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A PRIORI MODEL OF MULTICULTURAL COUNSELLING COMPETENCE FOR MALAYSIAN PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLORS

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ABSTRACT

Multicultural counselling competence has received increasing attention among researchers and counselling practitioners in Malaysia, in line with the growing need to address client cultural diversity. This paper proposes a conceptual framework in the form of the priori model of Multicultural Counselling Competence, developed through a comprehensive review and synthesis of relevant literature and established theories in multicultural counselling. The model posits that initial multicultural education and training, continuous professional development, and multicultural experience are significant predictors of multicultural counselling competence. Identity orientation and personality traits are positioned as moderating variables, influencing the strength of these relationships. This paper adopts a conceptual modelling approach to establish a theoretical foundation for future empirical research. The proposed framework will be tested in subsequent studies using an ex post facto design, with data analysed through Structural Equation Modelling. This paper highlights the importance of developing a contextualised model that reflects the Malaysian counselling environment, particularly in addressing cultural diversity in practice. The proposed framework is expected to strengthen multicultural counselling training, education, and professional practice. In addition, it is anticipated to contribute to the expansion of local literature in multicultural counselling and provide a reference point for future empirical studies in this field.

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Introduction

The rise of multiculturalism has been recognised as the fourth major force in counselling and psychology, following the psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioural and humanistic approaches (Harrichand, 2024). Rather than rejecting the conceptual

foundations of earlier approaches, multiculturalism enriches, extends and complements them by emphasising ethnographic factors (e.g., ethnicity, race, religion and language), demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender and geographic location), status variables (e.g., social, educational and economic status), affiliations (e.g., family relationships and organisational memberships) and other factors that contribute to individual identity formation (Pedersen *et al*., 2015). In line with these developments, numerous multicultural counselling competency models have been developed to assist counsellors in understanding, assessing and addressing cultural diversity in counselling practice in a more systematic and professional manner. These models are important because they provide guidance for counsellors in developing cultural awareness, enhancing knowledge of clients' cultural backgrounds and cultivating culturally responsive intervention skills. Furthermore, multicultural competency models serve as foundational frameworks for counsellor education curricula, clinical supervision and multicultural counselling practice (Ratts *et al*., 2016; Sue & Sue, 2022).

Accordingly, cultural diversity is now widely regarded as a critical component of counselling practice and has received increasing attention within the profession (Ivey *et al*., 2018; Sue *et al*., 2019). This growing emphasis on cultural diversity has elevated multicultural competence as a central concern in counselling. Among the helping professions, counselling has been particularly proactive in recognising the importance of multicultural competence, as it has become an integral component of culturally responsive counselling practice (Sue *et al*., 2022). Therefore, multicultural counselling competence must be taken seriously to ensure the development of counselling professionals who are capable of delivering holistic, ethical and culturally responsive services (American Counseling Association, 2014; Malaysian Board of Counsellors, 2025).

The increasing awareness of cultural diversity issues in counselling has placed multicultural competence at the forefront of professional discourse. The development of multicultural counselling competency models began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One of the most influential frameworks is the Multicultural Counselling Competencies Model developed by Sue and colleagues in 1982, subsequently revised in 1992 and updated in 1998. This model has been extensively discussed in the literature, widely applied in empirical research and strongly supported by scholars in the field of multicultural counselling (Wilcox *et al*., 2020; Ridley *et al*., 2021). In addition to this model, several other frameworks have contributed significantly to the field, including the Process of Cultural Competence Model (Campinha-Bacote, 2002), the Cross-Cultural Counselling Competence Model (Pedersen, 1997) and the Multicultural and Social Justice Counselling Competencies framework (Ratts *et al*., 2016), all of which emphasise social justice, cultural sensitivity and counsellors' professional development.

Nevertheless, the application of existing multicultural competency models is not without limitations. Most of these models were developed within Western cultural contexts characterised by sociocultural conditions, educational systems, societal values and experiences of diversity that differ substantially from those of Asian countries, including Malaysia

(Ridley *et al*., 2021; Sue *et al*., 2022). Furthermore, some models are overly broad and difficult to operationalise in local counsellor education and professional practice settings. Certain frameworks place greater emphasis on theoretical constructs and sociocultural awareness while paying less attention to professional development processes, direct multicultural experiences, counsellors' identity aspects and personality characteristics that may influence multicultural competence. Moreover, secondary models developed after the foundational frameworks have often become increasingly complex and sophisticated, yet have exerted comparatively less influence on the counselling profession than the primary models (Ridley *et al*., 2021). Despite the proliferation of multicultural counselling competency models internationally, most have been developed within the sociocultural contexts of their respective countries of origin and may not be fully applicable to the Malaysian context. Significant differences in demographic composition, ethnic relations, counsellor education and training systems, and the practical realities of local client populations necessitate the development of a contextually grounded model tailored to the unique characteristics of counselling practice in Malaysia.

In response to this need, the present study proposes the priori Model of Multicultural Counselling Competence for Malaysian Professional Counsellors, developed through a synthesis of relevant theories, existing multicultural competency models and findings from previous research. This priori model serves as an initial conceptual framework for explaining the relationships among initial multicultural education and training, continuous multicultural professional development, multicultural experiences, identity orientation, personality traits and multicultural counselling competence within the Malaysian context. Specifically, the model posits causal relationships between initial multicultural education and training (curriculum, practice and supervision, and research), continuous multicultural professional development (curriculum, practice and supervision, and research) and multicultural experiences (exposure, interaction and desire) with multicultural counselling competence (awareness, knowledge and skills). In addition, identity orientation (personal, social, collective and relational) and personality traits (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness to experience) are hypothesised as moderating variables to examine variations in the causal relationships among these constructs. This priori model is expected to provide a robust conceptual foundation for future empirical investigations while contributing to the enhancement of multicultural counsellor education, training and professional practice that are more relevant, effective and ethically grounded within the Malaysian context.

Various models have been developed to explain multicultural and cross-cultural competence within the counselling profession. These include the Multicultural Counselling Competencies Model proposed by Sue *et al*. (1992), the Process of Cultural Competence Model by Campinha-Bacote (2002), the Cross-Cultural counselling Competence Model by Pedersen (1997), and the Multicultural and Social Justice counselling Competencies introduced by Ratts *et al*. (2016). Each model emphasises different aspects of

multicultural competence development, including cultural awareness, social sensitivity, social justice, therapeutic relationships and counsellors' professional development.

However, the present study adopts the Multicultural Counselling Competencies Model by Sue *et al*. (1992) as its principal theoretical foundation. This model was selected because it is among the most fundamental, comprehensive and widely utilised frameworks in multicultural counselling research and practice. Furthermore, it offers a clear and systematic explanation of the three core domains of multicultural competence: Cultural awareness, cultural knowledge and cultural skills. Compared with other models that place greater emphasis on social justice, organisational sensitivity, or broader professional development, the model proposed by Sue *et al*. (1992) focuses primarily on the foundational competencies for direct counselling interactions with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. Consequently, this model is considered well aligned with the objective of the present study, which examines multicultural counselling competence within the context of professional practice.

In general, counsellors' multicultural competence depends largely on their ability to develop and integrate three essential components: Multicultural awareness, knowledge and skills (Andersen & Chen, 2018; Hays & Erford, 2025). Cultural awareness refers to counsellors' recognition of their own cultural values and biases, and an understanding of how these biases may influence multicultural counselling processes. It also involves examining stereotypes and fostering a positive orientation toward cultural diversity. Cultural knowledge encompasses counsellors' understanding of both their own worldview and that of their clients, as well as knowledge of specific cultural factors that may influence clients' experiences. Cultural skills, in turn, refer to the ability to translate such awareness and knowledge into culturally responsive interventions that address clients' unique needs effectively (Sue & Sue, 2022).

More specifically, it is essential for counsellors to develop multicultural competence in understanding clients' cultural backgrounds, conducting assessments and implementing interventions. Differences in perspectives arising from cultural diversity can enrich the counselling process and facilitate clients' attainment of counselling goals (Ratts *et al*., 2016; Leong & Pickren, 2019). Accordingly, counsellors must continuously enhance their multicultural education and experiences. In addition, they should cultivate strong professional attributes that enable them to address issues related to cultural diversity. Failure to take clients' differing perspectives into consideration may not only diminish counselling effectiveness but may also harm clients (Ratts *et al*., 2016; Sue *et al*., 2022).

A closer examination of the 31 competencies outlined in the Multicultural Counselling Competencies Model (Sue *et al*., 1992) reveals several factors that may influence multicultural counselling competence, including education, experience, identity and personality. Nevertheless, the roles of multicultural education and multicultural experience remain insufficiently articulated as direct contributors to multicultural counselling competence, even though both are acknowledged within the model. For

example, Sue *et al*. (1992) describe education as a critical factor influencing counsellors' multicultural competence, encouraging counsellors to seek educational experiences, consultation and training to enhance their understanding and effectiveness when working with racially and culturally diverse populations. Counsellors are also encouraged to pursue educational opportunities that foster cross-cultural knowledge, understanding and skills. When limitations in competence are identified, counsellors are advised to seek consultation, additional training or education, and referrals to more qualified individuals or resources (Sue *et al*., 1992). Similarly, experience is recognised as an important influence on multicultural counselling competence. Counsellors are encouraged to engage with individuals from different cultural backgrounds outside counselling settings through community events, social and political functions, cultural celebrations, friendships, neighbourhood groups and other activities that facilitate a deeper understanding of minority perspectives (Sue *et al*., 1992).

The priori Model of Multicultural Counselling Competence was developed to explain the causal relationship between multicultural education (initial multicultural education and training, as well as multicultural continuing professional development) and multicultural counselling competence. The Integrated Multicultural Training Model (Ponterotto, 1997) was selected to conceptualise the dimensions of multicultural education. This model integrates multiculturalism across six domains: (1) Minority representation, (2) curriculum issues, (3) counselling practice and supervision, (4) research considerations, (5) student and faculty competency evaluation, and (6) the physical environment. However, based on the Standards and Qualifications for Counsellor Training and the Guidelines for Continuing Professional Development Programs for Registered Counsellors issued by the Malaysian Board of Counsellors (2012; 2017), the present study focuses on only three domains: (1) Curriculum issues, (2) practice and supervision and (3) research considerations. The Standards and Qualifications for Counsellor Training by the Malaysian Board of Counsellors (2012) identify four major components of counsellor education programmes: (1) Core curriculum, (2) practicum training, (3) internship and (4) electives/research projects. Meanwhile, the Guidelines for Continuing Professional Development Programs for Registered Counsellors by the Malaysian Board of Counsellors (2017) outline two major components of continuing professional development programmes: (1) Mandatory activities and (2) elective activities. The mandatory component encompasses three primary categories: (1) Congresses, conferences, seminars, conventions and colloquia; (2) workshops and courses; and (3) training and mentoring activities.

Multicultural education forms the foundation for the development of multicultural counselling competence (Gonzalez *et al*., 2024). It enhances multicultural competence and plays a crucial role in promoting multicultural values within learning environments (Mardhiah *et al*., 2024). Within Sue *et al*'s (1992) Multicultural Counselling Competencies Model, multicultural coursework serves as an entry point into the initial stages of competence development, namely awareness and knowledge. Such coursework provides foundational

understanding of cultural concepts, sensitivity to differences, relevant theories and opportunities for self-reflection to identify personal values, beliefs and biases.

Gonzalez-Voller *et al*. (2020) reported that counselling trainees' self-perceived multicultural competence increased throughout their master's counselling programmes, with the highest growth occurring from student orientation through the practicum phase before slowing during internship. Their findings indicate that multicultural competence develops progressively alongside students' educational advancement. Similarly, Dameron *et al*. (2020) found that counsellors who completed programmes with multicultural content integrated throughout the curriculum demonstrated higher levels of multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills than those who completed only a single multicultural counselling course. Dune *et al*. (2022) further demonstrated that multicultural continuing professional development was significantly associated with multicultural competence.

Wright (2020) found that participants' post-test multicultural competence scores were significantly higher than their pre-test scores following participation in multicultural professional development activities. Likewise, Rafidah (2017) reported significant differences in multicultural competence levels between Malaysian counsellors who participated in multicultural continuing professional development activities and those who did not.

Furthermore, the Continuing Professional Development Program for Multicultural Competence developed in Malaysia resulted in significant improvements in participants' multicultural competence following training (Rafidah *et al*., 2020). Taken together, multicultural education and training have been identified as important predictors of multicultural competence (Wright, 2020; Dune *et al*., 2022). Therefore, counsellors should pursue multicultural education and training to ensure that the counselling profession remains relevant and responsive to the needs of culturally diverse societies.

Furthermore, the priori Model of Multicultural Counselling Competence was developed to explain the causal relationship between multicultural experience and multicultural counselling competence. The Multicultural Experience Model (Aytug, 2013), together with literature on multicultural experiences (Endicott *et al*., 2003; Leung & Chiu, 2010; Narvaez & Hill, 2010), was used to conceptualise the dimensions of multicultural experience. Aytug's (2013) model identifies two forms of multicultural experience: (1) Exposure and (2) interaction. In the present study, an additional dimension, (3) desire, was incorporated based on previous literature (Narvaez & Hill, 2010).

Unlike multicultural coursework, which establishes the foundations of awareness and knowledge, multicultural experiences provide opportunities for practical application that strengthen and expand these competencies. Such experiences help counsellors become more open-minded and flexible in recognising both differences and commonalities across cultures while enhancing their sensitivity toward culturally diverse groups (Backmann *et al*., 2020; Basman & Bayram, 2024). Consistent with Sue *et al*'s (1992) Multicultural Counselling Competencies Model, these experiences foster ongoing awareness and the ability to adopt multiple perspectives, capacities that

cannot be fully achieved through theoretical learning alone.

Mayer *et al*. (2024) reported significant improvements in students' intercultural competence-including knowledge, awareness and skills-following participation in a study-abroad programme that combined academic learning aboard a ship with experiences across multiple countries. These findings demonstrate that educational experiences involving interaction with diverse cultures can enhance individuals' ability to understand and adapt to cultural differences. Similarly, Moreno Sanchez (2021) found a significant relationship between levels of ethnic diversity exposure and multicultural competence, with individuals possessing broader cultural experiences exhibiting higher levels of competence. Moreover, multicultural experience has been identified as an important contributing factor and a predictor of multicultural competence development in several studies (Nelson & Luetz, 2021; Öner Yalçın & Uzun, 2025). Therefore, counsellors should enrich their multicultural experiences through training, cross-cultural interactions and exposure to diverse environments in order to strengthen their multicultural competence. Such efforts are essential to ensure culturally responsive, effective and client-centred counselling services for individuals from diverse backgrounds.

In their longitudinal study, Kuo *et al*. (2020) found that participants demonstrated substantial improvements in skills and self-confidence after engaging in a multicultural practicum focused on working with refugees. This finding illustrates how multicultural experiences serve as a platform for applying the knowledge and skills acquired through formal education. Conceptually, multicultural experience may function as a mediating variable linking multicultural education to multicultural competence; education provides the theoretical foundation and cultural awareness, whereas real-world experiences facilitate the application, adaptation and reinforcement of competencies in authentic settings. This relationship suggests that, in the absence of multicultural experiences, the effects of education may not be fully translated into optimal levels of competence. Accordingly, multicultural experience is essential for ensuring that counsellors can provide competent services to clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Moreover, the priori Model of Multicultural Counselling Competence proposed in this study also examines the role of identity as a moderator in the development of counsellors' multicultural counselling competence. Identity is considered important because individuals differ in their identity orientations, which may influence their levels of multicultural competence. Accordingly, identity is incorporated as a moderating variable in the model. Robins *et al*'s (1999) Model of Self (Identity), commonly referred to as the Dimensions of Self, was used to explain four dimensions of identity orientation: (1) Personal, (2) social, (3) collective and (4) relational identity.

Identity has been recognised as a critical element in the development of multicultural counselling competence among counselling practitioners and has been identified as a predictor of multicultural competence (Carmona *et al*., 2016; Matthews *et al*., 2018; Tang & Calafato, 2022). Personal identity, collective identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, or cultural group), and relational identity have been identified as key orientations

contributing to multicultural competence (Carmona *et al*., 2016; Matthews *et al*., 2018; Tang & Calafato, 2022). Therefore, counsellors should develop and strengthen their identity orientations to optimise multicultural competence when working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In addition, the priori Model of Multicultural Counselling Competence proposed in this study also investigates the role of personality as a moderator in the development of counsellors' multicultural counselling competence. Personality is included because individuals possess different personality traits that may influence their multicultural competence. Accordingly, personality is treated as a moderating variable within the proposed framework. Goldberg's (1981) Big Five Personality Model was used to conceptualise five personality dimensions: (1) Extraversion, (2) agreeableness, (3) conscientiousness, (4) neuroticism and (5) openness to experience.

Personality has been identified as an important factor in the development of multicultural counselling competence and is regarded as a predictor of multicultural competence (Carmona *et al*., 2016; Novikova *et al*., 2019; Burdine & Koch, 2021). In particular, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness to experience have been reported as key personality traits associated with multicultural competence (Başbay *et al*., 2018; Burdine & Koch, 2021). Therefore, counsellors should understand and leverage their personality strengths to enhance the effectiveness of multicultural counselling practice with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Overall, this literature review provides the theoretical and empirical foundation for each construct incorporated into the proposed the priori Model of Multicultural Counselling Competence for Malaysian Professional Counsellors. The model is expected to address existing research gaps by integrating education, experience, identity and personality within a Malaysian contextual framework, thereby contributing to the advancement of multicultural counselling practices that are more culturally relevant, effective and ethically grounded.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a conceptual modelling approach, which serves as a theoretical foundation for future empirical research. Conceptual modelling is employed to develop and explain the relationships among the key constructs of the study based on established theories and prior literature (Robinson, 2008). Through this approach, a conceptual model of multicultural counselling competence is developed to illustrate the relationships among the study variables within the context of professional counsellors in Malaysia, thereby providing a foundation for subsequent empirical testing.

The study is proposed to be conducted using a quantitative approach with an ex post facto research design. This design is appropriate for examining causal relationships and causal comparisons among variables without any manipulation by the researcher (Ary *et al*., 2019). The primary objective is to determine the influence of multicultural education and initial training, ongoing multicultural professional development and multicultural experiences on the level of multicultural counselling competence among

professional counsellors. In addition, the study aims to compare levels of multicultural counselling competence based on the identity orientation and personality traits of professional counsellors.

Sample

The target population for this proposed study consists of professional counsellors registered with the Malaysian Board of Counsellors. This population is considered appropriate because registered counsellors possess formal counselling training and practical experience, enabling a more accurate assessment of multicultural counselling competence.

A simple random sampling technique will be employed. This method is selected because it provides every member of the population with an equal probability of selection, thereby minimising sampling bias. To determine the required sample size, this study refers to the recommendation of Hair *et al*. (2010), who suggest a minimum of five to ten respondents per indicator item. With a total of 70 indicators, the minimum sample size required is estimated to range between 350 and 700 respondents.

Furthermore, Barclay *et al*. (1995) proposed the "10-times rule," whereby the minimum sample size should be determined based on ten times the largest number of indicators associated with a construct or the largest number of structural paths directed toward a construct. Based on these recommendations, this study targets a minimum sample size of 350 respondents to ensure stable parameter estimates and adequate statistical power.

Research Instruments

This study proposes the use of six adapted instruments to collect data. The Counselling Training Program Multicultural Competency Checklist (CTPMCC; Ponterotto *et al*., 1995) is adapted to obtain information related to initial multicultural education and training. The instrument consists of 22 items distributed across six subscales: (1) Minority representation (4 items), (2) curriculum issues (5 items), (3) counselling practice and supervision (3 items), (4) research considerations (4 items), (5) student and faculty competency evaluation (4 items), and (6) physical environment (2 items). However, the minority representation, student and faculty competency evaluation, and physical environment subscales were not included in this study, as the Standards and Qualifications for Counsellor Training issued by the Malaysian Board of Counsellors (2012) emphasise curriculum issues, counselling practice and supervision, and research considerations. Therefore, the present study utilises three subscales to represent the construct of initial multicultural education and training: (1) Curriculum, (2) practice and supervision and (3) research. The CTPMCC uses a two-point Likert scale response format. In terms of reliability, the CTPMCC demonstrates moderate internal consistency with an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .76$. The alpha coefficients for the minority representation, curriculum issues, counselling practice and supervision, research considerations, evaluation of student and faculty competence, and physical environment are $\alpha = .86$, $\alpha = .76$, $\alpha = .81$, $\alpha = .81$, $\alpha = .85$, and $\alpha = .60$, respectively (Constantine *et al*., 1996).

The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (OECD, 2008) is adapted to obtain information regarding continuing multicultural professional development. The TALIS instrument comprises 22 items across three subscales: (1) Professional development (10 items), (2) evaluation and feedback (8 items), and (3) practices, beliefs and attitudes (5 items). For this study, one subscale representing professional development was selected and subsequently adapted by the researcher into three dimensions: (1) Curriculum, (2) practice and mentoring, and (3) research. TALIS employs various response formats, including a two-point Likert scale. However, reliability estimates for the professional development subscale were not reported in the original instrument.

The Multicultural Experience Assessment (MExA; Aytug, 2013) and the Multicultural Experience Questionnaire (MEQ; Narvaez & Hill, 2010) are adapted to obtain information regarding multicultural experiences. The MExA consists of 13 items distributed across six subscales: (1) Multicultural exposure (5 items), (2) multicultural interaction (4 items), (3) breadth of multicultural exposure (1 item), (4) breadth of multicultural interaction (1 item), (5) duration of multicultural exposure (1 item) and (6) duration of multicultural interaction (1 item). The MEQ consists of 15 items distributed across two subscales: (1) Multicultural experience (9 items) and (2) multicultural desire (6 items). For the present study, two MExA subscales are selected to represent the construct of multicultural experience: (1) Exposure and (2) interaction. In addition, one MEQ subscale, (1) desire is selected to represent the multicultural experience construct. The MExA uses a six-point Likert scale, while the MEQ employs four-, five-, and six-point rating scales. However, only the five-point scale is used for the multicultural desire subscale. In terms of reliability, the MExA demonstrates high internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .83$. The alpha coefficients for the exposure and interaction subscales are $\alpha = .80$ and $\alpha = .89$, respectively (Aytug, 2013). Similarly, the MEQ demonstrates high internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .80$, although reliability coefficients for individual subscales were not reported (Narvaez & Hill, 2010).

The Multicultural Awareness, Knowledge and Skills Survey – Counsellor Edition – Revised (MAKSS-CE-R; Kim *et al*., 2003) is adapted to assess multicultural counselling competence. The instrument contains 33 items across three subscales: (1) Awareness (10 items), (2) knowledge (13 items), and (3) skills (10 items). It includes both positively and negatively worded items, comprising 26 positively worded items and seven negatively worded items. The present study retains all three subscales to represent multicultural counselling competence: (1) Awareness, (2) knowledge and (3) skills. The instrument employs a four-point Likert scale response format. In terms of reliability, the MAKSS-CE-R demonstrates high internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .81$. The alpha coefficients for the awareness, knowledge and skills subscales are $\alpha = .80$, $\alpha = .87$, and $\alpha = .85$, respectively (Kim *et al*., 2003).

The Aspects of Identity Questionnaire (AIQ-IV; Cheek *et al*., 2002) is used to obtain information regarding the

identity orientations of professional counsellors. The instrument contains 45 items across five subscales: (1) Personal (10 items), (2) social (7 items), (3) collective (8 items), (4) relational (10 items) and (5) special items (10 items). However, the special items are not included as a separate scale representing a specific identity dimension. Therefore, the present study utilises four subscales to represent the identity construct: (1) Personal, (2) social, (3) collective and (4) relational. The instrument utilises a five-point Likert scale response format. In terms of reliability, the AIQ-IV demonstrates internal consistency ranging from moderate to very high across its subscales. While the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient was not reported, the alpha coefficients for the personal, social, collective and relational subscales were reported as $\alpha = .73$, $\alpha = .84$, $\alpha = .72$, and $\alpha = .92$, respectively (Cheek *et al*., 2002).

The Big Five Inventory (BFI) (John & Srivastava, 1999) is used to obtain information regarding the personality traits of professional counsellors. The instrument contains 44 items across five subscales: (1) Extraversion (8 items), (2) agreeableness (9 items), (3) conscientiousness (9 items), (4) neuroticism (8 items), and (5) openness to experience (10 items). The BFI includes both positively and negatively worded items, comprising 28 positively worded items and 16 negatively worded items. The present study retains all five subscales to represent personality traits: (1) Extraversion, (2) agreeableness, (3) conscientiousness, (4) neuroticism and (5) openness to experience. The instrument applies a five-point Likert scale response format. In terms of reliability, the BFI demonstrates strong internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .83$. The alpha coefficients for extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience are $\alpha = .88$, $\alpha = .79$, $\alpha = .82$, $\alpha = .84$, and $\alpha = .81$, respectively (John & Srivastava, 1999).

Although this study proposes the use of several instruments containing a relatively large number of items, their selection is based on the alignment of the constructs with the study objectives and the need to obtain comprehensive data on multicultural counselling competence. To reduce respondent burden and enhance data collection efficiency, a pilot study will be conducted prior to the main study. Through the pilot study, the researcher will evaluate the suitability, clarity and psychometric strength of the items before final item selection. Items that are deemed less relevant, redundant, or demonstrate low reliability will be removed, ensuring that only those items that are statistically and conceptually representative of the constructs are retained. This approach is expected to produce a more concise, practical and respondent-friendly instrument while maintaining the validity and reliability of the study (Boateng *et al*., 2018; DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021).

Data Analysis

The study data will be analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) for Covariance-based Structural Equation Modelling (CB-SEM). Prior to conducting the main analyses, the data will be examined to determine whether the assumptions required for the proposed statistical procedures, particularly multivariate analyses involving Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), are satisfied.

These assumptions include: (1) Sample size adequacy, (2) data type, (3) normality, (4) linearity and (5) multicollinearity. The SEM procedure involves two major stages: (1) Measurement Model and (2) Structural Model. At the initial stage, the measurement model will be evaluated through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to assess the validity and reliability of all study constructs. Once the measurement model satisfies the prescribed model-fit criteria, the analysis will proceed to the structural model stage to examine the causal relationships among the constructs in the proposed research model (initial multicultural education and training, continuing multicultural professional development, multicultural experience and multicultural counselling competence). In addition, Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) will be conducted to examine causal differences based on the identity orientations and personality traits of professional counsellors.

Results and Discussion

Proposed Model of Multicultural Counselling Competence among Malaysian Professional Counsellors

Based on the literature reviewed, it is evident that multicultural education, multicultural experience, identity and personality influence a counsellor's level of multicultural counselling competence. These factors constitute important intrapersonal dimensions that should be emphasised to ensure the effective delivery of multicultural counselling services. Counsellors need to understand the most appropriate ways of providing counselling services to clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. The following section presents the Priori Model of Multicultural Counselling Competence among Professional Counsellors in Malaysia. The model comprises six variables: (1) Multicultural counselling competence, (2) initial multicultural education and training, (3) continuing multicultural professional development, (4) multicultural experience, (5) identity orientation and (6) personality traits. This model was developed to provide a conceptual framework that explains the relationship between counsellors' intrapersonal factors and their level of multicultural counselling competence. In addition, it serves as a guide for counsellor education, professional development, and counselling practice that is more responsive and inclusive of Malaysia's cultural diversity.

Figure 1 illustrates the Priori Model of Multicultural Counselling Competence among Malaysian Professional Counsellors, which was developed based on a review of the literature on multicultural counselling competence. The model proposes that multicultural counselling competence is influenced by three primary variables: Initial multicultural education and training (curriculum, practice and supervision, and research), continuing multicultural professional development (curriculum, practice and supervision, and research) and multicultural experience (exposure, interaction and desire). These three variables are viewed as factors to enhancing counsellors' multicultural counselling competence in working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, the model proposes that identity orientation (personal, social, collective and relational) and personality traits (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and

openness to experience) function as moderating variables that may influence the strength of the relationships between these factors and multicultural counselling competence. In other words, a counsellor's sense of identity and personality characteristics may determine the extent to which education, experience and professional development are translated into effective multicultural counselling practice. Overall, the model depicts a holistic relationship between intrapersonal factors and the development of multicultural counselling competence within the context of Malaysia's multicultural society.

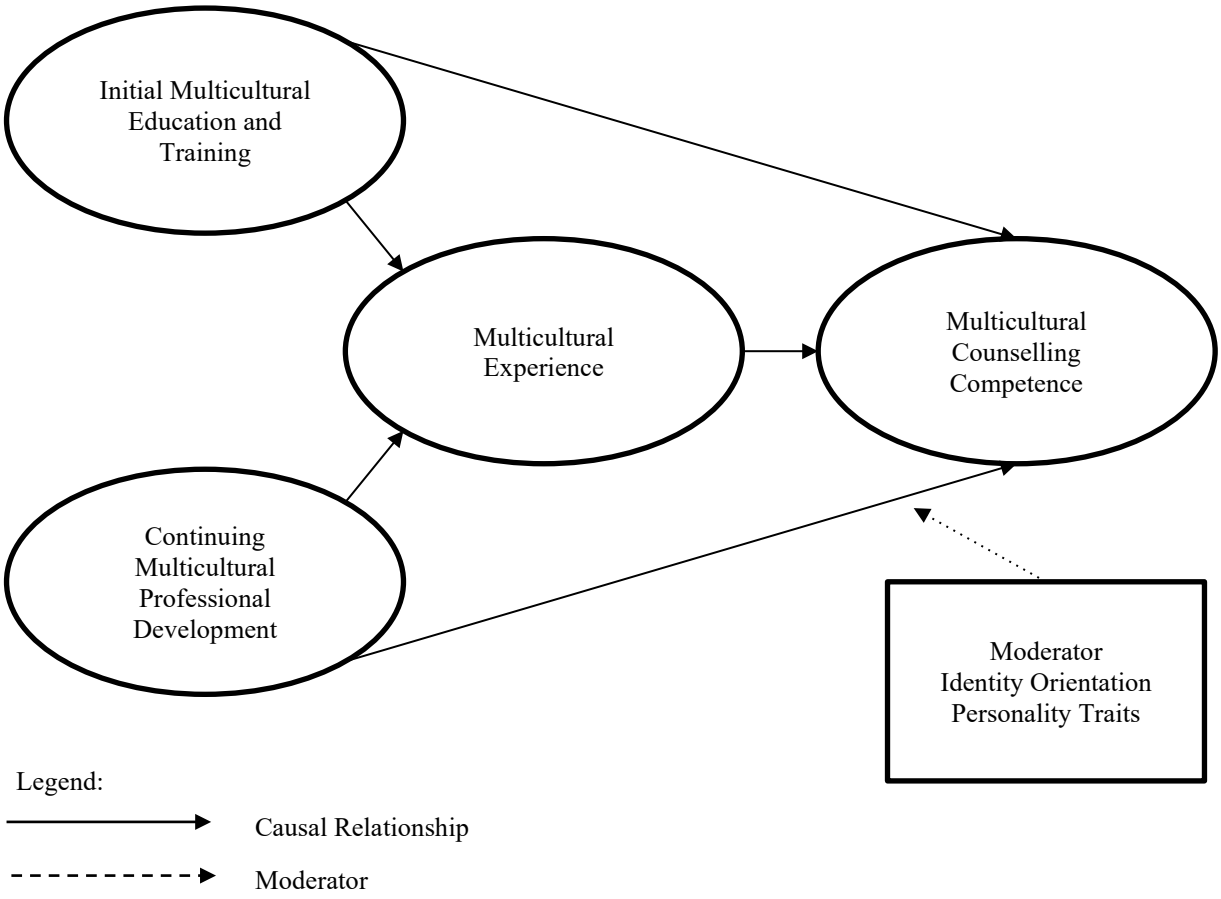


Figure 1: The priori model of multicultural counselling competence among Malaysian professional counsellors

Implications of the Study

This study is expected to make significant theoretical and practical contributions to the field of multicultural counselling in Malaysia. From a theoretical perspective, the priori Model of Multicultural Counselling Competence for Malaysian Professional Counsellors contributes to the development of local scholarship by offering a conceptual framework that is better aligned with the realities of Malaysia's multicultural society. The model extends existing theoretical foundations, particularly the Multicultural Counselling Competence Model (Sue *et al*.,

1992), by integrating intrapersonal factors such as initial multicultural education and training, continuing multicultural professional development, multicultural experience, identity orientation and personality traits. This integration enhances the comprehensiveness of the model and increases its relevance to counselling practice within the Malaysian context. Furthermore, the model provides a foundation for future empirical investigation through both quantitative and qualitative research, thereby strengthening the theoretical basis of multicultural counselling competence through evidence derived from local data.

From a practical standpoint, the model offers valuable guidance to higher education institutions, professional bodies and practicing counsellors in enhancing multicultural counselling capabilities. For counsellor education and training institutions, the model can serve as a framework for curriculum development that places greater emphasis on field-based experiences, multicultural counselling coursework and reflective training practices. The implications of this study are also particularly relevant to public and private higher education institutions offering counselling programmes, as curricula and training structures can be aligned with the recommendations of the priori Model of Multicultural Counselling Competence. Such curricular enhancements can help ensure that future counsellors acquire more comprehensive exposure to cultural competence, multicultural intervention skills and practical experiences that are relevant to the Malaysian sociocultural context.

The Malaysian Board of Counsellors and other professional organisations may also utilise the model to design continuing professional development programmes that are more focused on cultural sensitivity and responsiveness. For practicing counsellors, the model is a useful framework for self-reflection, professional improvement and the strengthening of multicultural competencies when working with clients from diverse backgrounds. In addition, the model has important implications for policymakers and government agencies in formulating guidelines, competency standards and ethical frameworks for counselling practice that are more inclusive, culturally responsive and reflective of the diverse cultural landscape of Malaysian society.

Conclusion

Overall, this conceptual paper underscores that multicultural counselling competence among professional counsellors in Malaysia is an increasingly critical necessity within the context of a multicultural society. Issues related to ethnic, religious, linguistic and socioeconomic diversity require counsellors to possess heightened cultural awareness, specialised knowledge and relevant skills to ensure that counselling services are inclusive, responsive and culturally appropriate. Accordingly, the proposed model of multicultural counselling competence serves as a foundational framework that integrates intrapersonal dimensions to develop counsellors who are equipped to meet the realities of Malaysia's diverse population. The proposed model highlights five key factors that underpin the development of multicultural counselling competence: Initial multicultural education and training, continuing multicultural professional

development, multicultural experience, identity orientation, and personality traits.

These factors collectively contribute to the development of counsellors who not only possess a strong theoretical foundation but are also capable of translating theory into professional practice. Intrapersonal factors such as identity orientation and personality traits, enhance counsellors' reflective capacity and ability to understand clients with greater empathy. Meanwhile, multicultural education, training and experiences provide a robust practical foundation for addressing issues arising from cultural diversity in counselling contexts.

In conclusion, the development of multicultural counselling competence should not be viewed as an auxiliary component of counsellor preparation; rather, it should be established as a core element of counsellor education, training and professional practice. The proposed model presented in this paper not only offers a conceptual framework for future research but also provides opportunities for enhancing counselling practice in Malaysia. Through comprehensive and consistent implementation, this model is expected to foster the development of professional counsellors who are better prepared, culturally sensitive and more effective in addressing the needs of an increasingly diverse and multicultural society.

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Author Contributions Statement

Nurul Aini Mudayat conceptualised the central research idea, developed the theoretical framework, formulation of the proposed model, provided critical review of the methodological framework, including the application of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), and led the writing and revision of the manuscript. Amir Asraf Yunus and Kamarul Md Shah contributed to refining the conceptual model, validated theoretical linkages and reviewed the manuscript for academic rigour. Normadiyana Abdullah and Nurhafizah Mohamad Yasin assisted in conducting the literature review, synthesising previous studies, and organising the manuscript structure.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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