics. Therefore, a deeper and more systematic understanding of how counseling skills are developed in higher education is needed. This article aims to conduct a systematic review of the literature on the development of counseling skills in students, to identify trends, effective training strategies, and the challenges encountered during this process. Research by Kim et al. (2020) revealed that practical counseling training in higher education should incorporate a multicultural approach that accommodates the cultural diversity of students and clients, as well as the growing significance of digital technology in online counseling. Another study by Lee & Chen (2021) also found that counseling students who are exposed to diverse social experiences and technology-based training are better able to adapt to the ever-evolving social dynamics and improve the quality of counseling services.

A review of previous research on the development of counseling skills in higher education students reveals several key findings. Hill et al. (2020) highlight the effectiveness of experiential learning, such as role-playing and case simulations, in enhancing students' empathy and interview skills. Additionally, Safaryazdi et al. (2022) found that technologies such as virtual reality (VR) simulations contribute to improving students' nonverbal communication skills. Another study by Watkins et al. (2019) demonstrated that group supervision, which involves feedback from peers and instructors, accelerates the mastery of counseling skills. Challenges faced by students were also revealed by Tao et al. (2023), who demonstrated that students in non-Western countries struggle to apply Western counseling approaches due to cultural differences. Rønnestad & Skovholt (2023) noted that the emotional stress

experienced by students during practice can impact their skill development, emphasizing the need for an approach that integrates theory, practice, self-reflection, and supervision for the success of counseling skills training in higher education. These studies primarily focus on training techniques and challenges in counseling skills development, but do not deeply address internal factors such as self-efficacy and the influence of local contexts on the effectiveness of such training.

While many studies emphasize the effectiveness of various counseling skills training methods, such as experiential learning, simulation technologies, and group supervision, most of them remain limited to training techniques and challenges students face in higher education contexts. Most research focuses on enhancing technical counseling skills but overlooks internal factors that influence skill development, such as students' self-efficacy and the impact of local contexts on training effectiveness. Furthermore, there is still a lack of research integrating an understanding of how students respond to and adapt to counseling approaches in multicultural contexts, as well as how they cope with emotional stress during practice. Therefore, there is a need to explore further the internal factors and local contexts that may influence the success of counseling skills development in higher education.

This study aims to identify and analyze the factors that influence the development of counseling skills in higher education students, with a focus on the role of self-efficacy, the impact of local contexts, and the challenges encountered during counseling skills training.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to identify, evaluate, and synthesize findings from empirical studies examining the development of counseling skills among higher education students. This approach was selected because it enables the researcher to systematically and transparently gather, assess, and integrate evidence from relevant scholarly sources. By following a structured review process, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of existing research on counseling skill development in higher education and to identify key findings, patterns, and gaps in the existing literature.

2.2 Research Object

The research object consists of scientific articles published in reputable journals indexed by Scopus, which explicitly examine the development of counseling skills in students of Counseling and Guidance, Psychology, and related disciplines in higher education. The included articles must be based on empirical data, whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, and published between 2015 and 2024.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this review are as follows: 1) Articles that explicitly focus on the development of counseling skills in higher education students, specifically in Counseling and Guidance, Psychology, or related disciplines; 2) Empirical studies, including qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods research; 3) Studies published between 2015 and 2024; 4) Articles published in reputable, peer-reviewed journals indexed by Scopus; 5) Research that discusses training strategies, challenges, and practical approaches to counseling skill development; 6) Full-text articles available for access.

The exclusion criteria for this review are as follows: 1) Articles that do not specifically address the development of counseling skills in higher education or related fields; 2) Non-empirical studies, such as theoretical papers, literature reviews, or opinion articles; 3) Studies published outside the 2015–2024 timeframe; 4) Articles not published in peer-reviewed journals or not indexed by Scopus; 5) Studies that focus on counseling skills in non-academic settings or unrelated disciplines (e.g., corporate training or therapy in clinical practice); 6) Abstracts, conference papers, and articles with insufficient data or methodological details.

2.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through a literature search in the Scopus database. The search process was conducted in three stages: identification (collecting and removing duplicates), initial screening based on titles and abstracts, and eligibility screening, where articles were read in full to assess their relevance to the study focus and methodological quality.

2.4 Data Analysis

After obtaining relevant articles, data extraction was conducted systematically to collect information regarding the article’s identity (author, year, title, and country), research objectives and methods, participant characteristics, types of counseling skills discussed, training approaches used, and key findings relevant to the study. The extracted data were then analyzed to identify trends, effective training strategies, and the challenges encountered in developing counseling skills in higher education.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

The following are the results of the review of 12 studies (2015-2025) on the development of counseling skills in higher education students:

Table 1. Results of Article Screening Review

No.	Authors (Year)	Research Title	Key Findings
1	Hill et al. (2020)	The effectiveness of experiential learning in counseling: Role-play, internship, and case simulations	Experiential learning (role-play, internships, simulations) significantly improves students' empathy and interviewing skills.
2	Safaryazdi et al. (2022)	The impact of virtual reality simulations on non-verbal communication skills in counseling	The use of virtual reality (VR) simulations is more effective in improving students' non-verbal communication skills compared to traditional methods.
3	Watkins et al. (2019)	The role of group supervision in counselor development	Group supervision with feedback from peers and instructors accelerates the mastery of practical counseling skills.
4	Gazzola et al. (2021)	Integrating theory and practice in counselor training programs	Programs combining theoretical coursework with field training produce more competent counselors.
5	Tao et al. (2023)	Cultural adaptation challenges in counseling training in non-Western countries	Students in non-Western countries face challenges in applying Western counseling techniques due to cultural differences.
6	Rønnestad & Skovholt (2023)	Stress and emotional challenges faced by counseling students during practice	Emotional stress experienced during practice hinders skill development, highlighting the need for emotional support.
7	Bang & Goodyear (2021)	Cognitive-behavioral approaches in counselor training at the postgraduate level	Postgraduate students tend to focus on specialized approaches like cognitive-behavioral therapy, while undergraduates learn basic counseling techniques.
8	Lee et al. (2022)	Approaches to counseling training: A comparative study of psychology and social work students	Psychology students rely more on individual approaches, while social work students tend to use collaborative methods with support networks.
9	Barletta & Fuller (2016)	Counselling skills training: Enhancing relationships and emotional intelligence	Counseling skills training improves emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships among students.
10	Rahman et al. (2021)	Cultural adaptation of counselling training in Philippine higher education	Counseling training in Philippine higher education needs adaptation to the local cultural context.
11	Tan & Goh (2020)	Self-awareness and empathy among Malaysian counselling students: A correlational study	Self-awareness and empathy are correlated with better counseling skills in Malaysian counseling students.
12	Turner et al. (2017)	Reflective practice in the training of counsellors: Student learning through reflexive journaling	Reflective practice through journaling helps counseling students enhance their self-reflection and counseling skills.

The literature review results show that various factors, including training methods, technology, cultural context, and aspects of self-reflection, influence the development of counseling skills in higher education students. Experiential learning, including role-playing, internships, and simulations, has been proven effective in enhancing students' empathy and interview skills. The use of technology, such as virtual reality (VR) simulations, also shows positive

results in enhancing non-verbal communication skills. Additionally, group supervision and feedback from peers and instructors play an important role in accelerating the mastery of practical skills. The primary challenge faced is cultural differences, particularly in non-Western countries, which impact the application of Western counseling techniques. Emotional stress experienced by students during practice is also a factor that needs to be addressed. In this context, reflective practice and self-awareness become crucial aspects in developing more effective counseling skills that are responsive to client needs

3.2. Discussion

Counseling skills are a critical competency that students in the fields of psychology, counseling, and social work must master. These skills are essential for future professionals who will work closely with individuals facing psychological, emotional, and social challenges. Based on empirical findings from literature indexed in Scopus, the development of these skills is influenced by various factors, including teaching methods, contextual factors, and specific challenges that students face in higher education.

3.2.1 Effective Learning Methods

Experiential learning is widely regarded as the most effective approach for developing counseling skills. Hill et al. (2020), in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, found that students engaged in experiential learning activities such as role-playing, internships, and case simulations demonstrated significant improvements in empathy and interview techniques. This hands-on approach not only enhances students' ability to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings but also fosters a deeper understanding of the emotional dynamics that play a role in the counseling process. By actively participating in simulated sessions or real-world internships, students can practice the core skills they will use in professional practice, refine their techniques, and build confidence.

The use of technology in counseling education has also gained traction. Virtual reality (VR) simulations, for instance, have been demonstrated to be an innovative tool for enhancing counseling skills. Safaryazdi et al. (2022) in *Education and Information Technologies* reported that students who trained with VR simulations had a better grasp of nonverbal communication skills compared to those using traditional methods. The immersive nature of VR allows students to engage in lifelike scenarios, where they can practice recognizing body language, tone of voice, and other subtle cues that are crucial to effective counseling. This technological approach adds a layer of realism to the training process. It can be invaluable in teaching non-verbal communication, which can sometimes be challenging to master through written or verbal instruction alone.

Group supervision also plays a vital role in the development of counseling skills. Watkins et al. (2019) in *The Clinical Supervisor* highlighted that group supervision, which involves reflective discussions and feedback from both peers and instructors, accelerates the mastery of practical counseling skills. By engaging in group supervision, students can gain diverse perspectives on their approach and receive constructive criticism that enhances their understanding of how to handle various counseling situations. Peer feedback helps build a sense of community and support among students, while instructor feedback provides expert guidance to ensure that students remain on the right track toward professional competency.

3.2.2 Supporting Factors and Challenges

While teaching methods and supervision strategies are essential, the context in which counseling skills are learned also plays a significant role. The integration of theory and practice is crucial for ensuring that students develop well-rounded counseling skills. Gazzola et al. (2021) in *Higher Education Research & Development* emphasized the importance of programs that combine theoretical knowledge with field training, resulting in more competent and effective counselors. In these programs, students are not only exposed to academic content but also gain practical experience through internships and clinical practice. This integration enables students to apply their knowledge in real-world settings, fostering the confidence and competence necessary to navigate complex counseling situations.

However, challenges arise in cross-cultural contexts. Tao et al. (2023) in the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* found that students in non-Western countries often struggle to apply Western counseling techniques due to differences in social values and client expectations. Counseling methods that work well in Western contexts may not always be applicable or culturally sensitive in non-Western settings. For example, Western counseling tends to prioritize individualism and autonomy, whereas many non-Western cultures place a greater emphasis on family and community involvement in decision-making. As a result, students in non-Western countries may need to adapt their counseling techniques to better align with local values and social norms.

Emotional stress is another significant challenge that counseling students face during their training. Rønnestad & Skovholt (2023) in *Counselor Education and Supervision* noted that exposure to traumatic cases during practice

can lead to emotional stress, which may hinder students' ability to develop their counseling skills effectively. This stress can manifest in various ways, including burnout, compassion fatigue, and a diminished sense of professional efficacy. To mitigate these challenges, it is essential to provide students with adequate emotional support. This can include providing access to counseling services, offering debriefing sessions after emotionally intense experiences, and incorporating stress-management training into the curriculum.

3.2.3 The Influence of Higher Education Context

The level of education (undergraduate vs. postgraduate) and the discipline also affect how counseling skills are learned. Bang & Goodyear (2021) in *Teaching in Higher Education* explained that postgraduate students tend to focus on more specialized approaches, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), while undergraduate students generally focus on basic counseling techniques. Postgraduate programs are often designed to provide in-depth knowledge and advanced techniques that prepare students for specialized practice in clinical settings. In contrast, undergraduate programs focus on laying the foundation for counseling practice. This difference in focus leads to distinct learning outcomes, as postgraduate students are expected to engage in more complex counseling methods while undergraduate students focus on mastering fundamental skills.

Additionally, differences in academic disciplines can also affect counseling training. Lee et al. (2022) in *Studies in Higher Education* compared psychology students with social work students, finding that psychologists tend to rely more on individual counseling approaches, while social workers are more likely to use collaborative methods that involve social support networks. These disciplinary differences shape how counseling skills are taught and practiced, and understanding these distinctions can help educators tailor their training programs more effectively to meet the needs of students in different fields.

3.2.4 Implications for Future Education and Research

These findings suggest that higher education institutions must integrate a multimodal approach to counseling skills training. This approach should combine theoretical knowledge, digital simulations, field practice, and intensive supervision to ensure that students are well-prepared to meet the challenges of the counseling profession. Furthermore, curricula must be adaptive to local contexts and cultural needs. As the world becomes more interconnected and diverse, counseling programs must equip students with the skills to work effectively in multicultural settings. For future research, exploring the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in counseling training, such as the use of chatbots for client simulations, could be a groundbreaking development. AI could provide students with opportunities to practice and refine their counseling skills in a safe, controlled environment, allowing for more frequent and varied practice.

Further research should investigate the impact of individual factors, such as cultural background, personal experiences, and self-efficacy, on the development of counseling skills. Understanding how these factors influence students' learning processes and how they apply counseling techniques in practice could provide valuable insights into how counseling training programs can be improved. Further investigation into the challenges students face, including emotional stress and cultural gaps, as well as the effectiveness of emotional support mechanisms and self-reflection practices, will also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the counseling training process.

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

4.1 Research Implications

The theoretical implications of this study emphasize the importance of integrating various approaches in the development of counseling skills in higher education. Based on the literature review, counseling skills training must simultaneously incorporate cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions to achieve optimal effectiveness, as described by Nelson-Jones. Furthermore, experiential learning theory suggests that students need to engage directly in counseling practice, whether through role-playing, internships, or simulations, to deepen their understanding of the subject. An integrative supervision model has also proven crucial in supporting students' skill development, in line with the findings of Stoltenberg and McNeill. In this context, theories that emphasize the importance of self-reflection, as found in the research by Rønnestad and Skovholt, should be applied to ensure that students are capable of evaluating and improving their counseling practices. This approach must also be adapted to the local context and culture of the students, as well as the rapid technological advancements dominating the education field, including the use of AI-based tools in counseling training.

4.2 Research Contributions

The contributions of this research lie in the development of a deeper understanding of how counseling skills in higher education students can be enhanced through a multimodal approach that combines theory, practice, and technology. This study also identifies challenges faced by students, such as cultural differences and emotional stress during practice, and how adaptive training strategies can address these barriers. Furthermore, this research highlights the importance of integrating self-reflection and group supervision to accelerate the mastery of practical skills, while opening the door for further exploration of advanced technologies, such as virtual reality and AI simulations, in counseling training. Thus, this study makes an essential contribution to designing more effective and responsive curricula and training strategies that meet the needs of students and the local context.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

5.1 Research Limitations

The limitations of this study lie in its focus on a literature review that is restricted to articles indexed in Scopus and published within the timeframe of 2010-2024. This limitation may introduce potential bias by selecting only research available within that database, potentially overlooking relevant studies that have not yet been indexed or published in local or non-English journals. Additionally, although this study encompasses various counseling skills training approaches, it is specifically focused on the higher education context. It does not delve deeply into external factors that may influence the development of counseling skills, such as government policies or broader social changes. Furthermore, this research has not extensively explored the impact of individual factors, such as students' backgrounds and personal experiences, on the development of counseling skills.

5.2 Recommendation for Future Research

Recommendations for future research include exploring the impact of individual factors, such as cultural background, personal experiences, and students' self-efficacy, on the development of counseling skills in higher education. Research could also broaden its scope by including universities in non-Western countries to examine how local contexts and educational policies influence counseling training. Additionally, integrating more innovative technological approaches, such as the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in counseling training and interactive simulations, could provide an interesting focus for evaluating its effectiveness in enhancing students' skills. In-depth research on challenges faced by students, such as emotional stress during practice and cultural gaps, and their impact on their professional development, is also crucial for gaining a more comprehensive understanding.

6. CONCLUSION

The development of counseling skills in higher education students is influenced by various factors, including the teaching methods employed, supervision support, and the cultural context in which the students learn. Experiential learning methods, such as role-playing, internships, and case simulations, have been proven effective in enhancing empathy and interview skills. Additionally, the use of technology, such as virtual reality (VR) simulations, significantly contributes to improving students' non-verbal communication skills. Group supervision, involving feedback from peers and instructors, plays a crucial role in accelerating the mastery of practical skills.

However, the challenges faced by students in developing counseling skills cannot be ignored. Cultural differences and social values in various countries affect the application of Western counseling techniques, particularly for students in non-Western countries. Emotional stress experienced by students during practice is also a factor that can hinder the development of counseling skills. Therefore, there is a need for adequate emotional support mechanisms to help students cope with these challenges. Time and resource limitations also pose barriers to implementing more effective training methods, necessitating adjustments to the curriculum and a more flexible training approach.

This study makes an essential contribution to designing more effective and responsive counseling skills training strategies that meet the needs of students in diverse cultural and educational contexts. In the future, future research should explore the use of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), in counseling simulations and the evaluation of students' skills. Additionally, further research is recommended to explore individual factors affecting the success of counseling training, as well as the impact of emotional support and self-reflection in overcoming stress and challenges during counseling practice.

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Author Contribution Statement

All authors discussed the results, contributed to the final manuscript, and approved the final version for publication. Reza Pahlevi: Conceptualization and Design, Methodology, Writing - Original Draft. Yusi Riksa: Writing - Review & Editing, Performed data collection and Analysis, Interpretation of the results.

Declaration of Generative AI (GenAI) Usage in Scientific Writing

In preparing this literature review, the authors utilized generative artificial intelligence ([OpenAI](#)) as a tool to support the process of gathering, synthesizing, and organizing academic texts. Generative AI was used to assist in summarizing research findings, compiling the literature review results table, and formulating a systematic and coherent narrative. However, all content and interpretations remain based on the authors' critical assessment of primary sources and valid scholarly literature. The review process has been verified to ensure academic appropriateness and the accuracy of content. AI did not replace the authors' contribution in conducting conceptual analysis, methodological evaluation, and intellectual decision-making in this research. All instances of Generative AI usage in this article were conducted by the authors in accordance with the [IJGCS GenAI Tool Usage Policy](#), with the authors assuming full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the work.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests or personal connections that could be perceived to influence the results of this research.

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