

Perceived Multicultural Counseling Competence of Malaysian Counselors: An Exploratory Study

Rafidah Aga Mohd Jaladin

This study investigated the nature and extent of perceived multicultural counseling competence (MCC) of 508 professional counselors in Malaysia using a national survey approach. Differences in counselors' perceived MCC pertaining to gender, ethnicity, highest education, and multicultural training were examined. Results revealed 5 factors as constituents of MCC and significant differences in perceived MCCs due to ethnicity, highest education, and participation in multicultural training. Implications for future research, counselor education, and counseling practice are discussed.

Keywords: multicultural counseling competence, professional counselors, Malaysian counseling, multicultural education

Este estudio investigó la naturaleza y la extensión de la competencia en consejería multicultural (MCC, por sus siglas en inglés) percibida de 508 consejeros profesionales en Malasia usando un enfoque de encuesta nacional. Se examinaron las diferencias en la MCC percibida de los consejeros respecto a sexo, etnicidad, nivel máximo de educación y capacitación multicultural. Los resultados revelaron 5 factores constituyentes de MCC y diferencias significativas en las MCC debido a etnicidad, nivel máximo de educación y participación en capacitación multicultural. Se discuten las implicaciones para investigaciones futuras, educación de consejeros y práctica de la consejería.

Palabras clave: competencia en consejería multicultural, consejeros profesionales, consejería en Malasia, educación multicultural

Malaysia is a multicultural country, especially in terms of ethnicity and religion within its population of 31.7 million people. Its history as a trading center between Europe, East and West Asia, India, and China and its history of colonization for several decades have spurred the formation of a multiethnic, multireligious, and multilingual society. Malaysia's

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population comprises 68.6% Bumiputera (80% Malays and 20% indigenous people), 23.4% Chinese, 7.0% Indians, and 1% others (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2016). The professed religions among Malaysians are diverse (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010): Islam (61.3%); Buddhism (19.8%); Christianity (9.2%); Hinduism (6.3%); Confucianism, Taoism, and other traditional Chinese religions (1.3%); and others (2.1%).

The national language is Malay, and the second language in official settings is English. Because of the country's cultural diversity, many Malaysians are bilingual or multilingual. Most can speak Malay, in addition to other community languages such as English, Mandarin, Tamil, Hokkien, and others. With their history, location, and societal composition, Malaysians have unique needs and values that are specific to their cultural context and ethnic/religious backgrounds. It is in this context that this research was conducted.

The culture and diversity of the Malaysian population contribute to the current national movement toward "One Malaysia," which emphasizes national unity by encouraging mutual respect and trust among different races in Malaysia. This national movement has highlighted the need to increase Malaysian counselors' awareness and understanding regarding diversity and multicultural issues in the Malaysian context to improve mental health service delivery. Multicultural counseling literature suggests that for counselors to work effectively with diverse clients, they have to develop multicultural counseling competence (MCC; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992; Sue & Torino, 2005; Whaley & Davis, 2007). This article reports on a national survey study aimed at exploring the nature and extent of perceived MCC of professional counselors in Malaysia. This is in line with the current need for more multiculturally competent counselors in the Malaysian counseling profession (Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2013; See & Ng, 2010).

malaysian counseling profession

The availability of key defining criteria of a profession—specialized knowledge, intensive and continuous training, professional bodies, licensure and certification, and ethical standards (Feit & Lloyd, 1990; Johari, 2001)—justifies that Malaysian counseling is indeed a profession (Ismail & Othman, 2001; Salim & Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2005; See & Ng, 2010). Malaysia has more than 20 counselor education programs since the 1980s that provide specialized education and training to guidance teacher counselors, inservice nonschool counselors, or preservice counselors (Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2008). However, the status of multicultural education in these programs is yet to be determined, because although most of the programs include courses on cultural diversity, multiculturalism is not infused across all courses in the curricula. To date, the vast

majority of counselor education programs in the United States, Australia, and other multicultural contexts have included and infused multicultural principles in training counselors (Arredondo & Arciniega, 2001; Castillo, Brossart, Reyes, Conoley, & Phoummarath, 2007; Smith, Constantine, Dunn, Dinehart, & Montoya, 2006). The model for counselor training in Malaysia has generally adopted the U.S. model, which reflects standards of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2015).

Three major professional bodies help improve the status of mental health and counseling services in Malaysia: the Malaysian Counselling Association (Persatuan Kaunseling Malaysia [PERKAMA]), the Malaysian Psychological Association, and the Malaysian Mental Health Association. However, these associations emerge from different governing ministries and hence have different policies and rules.

A code of ethics has been set by PERKAMA as a hallmark of the profession because of the self-regulating aspect for practicing counselors. The first PERKAMA Code of Ethics was introduced in 1994, the revised version was published in 2008 (PERKAMA, 2008), and the latest version was published in 2011 by the Malaysia Board of Counsellors, called the Lembaga Kaunselor Malaysia (LKM; 2011). In addition, since the introduction of the Counsellors Act (580) in 1998 (Lembaga Penyelidikan Undang-Undang Malaysia, 1998), the LKM functions as a registrar and an accreditation body for the licensing and certification of counselors, as well as accreditation of counselor education programs in Malaysia. To comply with Act 580, most employers in Malaysia require their counselors-in-service in various work settings (e.g., higher learning institutions, hospitals, and government agencies) to be registered with LKM. Some Malaysian agencies also include the requirement for counselor registration and licensure as part of their counselor recruitment and appointment. However, school counselors are not required to register because their employment status is labeled as “teachers” in the service scheme. This may affect the quality of service delivery in school settings. Therefore, there are salient issues and tensions related to multicultural counseling in Malaysia.

Although Malaysian counselors already have a strong professional identity (Othman, Che Din, & Sipon, 2000) and counseling is widely recognized as a profession in Malaysia and in the Asia Pacific region, concerns exist regarding clarifying the behaviors that individual counselors must exhibit to be part of the profession and to work effectively and ethically in Malaysia. These include addressing issues concerning the awareness and understanding of culture and diversity, the state of multicultural competency of Malaysian counselors, and the counselors’ individualized approaches when working with culturally diverse Malaysian clients. These issues have tremendous impact on the service delivery of counseling practice, counselor education, and counselor training in Malaysia because they imply a set of standards

and guidelines for judging the quality of multiculturally competent practices among Malaysian counselors when working with diverse Malaysian clients. Unfortunately, such guidelines have not yet been formulated for use by the Malaysian counseling profession. Hence, this study used a survey approach to explore Malaysian counselors' perceived MCC and to gain further insight into their practices of multicultural counseling in the specific sociopolitical context of Malaysia.

counselors' multicultural competence

Previous literature has demonstrated the need for counselors to be multiculturally competent, especially when working with ethnic minority clients in a specific multicultural context (Whaley & Davis, 2007). This resulted in numerous proposed models of MCC (Mollen, Ridley, & Hill, 2003); several attempts at operationalization of MCC (Arredondo et al., 1996); development of MCC instruments for assessing MCC among practicing counselors and trainees (e.g., the Multicultural Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills Survey–Counselor Edition [MAKSS-CE-R; Kim, Cartwright, Asay, & D'Andrea, 2003] and the Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale [MCKAS; Ponterotto, Gretchen, Utsey, Rieger, & Austin, 2002]); and several research studies with a focus on assessing counselors' MCC using self-report instruments (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999), observer-rated measures (Multicultural Competency Checklist; Ponterotto, Alexander, & Grieger, 1995), or practice demonstration (Neufeldt et al., 2006).

Among the existing models of MCC, the model by Sue et al. (1992) attracts the most attention among scholars and researchers worldwide. This is because the model is an extension of the pioneer model, which proposes three core dimensions of MCC: (a) *beliefs and attitudes* regarding racial and ethnic minorities, including the need to check for biases and stereotypes and the development of a positive orientation toward multiculturalism; (b) *knowledge* of one's own worldview, including knowledge of cultural groups with whom one works and knowledge of sociopolitical influences on members of these groups; and (c) *skills*, strategies, and interventions needed to work with minority groups within a cross-cultural counseling context (Sue et al., 1982). Sue et al. incorporated these dimensions into their 3 (characteristics) × 3 (dimensions) matrix but emphasized explicitly three core characteristics of a skilled counselor to further clarify the multicultural competencies. These are (a) being aware of counselors' own assumptions, values, and biases; (b) understanding the worldview of the culturally different client; and (c) developing appropriate intervention strategies and techniques. However, there is no consensus on empirical evidence regarding the components of MCC as a construct (Holcomb-McCoy, 2000; Ponterotto et al., 2002; Sodowsky, Taffe, Gutkin, & Wise, 1994). This indicates that there is no clear factor structure of MCC at this

point and it is open for further investigation (Worthington, Soth-McNett, & Moreno, 2007).

Among the most widely used and extensively reviewed MCC instruments found in research literature are the self-reported measures because they have generally acceptable internal consistency reliability across different populations and settings (Dunn, Smith, & Montoya, 2006). Although proven to be useful tools for counselor preparation, several limitations and criticisms are associated with their use in research. These involve, for example, the cultural relevance of such measures to be used in multicultural contexts other than the United States (Lonner & Ibrahim, 2008), the inconsistency of the factor structures of these instruments or a lack of clarity of construct (Ponterotto et al., 2002), and the failure to address diversity issues (e.g., differences in age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, physical ability). These limitations pose some challenges for international researchers to use any of the existing instruments in their specific cultural contexts, because these assessment tools may be biased and may not be culturally relevant for application to populations in other context-specific cultures such as Malaysia.

Relevant MCC studies found in the literature were mostly surveys conducted in the U.S. context using American samples from the majority and racial/ethnic minority groups. Some studies focused on practicing professional counselors (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999; Wheaton & Granello, 2002), and most focused on graduate trainees enrolled in postgraduate counseling programs (e.g., Cates, Schaeffle, Smaby, Maddux, & LeBeauf, 2007). A limited number of relevant MCC surveys were found in Australia (Pelling, 2007), Britain (Glockshuber, 2005), and New Zealand (Selvarajah, 2006). There have also been MCC studies that used a dyadic approach (Dillon et al., 2016; Voon & Aga Mohd Jaladin, 2013).

More than a decade and a half ago, Holcomb-McCoy and Myers (1999) conducted a national survey among professional counselors to explore their perceived MCC and the impact of training using the 61-item Multicultural Counseling Competence and Training Survey. The survey involved 500 professional counselors who were members of the American Counseling Association. Holcomb-McCoy and Myers found five dimensions of MCC: awareness, knowledge, definitions, racial identity development, and skills. They further examined professional counselors' perceptions of their multicultural competence and found that these respondents perceived themselves to be most competent on the definitions and awareness dimensions and least competent on the racial identity and knowledge dimensions. Among a list of demographic variables (i.e., professional counselors' work setting, educational level, ethnicity, gender, and age) examined in the study, only ethnicity was found to be statistically significant and influenced the knowledge, awareness, racial identity, and skill factors of MCCs.

Previous studies have found support for the significant effect of differences in gender (Carter, 1990), ethnicity (Granello & Wheaton, 1998a, 1998b), completion of multicultural courses (Castillo et al., 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2001, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999), and participation in multicultural training activities (Sodowsky, Kuo-Jackson, Richardson, & Corey, 1998) on perceived MCC. Therefore, it is hypothesized that there are significant differences in MCCs due to reference group membership, completion of multicultural courses, and participation in multicultural training activities.

In view of the inconclusive nature of MCC from previous studies, the present research aimed to explore the perceived MCC among professional counselors in Malaysia. In addition to identifying the personal and professional backgrounds of Malaysian counselors, the specific research questions include the following:

Research Question 1: Are there significant differences in Malaysian counselors' perceived MCC due to gender, race/ethnicity, highest education, completion of multicultural courses, and participation in recent training activities?

Research Question 2: What are the dimensions that constitute the perceived MCC of professional counselors in Malaysia?

Research Question 3: To what extent do Malaysian counselors perceive themselves as multiculturally competent based on these factors?

method

PARTICIPANTS

A sample of 1,500 professional counselors was randomly drawn from the mailing list of the LKM. These counselors were registered with the LKM, and most have a practicing license. A total of 508 registered counselors responded to the survey (response rate of 34%). There were 259 men (51%) and 249 women (49%). Most were Malays ($n = 378$, 74.4%) by ethnicity, Muslims ($n = 403$, 79.3%) by religion, and between ages 30 and 49 ($n = 326$, 64.2%). Overall, the gender and ethnic background of the sample reflected those of the study population (see Table 1). This provides some evidence that the sample seems representative of the study population.

In terms of participants' education and training background, the majority of the counselors had their highest education at bachelor's (47.6%) or master's (40.4%) degrees mainly from local institutions in Malaysia. Although most participants had formally completed courses in multicultural counseling (79.2%), more than half (54.0%) reported that they did not participate in recent professional development workshops and seminars

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics of Survey Sample
Compared With the Malaysian Counselor Population

Characteristic	Sample		Malaysian Counselor Population	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender				
Male	259	51.0	933	50.9
Female	249	49.0	900	49.1
Ethnicity				
Malay	378	74.4	1,376	75.1
Chinese	74	14.6	285	15.5
Indian	21	4.1	69	3.8
Other	35	6.9	103	5.6
Age group (years)				
20–29	66	13.0	NA	NA
30–39	160	31.5		
40–49	166	32.7		
50–59	104	20.5		
60 and older	11	2.2		
Total	507			
Highest education				
Diploma	34	6.7	NA	NA
Bachelor's	242	47.6		
Master's	205	40.4		
PhD	27	5.3		
Completion of multicultural courses				
Yes	401	79.2	NA	NA
No	105	20.8		
Total	506			
Participation in multicultural training				
Yes	233	46.0	NA	NA
No	274	54.0		
Total	507			

Note. NA = not available.

on multicultural counseling training. Thus, the majority of participants lacked continuous professional development training in the aspects of culture and social diversity in recent years of their employment.

INSTRUMENTS

The demographic questionnaire comprised 15 items on personal background (e.g., participants' gender, race/ethnic, and religious identity), education and training (e.g., the institution participants graduated from, courses on multicultural counseling taken and completed, and professional development workshops or seminars on cultural diversity or multicultural counseling attended in the past 5 years), and work-related items (e.g., participants' current employment setting, their years of counseling practice, and the type of counseling services provided to clients).

The main instrument, the 32-item Multicultural Counseling Competency Survey–Malaysian Counselor Edition (MCCS-MCE), was developed based on previous research findings, Sue et al.’s (1992) model, and two revised scales (i.e., the MAKSS-CE-R [Kim et al., 2003] and the MCKAS [Ponterotto et al., 2002]), with some item modifications and additions. Although this research was not a scale development study, the development of the survey, especially the MCCS-MCE, was guided by existing literature on scale development (e.g., Dawis, 2000; DeVellis, 2003; Khawaja, Gomez, & Turner, 2009) to ensure that the MCCS-MCE was culturally relevant for use in the Malaysian context. The process in developing the MCCS-MCE is discussed in detail in Aga Mohd Jaladin, Abedalaziz, Amit, and Mudayat (2016). The reference instruments were chosen and reviewed because they have recently undergone “extensive” and “promising” revisions (Dunn et al., 2006, pp. 479 and 477, respectively) and have a list of items in the public domain (i.e., published journal articles).

Theoretically, Items 1 to 8 were intended to assess counselors’ multicultural awareness (e.g., Item 1: “Being born a Bumiputera or majority in this society carries with it certain privileges and advantages”), Items 9 to 22 were used to measure counselors’ multicultural knowledge (e.g., Item 9: “At present, how would you rate your understanding regarding Malaysian culture?”), and Items 23 to 32 were constructed to assess counselors’ perceived skills when counseling clients from diverse cultural backgrounds (e.g., Item 23: “Differences exist between my clients and myself regarding ethnicity and beliefs”). All items were scored using a 5-point Likert scale response format, with higher scores indicating a higher level of multicultural competency (i.e., a minimum score is 1 and a maximum score is 5). Content-related evidence of validity of the instrument was based on feedback from five expert reviewers who were selected based on their expertise in multicultural issues and years of teaching experience in multicultural counseling courses in Malaysia. The reliability of the MCCS-MCE was measured using Cronbach’s alpha values. The Cronbach’s alpha for the total scale ($N = 508$; total item = 32) was .78, indicating good internal consistency.

PROCEDURE

After obtaining approval from the Monash University Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans and the LKM, I mailed the survey package to 1,500 prospective respondents. The package comprised two split booklets of the questionnaire (i.e., both the English and Malay-translated pen-and-paper versions); an addressed reply-paid envelope; a pen and a mini notebook (as small gifts and materials to complete the survey); a cover letter containing information on the purpose of research and the two web survey addresses (i.e., the survey web page link for the English and the Malay-translated electronic versions of the questionnaire) on the Internet;

and the explanatory statement that contained information regarding ethical approval from Monash University and study permission from the LKM, researcher contact information, and a reminder note to inform respondents to return the completed survey within 2 weeks of receipt.

In line with the strategies to encourage high response rate discussed in previous literature (Pelling, 2007; Pelling, Brear, & Lau, 2006), two sets of reminder letters were also used. The first was sent to all participants in the 4th week after the initial mailing, and the second was sent 2 weeks after the second mailing. As an alternative strategy to encourage response, follow-up e-mails and electronic reminders were also used. Data analysis was performed using the SPSS software (Version 20.0).

results

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

Research Question 1 examined gender, ethnicity, highest education, multicultural training, and perceived MCC. An independent-samples *t* test was performed to compare the MCC scores for men ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.34$) and women ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.34$), $t(506) = 0.73$, $p = .47$ (two-tailed).

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to explore the impact of ethnicity on self-perceived MCC. Participants were divided into four groups according to their ethnicity (Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other). Results showed a statistically significant difference at the $p < .05$ level in MCC scores for the four ethnic groups, $F(3, 504) = 3.10$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's honestly significantly difference (HSD) test failed to suggest which group was statistically different. However, the mean plot indicates that among the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia, Chinese and Indian counselors generally perceived themselves to be more multiculturally competent than their Malay peers.

To explore the impact of highest education level on self-perceived MCC, I conducted a one-way between-groups ANOVA. I divided participants into four groups according to their highest education level (diploma, bachelor's, master's, and PhD). Results showed a statistically significant difference at the $p < .01$ level in MCC scores for the four groups, $F(3, 504) = 4.09$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test indicated that the mean score for the diploma group ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.34$) was significantly different from the master's degree group ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.34$) and PhD group ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.40$). The bachelor's degree group ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.32$) did not differ significantly from the other groups.

To investigate any significant differences between groups due to multicultural education and training factors, I performed two independent-

samples *t* tests. The first test was conducted to compare the MCC scores for participants' completion of multicultural education (multicultural courses completed vs. multicultural courses uncompleted). There was no significant difference in MCC scores for those who had completed multicultural counseling courses ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.33$) and those who had not completed multicultural counseling courses ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.38$), $t(506) = -1.50$, $p = .13$ (two-tailed). In contrast, results from the second *t* test, which compared participants' MCC scores with their participation in recent training in multiculturalism, showed a significant difference in scores for those who had attended multicultural professional development training in the past 5 years ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.35$) and those who had not ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.33$), $t(506) = -2.46$, $p = .014$ (two-tailed). Both findings indicate that although the majority of participants completed their multicultural counseling education, it does not affect their perceived MCC unless they participated in continuous training.

In summary, results in this section showed that self-reported MCC of Malaysian counselors did not differ significantly by gender and multicultural education but was found to be statistically significant by race/ethnicity, highest educational level, and recent participation in multicultural training.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

A principal components analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was conducted on the 32 items to explore the dimensions of MCC. Four criteria for determining the number of components were considered: visual inspection of the inter-item correlation matrix, Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO; Kaiser, 1974), Cattell's (1966) scree test, and Horn's (1965) parallel analysis.

The inter-item correlation matrix was visually inspected, and most values were in the low to moderate range. KMO was equal to .82 and Bartlett's test was significant, $\chi^2(496) = 5,246.22$, $p < .001$, indicating that the inter-item correlation matrix was suitable for factor analysis. There were nine components with eigenvalues exceeding 1, accounting for a total of 61.95% of the variance. However, an inspection of the scree plot recommended the retention of five factors. The five-factor solution was supported by the results of the parallel analysis, using the SPSS macro written by O'Connor (2000). Details of the eigenvalues generated from the PCA and the criterion values obtained from the parallel analysis are shown in Figure 1.

Following oblique rotation using direct oblimin, 27 out of 32 items produced a factor loading of at least .40. Following Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson's (2010) recommendation, items with factor loadings of .40 and less were removed from further analysis. Therefore, three items were deleted, and the final 27 items were factor analyzed a second time. Five interpretable factors accounting for 49.03% of the total variance were extracted. For the purpose of further analysis, the 27 items explaining

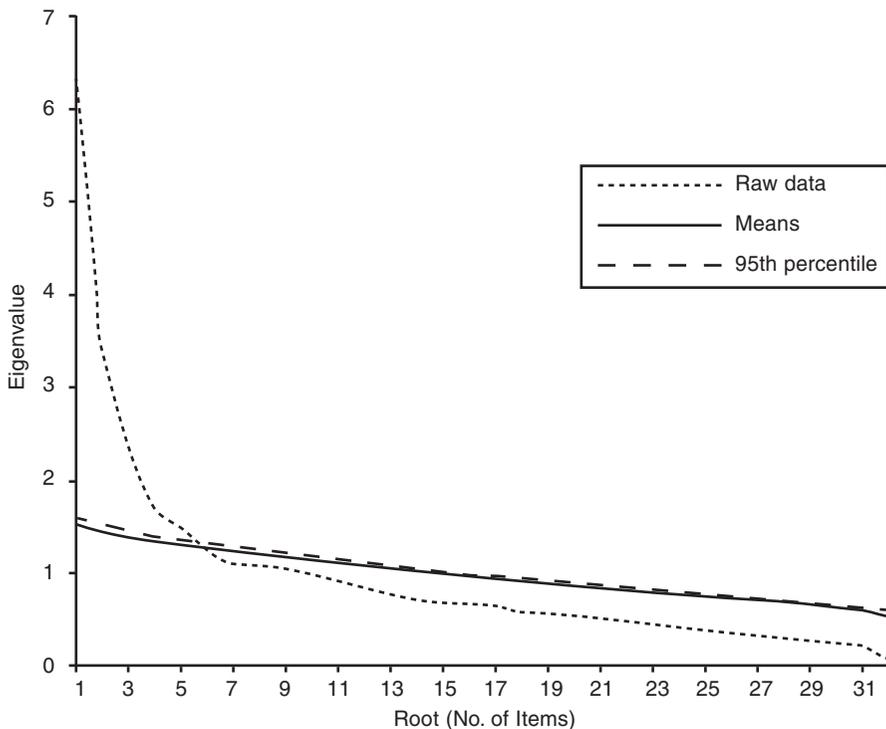


FIGURE 1
Scree Plot and Parallel Analysis for the
Multicultural Counseling Competency
Survey—Malaysian Counselor Edition

49.03% of the total variance and loading on five factors were retained (see Table 2).

A review of the items associated with each factor resulted in identification of the following. Factor 1, Multicultural Understanding, consisted of seven items and accounted for 19.51% of the variance. This factor focuses on the professional counselors' understanding of culture and diversity and the impact of culture on clients and counselors. Factor 2, Multicultural Knowledge, comprised seven items and explained 12.55% of the variance. The items involved professional counselors' knowledge of multicultural issues in the Malaysian counseling. Factor 3, Microcultural Skills, comprised four items that accounted for an additional 8.04% of the variance. These items focused on professional counselors' specialized counseling skills in dealing with clients from microcultures, including gay, lesbian, disabled, and elderly clients. These groups are among the minority and the least accessible client populations in the Malaysian context. Factor 4, Multicultural Awareness,

TABLE 2
Factor Loadings and Reliability Coefficients From the
Rotated Five-Factor Structure Matrix for the 27-Item MCCS-MCE:
Principal Components Analysis With Oblimin Rotation

MCCS-MCE Item	Factor					α
	1	2	3	4	5	
1. Multicultural Understanding						.85
Understanding ethnic differences	.80					
Understanding racism issues in Malaysia	.78					
Understanding differences in religion and spirituality	.78					
Understanding gender differences	.77					
Understanding Malaysian culture	.72					
Understanding the impact of culture on culturally different clients	.63					
Understanding cultural influence on thinking and behaving	.54					
2. Multicultural Knowledge						.75
Barriers and challenges exist in cross-cultural counseling relationship		.74				
Individual differences in values, beliefs, and practices exist within groups		.73				
Culture and racism influence identity development		.70				
Conflicting values exist between mainstream and Malaysian counseling		.69				
Ethnic differences exist in counseling		.67				
Personal biases, language dominance, or rigidity in ethnic identity require referral		.48				
Culture-specific strategies exist in counseling		.44				
3. Microcultural Skills						.86
Counseling gay men			.91			
Counseling lesbian clients			.91			
Counseling disabled persons			.80			
Counseling the elderly			.66			
4. Multicultural Awareness						.60
Ethnic minorities have problems in accessing counseling				.68		
Malaysian counselling has neglected ethnic minorities' needs				.60		
Non-Bumiputera have unique challenges				.52		
Malaysian culture is unique				.50		
Bumiputera have privileges and advantages				.46		
Stigma and taboos exist in counseling				.45		
5. Macrocultural Skills						.83
Counseling non-Bumiputera client					.89	
Counseling ethnically different client					.86	
Counseling religiously different client					.80	

Note. Reliability for the 27-item scale, $\alpha = .77$. The reliability for Factor 5 is low because most of its items have very low item discrimination. MCCS-MCE = Multicultural Counseling Competency Survey–Malaysian Counselor Edition.

included six items and explained 6.00% of the variance. This factor focuses on the professional counselors' characteristic of being aware of their cultural self and personal values, multicultural issues related to ethnic minorities in Malaysia, and the uniqueness of Malaysian culture. Factor 5, Macro-cultural Skills, consisted of three items accounting for 5.25% of the variance. These items involved professional counselors' skills in dealing with clients from macro cultures who are culturally different from the counselors.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3

This research question examined the extent of Malaysian counselors' self-perceived MCC. Descriptive statistics with means and standard deviations were used to examine counselors' self-reported MCC based on the extracted factors. The mean ratings of competence for each factor were mostly between 3 (*moderately competent*) to 4 (*competent*). Overall, the participants perceived themselves as multiculturally competent ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.34$). They perceived themselves to be most competent on the multicultural knowledge ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.63$) and multicultural understanding ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.55$) dimensions. In contrast, they perceived themselves to be the least competent in micro-cultural skills ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.80$) and multicultural awareness ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.56$) dimensions.

discussion

Although several limitations affect the generalizability of this study, the main findings suggest a number of significant issues for counselor preparation and future counseling research. As Malaysian counseling mostly adopted and adapted the U.S. counseling model, the discussion of the main findings uses a comparative framework for MCC theory, assessment, and practice between Malaysia and the United States. First, the present study revealed that five dimensions (i.e., multicultural understanding, multicultural knowledge, micro-cultural skills, multicultural awareness, and macro-cultural skills) constitute the MCCs of professional counselors in Malaysia. This finding is consistent with findings from previous research (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999), which also found five dimensions of MCC. It appears that there are some differences and similarities in shared meaning of items and dimensions across cultures because the awareness, knowledge, and skills dimensions were found in both the U.S. and Malaysian studies. A lower reliability coefficient was observed for the multicultural awareness dimension, whereas the other dimensions had high reliability coefficients. This pattern of results is somewhat consistent with results from previous studies (Kim et al., 2003; Whitney, 2006), suggesting that "the construct of multicultural 'awareness' is more diverse than is multicultural 'knowledge' or 'skills'" (D'Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991, p. 145). Thus, the items used to measure counselors'

multicultural awareness may produce less internal consistency as a group than those used to measure other dimensions. This finding implies that to develop MCCs among counselors, the education and training programs must address issues in the key areas of multicultural counseling (i.e., multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills) as well as enhance counselors' qualities to ensure they are more understanding of culture and diversity and multiculturally experienced with culturally different clients.

Second, the results of this study suggest that professional counselors in Malaysia, as a collective community, perceive themselves to be multiculturally competent. Malaysian counselors perceived themselves to be most competent on the multicultural knowledge and understanding dimension, which are two core qualities of a multiculturally competent counselor proposed by the Sue et al. (1992) model. In contrast, they perceived themselves to be the least competent on the multicultural awareness and skills dimensions. This finding is somewhat contradictory with Holcomb-McCoy and Myers' (1999) research because their respondents perceived themselves to be most competent on the multicultural awareness dimension and the least competent on the knowledge dimension. In contrast, the current finding suggests that counselors' knowledge and understanding about culture and diversity in Malaysia are far more adequate than their multicultural skills and awareness. This is in line with the learning objectives of most counselor preparation programs in Malaysia, whereby these programs emphasize more on knowing what cultural differences exist in Malaysian society rather than knowing how to recognize and successfully deal with such differences in a counseling process with culturally diverse clients, especially those from minority client populations. In addition, the low ratings of participants regarding multicultural awareness and skills might reflect the preference for the convenient practice of culture-match counseling (e.g., ethnic-matching counseling) rather than practicing multicultural counseling in a broader sense.

Third, the current results also showed that Malaysian counselors' perceived MCC differed significantly by ethnicity (Malays, Chinese, Indian, and other), highest education qualification, and recent professional training in multiculturalism. Among the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia, being Indian was significantly and positively correlated with perceived MCC. This finding is interesting because it is consistent with the general perception that being a member of a minority population enhances counselors' multicultural competence (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999). Although Indian and Chinese ethnic groups are sometimes referred to as ethnic minorities, their language system across groups is culturally diverse. Most Indian and Chinese counselors can speak well in three languages: their mother tongue, standard Malay, and English. Malay counselors, on the other hand, are mostly bilingual. As the Indian counselors are the smallest in population percentage, perhaps their

personal and professional backgrounds and experiences contribute to their high ratings on perceived MCC.

In addition, having master's and PhD qualifications was also found to be a good predictor of counselors' perceived MCC. This means that the higher the education qualification of counselors, the more multiculturally competent they become. One possible explanation for this could be that pursuing postgraduate education enables counselors to keep abreast of current thinking and issues in multicultural counseling. Hence, the knowledge and skills garnered from postgraduate education programs help the counselors to improve their current practices with culturally diverse clients.

Perhaps the most intriguing finding was the effect of significant differences in participation in recent multicultural training on counselors' perceived MCC. This means that professional development training in multicultural counseling directly contributes to and influences counselors' multicultural competence, whereas having completed multicultural courses did not have significant effects on perceived MCC. This finding suggests that as professionals in a multicultural context, Malaysian counselors have to seek more opportunities for continuous and up-to-date education and training in multicultural counseling to become multiculturally competent.

Overall, the results of this study imply a strong relationship between ethnicity and MCC and between counselors' professional education and development training and MCC. This overall finding provides answers and empirical evidence to Holcomb-McCoy and Myers's (1999) question of "where and when do counselors acquire their multicultural competence?" (p. 299). Empirical evidence indicates that counselors acquire and develop their multicultural competence through a socialization process during the development of their racial/ethnic identity, completion of postgraduate counseling programs, and recent participation in professional development training on culture and diversity.

Last but not least, although some studies suggest that multicultural courses increase counselor multicultural competence (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999; Robles-Piña & McPherson, 2001; Sodowsky et al., 1998), the present results showed otherwise. This finding is consistent with the findings from previous research (Holcomb-McCoy, 2001), as both findings did not support the relationship between completion of multicultural courses and counselors' perceived multicultural competence. Several interpretations can be drawn from this finding. First, it could be that the syllabus in the multicultural courses and the MCCs are not linked and, thus, address different dimensions of multicultural competence. Second, because the multicultural counseling courses are simply included and not yet infused in the counselor education programs in Malaysia, the results could imply that these courses have not had sufficient multicultural components needed to develop counselors' MCCs. Although most counselor education programs offered multicultural courses, the teach-

ing delivery of other courses (such as counseling theories, techniques of counseling, and career counseling) have yet to sufficiently incorporate a consideration for multiculturalism in the teaching and learning process. By making culture and context central in the teaching delivery of all counseling courses through experiential or in vivo exposure and case studies, counselors' MCCs could be developed.

LIMITATIONS

Because this research is exploratory in nature, some potential limitations need to be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the use of self-report measures may reflect participant counselors' desire to be seen as competent; perhaps future research should include a social desirability measure to control for this effect. Second, the low return rate (34%) of the survey may limit the generalizability of the results. However, multiple strategies were adopted to ensure high return rate of the survey, such as doing a follow-up mailing. Perhaps the research culture among Malaysians, especially among counseling practitioners, was still low and, hence, potential participants did not see the importance of research in their professional development. A final limitation is the low reliability for the multicultural awareness dimension, which may make it open to many interpretations even in exploratory studies. Does multicultural awareness add something meaningful to the factor solution? Perhaps future research can consider including a validated MCC measure that has high reliability for multicultural awareness, such as the MAKSS-CE-R, to investigate concurrent validity of the MCCS-MCE revised instrument.

IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this study indicate that MCC is a broad and multidimensional construct and is an important foundation in the practice of multicultural counseling, which has direct implications for counselor preparation in professional counseling in Malaysia. Counselor education and training programs in Malaysia are encouraged to incorporate and emphasize all five components of MCC to develop better counselor education programs and multicultural counseling courses. Perhaps counselors and trainees could be first introduced to the five core qualities of MCC (i.e., multicultural understanding, multicultural knowledge, microcultural skills, multicultural awareness, and macrocultural skills) revealed in this study, which underlie both the dimensions of MCC and core characteristics of a multiculturally competent counselor. This can be successfully achieved through an experiential teaching-and-learning process or infusing these qualities in the current curriculum of counselor education programs or current policies on counselor preparation.

The findings suggest that, to better educate and train counselors as multiculturally competent practitioners, counselor education and training programs could emphasize the practical components of counseling in the curriculum. Currently, according to the standards for accreditation of counselor education and training programs in Malaysia (LKM, 2003), the allocated hours for the practical component in a bachelor's and master's degree program are 66 (out of 120 total hours) and 33 (out of 48 total hours), respectively. This raises some concerns regarding the quality of the graduates produced by these theory-based programs. Perhaps policy makers need to review the relevant policy pertaining to standards in counselor education and training in Malaysia. It is recommended that the allocated hours for the practical components for both bachelor's and master's programs should be increased to ensure trainees have sufficient practical training with culturally diverse clients. Second, the teaching and learning process should place more emphasis on the multicultural components of the counselor education and training programs. Perhaps the inclusion of the cultural and social diversity component or multicultural counseling courses is insufficient to contribute to counselors' multicultural competence. Therefore, the solution for policy makers is twofold: (a) increasing the allocated number of credit hours for the social and cultural diversity component, and (b) infusing and emphasizing the multicultural components in the teaching and learning of the other seven core components of the counselor education programs.

Perhaps the way that these multicultural courses are developed does not focus on all the dimensions of MCC revealed in this study. Course coordinators and counselor educators should include training in the curriculum that focuses on all the five components of MCC when they develop multicultural counseling courses at their universities. In particular, they should emphasize issues pertaining to multicultural skills and awareness because these dimensions received the lowest MCC mean ratings.

It could be that the teaching method in these multicultural courses does not meet the prescribed standards to produce multiculturally competent counselors. This study's findings seem to suggest three recommended solutions for counselor educators. The first solution involves screening the MCCs of all counselor educators/trainers involved in the education, training, and professional development of counselors or trainees first before they are qualified to teach, especially in teaching multicultural courses. This will ensure that these educators have strong theoretical knowledge of MCC as well as the relevant multicultural abilities. The second solution lies in the lesson plans; counselor educators should carefully develop lesson plans to incorporate and provide in vivo learning experiences and activities as well as emphasize multicultural skills using hypothetical cases. Perhaps site visits to foster homes or community

services in rural areas can be part of the lesson plans for enhancing multicultural awareness and skills among trainees.

Third, there could be a standard assessment procedure to determine graduating students' MCC level based on their self-report ratings to make preliminary predictions of the quality of their multicultural counseling practices after graduation. By doing this, counselor educators contribute to preparing multiculturally competent future counselors who can handle diverse clients in the Malaysian context. Therefore, it is timely to impose a requirement for all institutions offering counselor education programs to consistently review their existing programs and courses to keep abreast of the current thinking and development in the multicultural counseling field. All these can be achieved if the Malaysian counseling profession formulates a set of culturally relevant standards or guidelines to evaluate multicultural counseling practices in Malaysia.

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