



The Role of Counselor Ethics and Competence in Multicultural Counseling: Principles and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Background: Multicultural counseling plays a vital role in guidance and counseling, particularly in Indonesia, which is characterized by extensive cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. **Objective:** This study aims to examine the roles of counsellor ethics and multicultural competence in the implementation of multicultural counseling and to identify the challenges encountered in practice. **Method:** The study employs a qualitative literature review design, analyzing relevant academic journals, books, and scientific publications on counsellor ethics, counsellor competence, and multicultural counseling. **Result:** The findings indicate that professional ethics serve as a fundamental guideline for counsellors in respecting clients' rights, dignity, and cultural values, while multicultural competence enables counsellors to understand cultural differences, manage personal biases, and apply appropriate counseling strategies. The integration of ethical principles and multicultural competence contributes significantly to the delivery of inclusive, effective, and equitable counseling services. **Conclusion:** The study emphasizes that strengthening ethical awareness and multicultural competence is essential for enhancing the quality and professionalism of counseling services in multicultural contexts. **Contribution:** This study provides a conceptual synthesis that underscores the interdependence between ethical standards and multicultural competence as a framework for advancing culturally responsive counseling services.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Counseling is a professional service that helps individuals understand themselves, overcome problems, and optimally develop their potential across various aspects of life (Chan, 2020). The counseling process places the relationship between counsellor and client at the centre, built on trust, respect, and professional responsibility. The success of counseling services largely depends on the counsellor's ability to create a safe, ethical relationship, enabling clients to feel valued and protected as they express their concerns. Therefore, professional ethics serve as an essential foundation that cannot be separated from counseling practice.

In Indonesian society, characterized by high cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and social diversity, counseling practice increasingly takes place in multicultural contexts. Counsellors often interact with clients from different cultural backgrounds, which influence how they think, behave, communicate, and interpret life challenges. This condition requires clear ethical guidelines as a professional behavioural reference to ensure that counseling services

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respect diversity and the rights of each individual (Marjo & Sodiq, 2022). Without a strong ethical foundation, the counseling process risks generating injustice and violating clients' cultural values.

Several studies in the literature indicate that cultural differences can significantly affect the effectiveness of counseling (Kim & Park, 2015; Zane & Ku, 2014; Koç & Kafa, 2019; Pérez-Rojas & Gelso, 2020). These differences extend beyond language to include value systems, social norms, and the ways individuals express emotions and solve problems. Counsellors lacking cultural sensitivity are prone to interpreting client behaviour through their personal perspective, potentially leading to bias, misunderstandings, and ethical violations in the counseling process (Xing & Zheng, 2025; Day-Vines et al., 2018; Nassar-McMillan et al., 2015). This underscores the importance of multicultural competence as an integral part of counsellor professionalism.

Previous research emphasizes that ethics and multicultural competence are two interconnected aspects that cannot be separated in multicultural counseling. Alawiyah et al. (2020) argue that professional counsellors must uphold ethics, demonstrate empathy, and take moral responsibility in all counseling practices. Meanwhile, Rizky et al. (2022) assert that multicultural competence includes self-awareness, cultural knowledge, and intercultural communication skills that enable counsellors to adapt counseling approaches to clients' backgrounds.

Nevertheless, various studies also highlight challenges in implementing ethics and multicultural competence in practice. Barriers such as language differences, stereotypes, social prejudices, and imbalances in social relationships between counsellors and clients are still frequently encountered in cross-cultural counseling (Nabila et al., 2024). Many studies discuss ethics or multicultural competence separately, which limits a comprehensive understanding of their interrelation in multicultural counseling.

In this context, there is a research gap that warrants further exploration, particularly regarding how counsellor ethics and competence simultaneously support the effectiveness of multicultural counseling. An integrated analysis is needed to understand the extent to which professional ethics and multicultural competence complement each other in addressing the complexities of clients' cultural diversity. Such a study is expected to provide conceptual contributions to the development of more inclusive and equitable counseling practices.

This study aims to examine the roles of counsellor ethics and competence in multicultural counseling through a literature review. It specifically seeks to understand the importance of professional ethics and multicultural competence in counseling practice, identify common challenges in their implementation, and formulate conceptual implications for strengthening counsellor professionalism. Consequently, the results of this study are expected to serve as an academic and practical reference for developing counseling services that are responsive to cultural diversity.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using a literature review design. This approach was chosen to gain a comprehensive understanding of the role of counsellor ethics and competence in multicultural counseling by analyzing relevant scholarly sources. A literature review allows researchers to examine, compare, and synthesize concepts, theories, and previous research findings related to the research topic. This design aligns with the study's objective of strengthening the conceptual framework and theoretical understanding, rather than conducting empirical field measurement.

2.2 Research Object

The objects of this study include scholarly works such as journal articles, academic books, and other scientific documents that discuss counsellor ethics, counsellor competence, and counseling practices within a multicultural context. These sources were selected for their direct relevance to the research focus and for providing theoretical and empirical foundations for multicultural counseling. The scope of the research objects is not limited to a single discipline but encompasses guidance and counseling, psychology, and education related to counsellor ethics and professional competence.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through a review of literature from various credible sources, including national and international academic journals, academic reference books, and other scientific publications. The data collection process began with identifying relevant keywords, such as "counsellor ethics," "counsellor competence," and "multicultural counseling." The researcher then selected sources based on topic relevance, author credibility, and contribution to the research discussion. The selected literature was subsequently classified into themes and research foci.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis techniques. Each literature source was thoroughly reviewed to identify key concepts, research findings, and theoretical perspectives related to counsellor ethics and competence in multicultural counseling. The collected data were then analysed descriptively and analytically by grouping, comparing, and synthesising information from multiple sources. This process aimed to produce a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the roles of counsellor ethics and competence, as well as the challenges faced in multicultural counseling practice.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

a) Ethical Principles in Multicultural Counseling

In multicultural counseling, ethical principles serve as a primary guide for counsellors in establishing safe and effective therapeutic relationships. Counsellors are required to maintain client confidentiality, ensuring that personal information, experiences, or conflicts disclosed during sessions are not shared without permission. This becomes more complex in multicultural contexts, where perceptions of privacy and confidentiality may vary across cultures.

Additionally, counsellors must respect client autonomy, including their right to make independent decisions, decline advice, and set counseling goals in line with their cultural values and norms. Principles of justice and non-discrimination must also be consistently upheld; counsellors should not treat clients differently based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or socioeconomic status. Professional ethics emphasize that counsellors must identify and avoid both conscious and unconscious biases while considering the client's cultural context in every interaction. A counsellor working with clients from indigenous communities must respect their practices and traditions, even if they differ from the counsellor's own perspective.

b) Multicultural Counsellor Competence

Counsellor competence in a multicultural context goes beyond technical counseling skills and requires reflective and adaptive abilities. Key competencies include:

1. Understanding the client's culture and values. Counsellors need to understand clients' cultural backgrounds, including beliefs, social norms, and daily practices. This understanding enables counsellors to accurately interpret clients' behaviours and reactions, thereby avoiding misunderstandings. For instance, passive behaviour or communication distance may reflect cultural norms rather than indifference.
2. Self-reflection to recognize personal biases. Counsellors must actively reflect on their own values, assumptions, and stereotypes. This process helps reduce bias's influence on professional judgment and decision-making in counseling. For example, a counsellor aware of gender or ethnic biases can adjust their approach to be more inclusive and neutral.
3. Applying culturally adaptive and sensitive counseling strategies. This competency includes the ability to select culturally relevant techniques and interventions. For example, using family-based counseling methods for clients from collectivist cultures or adjusting language and terminology to ensure clarity without undermining the client's cultural context.

c) Practical Challenges

Applying ethical principles and multicultural competence in practice presents several challenges:

1. Language differences and interpretation. Language is not only a communication tool but also reflects cultural values and meaning. Misinterpretations or insufficient language proficiency can lead to miscommunication and misunderstandings of clients' experiences.
2. Cultural stereotypes or prejudices. Counsellors may face biases arising from personal experiences or social pressures. For instance, assuming that certain groups are generally less open can affect how counsellors evaluate client behaviour. Addressing this challenge requires continuous self-reflection, supervision, and ongoing professional learning.
3. Differences in professional norms and practices across cultures. Counseling standards in one country or community may differ from the client's cultural norms. Counsellors must adapt procedures and techniques to remain ethically sound while respecting cultural sensitivity.

The findings indicate that applying ethical principles, developing multicultural counsellor competence, and managing practical challenges are key factors in multicultural counseling. Counsellors who consistently apply ethical principles can establish safe therapeutic relationships that respect clients’ values. Multicultural competence enables counsellors to tailor interventions to clients’ cultural backgrounds, while practical challenges necessitate self-reflection, supervision, and adaptive strategies to maintain effective services. To facilitate understanding, the main findings of this study are summarised in the following table:

Table 1. Key Findings on Ethical Principles, Counselor Competence, and Practical Challenges in Multicultural Counseling

Aspect	Key Findings	Examples / Notes
Ethical Principles	Safeguarding client confidentiality, respecting client autonomy, upholding justice and non-discrimination, preventing bias, and considering cultural context	Counselors working with clients from Indigenous communities adapt counseling sessions to align with cultural practices while maintaining strict confidentiality. Professional ethical standards help prevent discrimination and biased treatment.
Multicultural Counselor Competence	Understanding clients’ cultural values and backgrounds, engaging in self-reflection to identify personal biases, and applying culturally responsive and sensitive counseling strategies	Example: Implementing family-based counseling approaches for clients from collectivist cultures; adjusting language and terminology to match clients’ cultural contexts. Competence increases the effectiveness of interventions.
Practical Challenges	Language barriers and interpretation issues, cultural stereotypes or prejudice, differences in professional norms and practices	Misinterpretation due to language differences may lead to misunderstanding. Counselors require supervision, continuous professional development, and reflective practice to minimize bias and improve service quality.

Based on Table 1, the implementation of ethical principles, the development of multicultural counsellor competence, and the management of practical challenges are three interrelated aspects of multicultural counseling. Ethical principles, such as maintaining confidentiality, respecting client autonomy, upholding justice, and avoiding bias, form the foundation for building safe therapeutic relationships that honour clients’ cultural values. Counsellor competence, including understanding clients’ cultural values, engaging in self-reflection to recognize biases, and applying adaptive counseling strategies, enables these ethical principles to be applied effectively and in a culturally relevant manner. Meanwhile, practical challenges such as language differences, cultural stereotypes, and variations in professional norms require counsellors to engage in supervision, ongoing training, and self-reflection to ensure interventions remain effective and culturally sensitive. Together, these three aspects complement one another and are key to the success of inclusive, ethical, and adaptive multicultural counseling.

3.2. Discussion

The study’s findings reveal that professional ethics and multicultural competence are closely intertwined and essential to effective multicultural counseling. Counsellor ethics serve as a foundational framework that guides practitioners in respecting clients’ rights, maintaining confidentiality, promoting fairness, and honouring cultural values. At the same time, multicultural competence enables counsellors to recognize and navigate cultural differences, manage personal biases, and implement contextually appropriate counseling strategies. The study also highlights practical challenges in multicultural counseling, including language barriers, value conflicts, cultural stereotypes, and social class differences, which can affect the counseling process if not addressed. Overall, the findings indicate that integrating ethical principles with multicultural competence enables counsellors to provide inclusive, responsive, and equitable counseling services, thereby supporting clients’ well-being and fostering trust, respect, and cultural sensitivity in the therapeutic relationship.

a) Ethics in Counseling: The Foundation of Understanding

Ethics can be understood as a set of moral principles that distinguish right from wrong in both personal and professional contexts. In counseling, ethics provides a framework that guides counsellors to perform their duties responsibly, professionally, and in accordance with established standards. It emphasizes the importance of respecting clients’ rights, maintaining confidentiality of personal information, avoiding the misuse of power, and fostering relationships grounded in trust, empathy, and mutual respect. Counsellors are also expected to align with societal norms and cultural values, recognizing and honouring clients' diverse backgrounds (Ratts et al., 2016). In this sense, ethical practice is not merely a set of rules, but a commitment to safeguard clients from harm while promoting their

well-being, dignity, and autonomy. Moreover, ethics plays a key role in maintaining service quality and sustaining public trust in the counseling profession.

From a philosophical perspective, ethics is a branch of philosophy that examines the principles, values, and norms that regulate human behaviour, both individually and collectively (Longo et al., 2020). It explores questions about what constitutes morally right or wrong actions, the responsibilities of individuals toward one another, and how social and cultural contexts shape ethical standards. In counseling, philosophical ethics serves as a conceptual foundation, enabling practitioners to critically examine their own beliefs and behaviours, as well as the societal and professional norms that influence their practice. Understanding ethics philosophically helps counsellors navigate complex moral dilemmas, such as balancing client autonomy with safety concerns, addressing cultural conflicts, or resolving potential conflicts of interest in professional practice (Elzamzamy & Keshavarzi, 2019).

Ethical understanding in counseling can be conceptualized in two interrelated forms: critical reflection and applied reflection. Critical reflection involves evaluating moral principles and human behaviour in a thoughtful, philosophical manner, particularly as these interact with social change and evolving relational contexts. It encourages counsellors to question assumptions, recognize systemic influences on behaviour, and anticipate the ethical implications of their decisions. Applied reflection, on the other hand, focuses on translating these moral principles into everyday practice, guiding counsellors in their interactions with clients in concrete and contextually sensitive ways. By integrating critical and applied reflection, counsellors are better equipped to internalise ethical standards, make informed, culturally responsive decisions, and foster counseling relationships that are both principled and adaptable to clients' diverse needs.

b) Counselor Ethical Principles in Multicultural Counseling

In counseling practices involving cultural diversity, counsellors must recognise that cultural differences can significantly influence the counseling process, including communication styles, clients' problem perceptions, coping strategies, and decision-making patterns. These differences require counsellors to adopt an ethically grounded approach that respects each client's values, dignity, and rights. Ethical principles serve as a safeguard against discrimination and ensure that counsellors do not impose their own cultural assumptions or biases onto clients (Curling et al., 2023). By upholding confidentiality, autonomy, and fairness, counsellors can create an environment where clients feel validated, understood, and empowered to participate in the counseling process actively.

Counsellors are also required to acknowledge the boundaries of their professional competence (Decelis & Falzon, 2022). When a counsellor feels they lack sufficient knowledge or skills related to a client's cultural background, they have a professional obligation to seek supervision, attend additional training, or refer the client to a more qualified professional (Wong et al., 2013). This ethical responsibility is critical to preventing intervention errors that could potentially harm clients, undermine trust, or reinforce inequities. Recognising these limits demonstrates accountability and reinforces the counsellor's commitment to providing culturally sensitive and ethically responsible services.

Furthermore, counsellors must actively avoid all forms of abuse, whether verbal, nonverbal, or behavioural. They must not engage in practices that demean or marginalise clients based on culture, religion, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status (American Psychological Association, 2022). Professionalism, empathy, and respect for diversity are foundational to building ethical, humane, and collaborative counseling relationships. The deliberate application of these ethical principles helps establish a counseling environment that is safe, supportive, and open, allowing clients to engage meaningfully in the process and ensuring that counseling outcomes prioritise their overall well-being.

a) Counselor Competence in Multicultural Counseling

Multicultural competence refers to a counsellor's ability to recognise, respect, and respond appropriately to cultural diversity in the counseling process. Counsellors who possess this competence are aware of their own values, beliefs, and potential biases, and actively seek to understand their clients' cultural backgrounds (Berger et al., 2014). This awareness enables counsellors to adapt their approaches, methods, and intervention strategies to align with the client's cultural context and specific needs. Multicultural competence encompasses key elements such as cultural knowledge, intercultural communication skills, and an open, empathetic attitude toward differences (Papadopoulos et al., 2022). By fostering these abilities, counsellors can provide services that are not only effective but also respectful and culturally responsive. Maintaining and enhancing multicultural competence requires ongoing professional development, including continued education, training, supervision, and reflective practice.

With adequate multicultural competence, cultural differences are reframed not as obstacles but as potential strengths that can support the client's optimal development. Counsellors can use these differences to build rapport, identify culturally relevant resources, and create interventions that resonate with the client's lived experiences (Moshier et al., 2017). According to Gordon, competence comprises six interrelated aspects: knowledge, understanding, skills, values, attitudes, and interests. Together, these aspects form the foundation of counsellor professionalism, guiding the delivery of comprehensive and ethically responsible guidance and counseling services (Lubis, 2025). In multicultural contexts, these elements must be integrated thoughtfully to ensure services remain sensitive and responsive to diverse cultural norms, practices, and perspectives.

Key multicultural competencies include cultural sensitivity, awareness of potential differences between counsellor and client, the ability to establish a comfortable environment despite such differences, mastery of culturally appropriate counseling strategies and techniques, and the capacity for clear and effective communication. These competencies are essential prerequisites for providing counseling services that are harmonious, dignified, and inclusive (Halqim & Hanif, 2025). By cultivating these skills, counsellors can enhance therapeutic relationships, minimise misunderstandings, and support clients in achieving meaningful personal growth while respecting their cultural identities (Frey, 2013).

d) Barriers in Multicultural Counseling

Multicultural counseling faces various barriers that can influence the effectiveness of the counseling process. While the goal of multicultural counseling is to foster positive change and personal growth, counsellors often encounter challenges related to language differences, cultural values and norms, stereotypes, prejudices, and disparities in social class between themselves and their clients (Nabila et al., 2024). Language, in particular, is a critical barrier. Variations in vocabulary, dialect usage, and nonverbal communication can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations, which may compromise the counseling relationship. This challenge is especially pronounced in multiethnic societies such as Indonesia, where counsellors may not be fluent in multiple languages or familiar with local dialects, potentially limiting their ability to understand and respond to clients' needs fully.

Differences in values also pose significant challenges in multicultural counseling. Values encompass beliefs about what is right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable, and appropriate or inappropriate behaviour. Conflicts can arise when counsellors unintentionally impose their personal values or the dominant cultural values on clients from minority or culturally distinct backgrounds. Such imposition can undermine clients' autonomy and trust, leading to reduced engagement and potential harm. These value differences are often shaped by multiple factors, including social, economic, religious, generational, and cultural contexts, which may vary widely between counsellors and clients. Recognising and respecting these differences is essential for providing culturally sensitive and ethically sound counseling.

Other barriers include social class disparities, cultural stereotypes, unconscious prejudices, and racism. Differences in life experiences and perspectives between counsellors and clients from varying social classes can affect the quality and depth of the counseling relationship. Unconscious biases or stereotypes may lead to unequal treatment, while racism represents a more extreme and harmful form of discrimination that can result in oppression or marginalisation of certain groups. To overcome these challenges, counsellors must cultivate strong self-awareness, reflect critically on their own biases, and develop comprehensive multicultural competence. Such preparation enables counsellors to minimise barriers, foster inclusive counseling environments, and ensure that all clients receive equitable, respectful, and practical support.

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

4.1 Research Implications

The findings of this study emphasize that multicultural counseling practice requires continuous strengthening of both professional ethical standards and counsellors' multicultural competence. This review highlights the importance of integrating ethical values and multicultural awareness into counsellor education, training, and supervision to ensure services respond to client diversity in a fair and dignified manner. Educational institutions and professional counseling organizations are encouraged to make ethics and multicultural competence core components of curriculum development and professional standards, thereby equipping counsellors with the preparedness needed to face the challenges of counseling in multicultural societies.

4.1 Research Contributions

This study contributes to the theoretical literature by enriching the discussion of the interconnection between ethics and counsellor competence in multicultural counseling through a comprehensive literature review. In practice, it serves as a conceptual reference for counsellors, educators, and practitioners in guidance and counseling to understand the importance of applying ethics and simultaneously mastering multicultural competence. Furthermore, this study provides a foundation for future research that empirically tests the effectiveness of ethical practice and multicultural competence in improving the quality of counseling services in culturally diverse environments.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

5.1 Research Limitations

This study is limited by its literature review approach, so its findings are conceptual and dependent on the quality and scope of the analyzed sources. The study does not include empirical data from direct counseling practice, such as observations, interviews, or measurements involving counsellors and clients. Additionally, the cultural contexts discussed in the literature do not fully represent the entire diversity of cultures in Indonesia, limiting the generalizability of the findings across all multicultural counseling settings.

5.1 Recommendation for Future Research Directions

Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to employ empirical approaches, whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, to directly examine the impact of counsellors' ethics and multicultural competence on the effectiveness of counseling services. Subsequent studies could also focus on specific cultural contexts, such as schools, universities, or indigenous communities, to gain a deeper, more contextually grounded understanding. Furthermore, developing valid and reliable instruments to measure counsellor ethics and multicultural competence is an important agenda to support future research and the practice of multicultural counseling.

6. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that ethics and counsellor competence play a critical role in the implementation of multicultural counseling. Professional ethics serves as a moral and normative foundation guiding counsellors to respect clients' rights, dignity, and cultural values, thereby creating counseling relationships that are safe, fair, and grounded in trust. In diverse societies, applying ethical principles is fundamental to preventing bias, discrimination, and professional misconduct during counseling.

In addition to ethics, counsellors' multicultural competence is a key factor in enhancing counseling effectiveness. This competence includes counsellors' self-awareness of their personal values and biases, understanding of clients' cultural backgrounds, and the ability to adapt counseling approaches and strategies to the context. Counselors with multicultural competence can view cultural differences as strengths rather than obstacles, making counseling services more inclusive and responsive to client needs.

Overall, integrating professional ethics and multicultural competence is a primary prerequisite for improving the quality and professionalism of multicultural counseling. The findings underscore the need for ongoing development of ethics and multicultural competence in counsellor education, training, and professional development. This approach ensures that multicultural counseling can be conducted with dignity, effectiveness, and a focus on clients' well-being in increasingly complex cultural contexts.

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Author Contribution Statement

All authors discussed the results, contributed to the final manuscript, and approved the final version for publication. Muhammad Andi Setiawan: Conceptualization and Design; Writing - Original Draft, Methodology, Interpretation of the results. Performed data collection and Analysis. Indah Lestari: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing. Maria Grace B. Mababa: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing.

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The authors declare that Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools were used to refine the academic language and accuracy of the work, improving its academic tone and language accuracy, including grammatical structures, punctuation, and vocabulary. The work was then further modified to better reflect the authors' own tone and writing style. 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 known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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