
The Multicultural Counselling Competencies of Canadian Counsellors

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates 181 counsellors' multicultural competencies in the domains of self-awareness, knowledge, skills, and the counselling relationship. Counsellors recognized value conflicts with clients but reported difficulties resolving differences. Experience working with multicultural clients and attending professional development seminars were the strongest predictors of higher levels of multicultural competencies, followed by prior multicultural course work and case consultation.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie les compétences multiculturelles de 181 conseillers dans les domaines suivants : la conscience de soi, les connaissances, les compétences et les relations de counseling. Les conseillers reconnaissent l'existence de désaccords avec leurs clients concernant les valeurs; toutefois, ils constatent des difficultés à les résoudre. L'expérience acquise en travaillant avec des clients multiculturels et la participation à des ateliers de perfectionnement professionnel constituent les meilleures variables prédictives de niveaux plus élevés de compétences multiculturelles. Les variables prédictives suivantes sont moins significatives : les études préalables relatives au counseling multiculturel et la consultation pour évaluer les cas.

The diversity of Canada's population poses challenges for the delivery of culturally responsive counselling services. As consumers of professional services become increasingly diverse, counsellors need to consider how well their practices meet client needs (Arthur, 1998; Hall, 1997). However, multicultural counselling requires more than a focus on clients who are deemed "culturally diverse." Without also attending to the influence of counsellors' cultural backgrounds, cultural encapsulation may unintentionally impact assessment and intervention practices in adverse ways (Dana, 1998; Pedersen, 1995; Sue & Sue, 1999; Sue et al., 1998). Concerns about cultural encapsulation have led to the articulation of multicultural counselling competencies in three domains: awareness, knowledge, and skills (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Counsellor self-awareness is defined as developing an understanding of the ways that cultural conditioning impacts a personal worldview and influences counselling relationships. Self-awareness is considered an essential base of personal knowledge for appreciating the worldview of clients and for

This study was supported by a research grant awarded to the first author from the University of Calgary Research Services.

overcoming the negative bias that is associated with counselling from an ethnocentric point of view (Daniels & D'Andrea, 1996; Pedersen, 1995). In addition to self-awareness, counsellors require knowledge and information about the issues faced by the cultural groups they work with. Counsellors are encouraged to develop the cultural flexibility that supports appropriate counselling skills and interventions with clients. Recent literature has expanded upon relevant attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, and skills in each of the three domains (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue et al., 1998).

Although the rationale for multicultural counselling has been well documented, studies that examine the development of related competencies are only beginning to appear in the literature (e.g., Brown, Parham, & Yonker, 1996; D'Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991). Investigations of graduate students entering counselling professions suggest that they do not feel equipped to manage the diversity of their caseloads. For example, discrepancies have been reported between the adequacy of counsellor training and the self-reported competencies of graduates who counsel culturally diverse clients. Higher levels of multicultural counselling competence has been attributed to direct exposure to people from particular cultural groups through training and casework (Allison, Crawford, Echemendia, Robinson, & Knepp, 1994; Allison, Echemendia, Crawford, & Robinson, 1996; Pope-Davis & Ottavi, 1994; Zayas, Torres, Malcolm, & DesRosiers, 1996). Since endeavors to increase the amount of multicultural content in counselling curriculum has occurred primarily in the 1990's (Reynolds, 1995), it is of concern that without deliberate efforts to access continuing education, professionals who graduated earlier may be practicing without the available knowledge on multicultural counselling. The published literature on multicultural counselling is based almost entirely on samples of American counsellors. It is timely to consider how Canadian counsellors are attending to the multicultural competencies needed to support work with culturally diverse clients. The current study investigated the multicultural counselling competencies of counsellors across Canada and addressed the following questions:

1. What are the client populations that Canadian counsellors define as culturally diverse?
2. How do Canadian counsellors rate their multicultural competencies on the dimensions of self-awareness, knowledge, skills, and the multicultural counselling relationship?
3. Which multicultural client issues do counsellors believe they are managing effectively/ineffectively?
4. What demographic and professional practice factors are associated with higher levels of multicultural counselling competencies?

The discussion begins with the descriptive information of the study followed by a discussion of the factors associated with multicultural counselling competencies.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

A random sample was selected consisting of every third member of the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association (CGCA) stratified by province. The research questionnaires were mailed directly from the administrative office of CGCA to ensure anonymity. This included a demographic questionnaire (adapted from the Multicultural Counseling Awareness Scale: Form B, Ponterotto, Sanchez, & Magids, 1990), a critical incidents questionnaire (adapted from Ottavi, Pope-Davis, & Dings, 1994), and the Multicultural Counseling Inventory (MCI Sodowsky, Taffe, Gutkin, & Wise, 1994). The mail-out resulted in responses from 205 members, a response rate of 38%. Twenty-four questionnaires were not analyzed due to incomplete data, i.e., more than 5 questions unanswered, reducing the participation rate to 33%.

In the final sample of 181 participants there were 62 males and 119 females with a mean age of 46.5 years ($SD = 8.9$ years). Approximately half of the participants (55%) have been practicing as a counsellor for ten years or more. Although 84% of the participants have completed a graduate degree, only 34% of the participants completed one or more courses in multicultural counselling during their post-secondary program. This may be accounted for by the recent attention paid to multicultural counselling curriculum (Reynolds, 1995) as approximately half of the sample completed their post-secondary education prior to 1990. However, 64% of the participants have attended workshops or seminars that address multicultural counselling issues that were not part of their post-secondary program. It is noteworthy that 68% of the participants did not access supervision and 73% of the participants were not involved with other methods of case consultation regarding their culturally diverse clients.

Critical Incidents. Critical incidents have been used to capture adults' classroom learning (Brookfield, 1995) as well as their reactions to cross-cultural transition and training experiences (Arthur, in press; Ottavi et al., 1994). In this study, participants were asked to respond to two questions directed at a counselling scenario where they perceived they held adequate multicultural competencies and a counselling scenario where they perceived they lacked multicultural competencies. The critical incident prompts were as follows:

1. Think of a recent client whose cultural background was different than your own *when a counselling session went particularly well.*
2. Think of a recent client whose cultural background was different than your own *when a counselling session did not proceed as well as it could have.*

With each prompt, counsellors were asked to describe, a) the nature of the presenting issues, and b) the competencies (self-awareness of cultural influences, knowledge of other cultures, counselling skills) that either *contributed to the positive counselling experience*, or, alternatively, that they *would have liked to assist them.*

Multicultural Counseling Inventory. The MCI is a 40-item self-report inventory designed to assess the competencies of counsellors who work with minority or culturally diverse clients (Sodowsky et al., 1994). Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale with a score of 1 indicating low multicultural counselling competence and a score of 4 indicating high multicultural counselling competence. Seven items are reversed scored to reduce the effects of a response set. Factor analysis produced a 4-factor model based upon responses from graduate student and university based counsellor samples. The Multicultural Counseling Awareness scale refers to proactive multicultural responsiveness, understanding, responsiveness and advocacy, i.e., *My life experiences with minority individuals are extensive.* The Multicultural Counselling Knowledge scale refers to culturally relevant case conceptualization and interventions, cultural information, and multicultural counseling research, i.e., *I am familiar with research findings about minority clients' experiences in counseling.* The Multicultural Counselling Skills scale refers to success in working with cultural minority clients, i.e., *I am able to recognize cultural mistakes and quickly recover.* The Multicultural Counseling Relationship scale incorporates counsellor and minority client interactions such as comfort level, stereotypes, and worldview, i.e., *I have difficulties communicating with clients who use a decision-making style that is different from mine.* The inventory has high face validity in the coverage of content pertaining to multicultural counselling competencies. Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alphas) has been reported as ranging from .81 to .83 for Multicultural Counseling Skills, .80 to .83 for Multicultural Awareness, .65 to .67 for Multicultural Counseling Relationship, .79 to .80 for Multicultural Counselling Knowledge, and .86 to .88 for the full scale. Low to moderate correlations have been reported among the factors, ranging from .16 to .41. A self-evaluation of multicultural counselling competencies can be obtained through the individual subscales as well as an overall evaluation through the full scale of the MCI (Sodowsky & Impara, 1996). Convergent validity of the MCI is supported by moderately high correlation of .68 between the full scales of the MCI and Multicultural Awareness-Knowledge-Skills Scale (D'Andrea et al., 1991). Low correlations between the MCI with racist attributions to African Americans, rigidity, and intolerance for ambiguity suggest that conceptually distinct constructs are measured by the MCI (Sodowsky & Impara, 1996). Subsequent research has confirmed that the four factors of the MCI are measuring distinct constructs, however the interscale correlations are reported to be higher overall than previous research with the exception of the Relationship scale (Pope-Davis & Nielson, 1996).

For this study, the Cronbach alpha values calculated for internal consistency were .79 for the overall MCI scale, .81 for the Skills scale, .76 for the Awareness scale, .74 for the Knowledge scale, and .66 for the Relationship scale. These reliability coefficients closely approximate the reliabilities reported by Sodowsky et al. (1994). A scale reliability analysis of the original Relationship scale indicated an alpha value of .55 that appears primarily due to an item-scale loading of -.19 for the only positive-scored item in the scale. Due to the poor loading of this item, it was omitted and the alpha value of the Relationship scale improved to .66.

Data Analysis

Information from the critical incidents was reviewed using a constant comparison method of content analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1981) in which three raters developed a taxonomy of themes. Data were coded independently and then reviewed as a group to guard against coding drift. Discrepancies about data coding were negotiated until consensus between raters was reached. When new themes and categories emerged, all subsequent data was reviewed to ensure accuracy of coding. The number of categories and themes was determined by the data. This accounts for differences between the numbers of participants and numbers of coded responses.

The relationship between the four scales of the MCI was examined through determining their correlation. Next, the SPSS Quick Cluster routine was used to develop two categories of counsellors with high multicultural counselling competence and low multicultural counselling competence based on the four MCI scales. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was then conducted on the four scales to test for significant differences across the two groups of counsellors. Another MANOVA was performed using several independent demographic variables associated with high and low multicultural counselling competence. Finally, a Logistic Regression analysis was conducted to determine how well counsellor characteristics predicted multicultural counselling competence and to identify the strongest predictor characteristics.

RESULTS

Critical Issues in Counselling Culturally Diverse Clients

It was of interest to understand how counsellors were defining cultural diversity. The categories of client's "cultural background" and the number of responses for each client group included gender (female $n = 72$, male $n = 42$), ethnicity ($n = 74$), First Nations ($n = 42$), religion ($n = 9$), disability ($n = 8$), gay/lesbian ($n = 6$), race ($n = 3$), gangs ($n = 2$), and refugees ($n = 2$). The raters categorized a total of 292 presenting client issues. Those emerging from the data most often (more than 20 related issues coded) included intergenerational and family conflict, marital or couple concerns, adjustment issues, abuse, and career-related issues. Clients' presenting concerns were also coded (10 or more related issues coded) as behavioral concerns, academic difficulties, depression and anxiety, grief and relationship losses, and substance use. Issues represented in the data less often (fewer than 10 related issues coded) included pregnancy, school and peer conflicts, financial concerns, family violence, self-esteem, prejudice, disability and illness, and crisis/suicide issues. Although many of the presenting issues are concerns expressed by a general client population, counsellors reported confounding influences of culture for understanding the nature of client issues, the potential for value conflicts, and the need to design culturally appropriate interventions (see Table 1). Counsellors overwhelmingly emphasized the multi-

TABLE 1

Multicultural Competencies Identified in Critical Incidents

Competency	Number of Times Reported
Awareness and Reaction of Counsellor	
Awareness of cultural differences	82
Openness to learning about clients' culture	34
Recognizing individuality of clients	11
Awareness of value conflict, therapist disagrees with client values	20
Knowledge	
Limitations of counsellor competence	14
Knowledge about cultural aspects of client's life	
Lack of cultural information	51
Sufficient cultural information	53
Access to community resources	
Lack of information about resources	9
Sufficient information to use community resources	15
Communication	
Lack of knowledge to interpret non-verbal communication	1
Knowledge about non-verbal communication	8
Limitations of Code of Ethics	1
Counsellor Experience With Client's Culture	
Prior personal experience	10
Prior professional experience with client's culture	12
Lack of professional experience with client's culture	3
Skills and Interventions	
Consultation and Use of Resources	
Professional experienced with client's culture	6
Use of Interpreter	11
Referral or use of team approach	15
Basic Counselling Skills	69
Client Advocacy	9
Reading about client's culture and presenting issues	5
Reliance on specific theoretical frameworks	15
Barriers to Intervention	
Value conflicts in counselling	25
Systemic barriers	6
Language barriers	10

cultural competency of awareness as fundamental to counselling situations that went well. This includes the importance of recognizing and acknowledging cultural differences between clients and counsellors, as well as remaining open to learning about the cultural beliefs and practices of clients. However, counsellors reported dilemmas about how to manage awareness of cultural differences when they felt strongly in disagreement with the values expressed by clients. The awareness domain became problematic and counselling sessions did not go as well as they could have when values conflicted and decisions were being made that counsellors did not believe were in their clients best interests. Knowledge about the backgrounds of culturally diverse clients as well as access to consultation and community resources were considered to be important features of multicultural counselling interactions that went well. Conversely, lack of information and knowledge about the cultural background of clients, or issues that exceeded counsellors' self-assessed level of expertise were reported as counselling sessions that did not proceed well.

Many counsellors felt that their abilities to use basic counselling skills in culturally appropriate ways led to positive working relationships. For example, the majority of counsellors named "basic counselling skills" as the essence of their work with clients, while others named factors such as empathy, the therapeutic alliance, and support given by the counsellor as factors that led to sessions going well. Access to other resource people within the community enhanced counsellors' views of positive counselling outcomes. Barriers to interventions with culturally diverse clients were noted on both personal and systemic levels. On an individual level, counsellors reported concerns and lack of ability to overcome issues of value conflict. Counsellors reported awareness of their personal values and the values expressed by clients. However, when counsellors did not agree with the values expressed by clients, counselling sessions did not proceed as well as they could have. Inability to bridge cultural differences through the counselling relationship was an area identified by many counsellors as a key factor in their work with culturally diverse clients. On a systemic level, a perceived inability to impact the environment surrounding the counselling relationship (e.g., agency guidelines, lack of resources) was considered to adversely impact the needs of multicultural clients.

Counsellors' Multicultural Competencies

The means and standard deviations were calculated for the overall MCI scale ($M = 116.2$, $SD = 10.1$) and the Skills ($M = 38.3$, $SD = 4.1$), Awareness ($M = 27$, $SD = 5.1$), Knowledge ($M = 35.2$, $SD = 4.2$) and Relationship ($M = 15.7$, $SD = 3.4$) scale scores of participants. It was noted that Skills had the highest mean followed by Knowledge, Awareness and Relationship, respectively.

Correlations between MCI scales. Examination of the correlations among the MCI scales reveals that the Skills scale was positively and highly related to the overall MCI scale ($r = .69$, $p < .001$). As might be expected, the Skills and Knowledge scales were moderately and positively related ($r = .57$, $p < .001$). Awareness

was also positively related to Skills ($r = .23, p < .01$) and Knowledge ($r = .33, p < .001$) although the correlation is not as strong as the relationship between Skills and Knowledge ($r = .57, p < .001$). These results approximate the MCI subscale correlations found during instrument development (Sodowsky et al., 1994) and suggest that the scales are measuring related but different constructs (Ottavi et al., 1994).

The Relationship scale was not significantly related to the overall MCI or Knowledge scales and showed low negative correlations with the Skills ($r = -.20, p < .01$) and Awareness scales ($r = -.15, p < .05$). This relationship is counter-intuitive, suggesting that perhaps the relationship scale is measuring a factor other than multicultural counselling competency, or a unique dimension of multicultural counselling competency. Consequently, any association with the relationship scale should be interpreted with caution.

Counsellor characteristics and multicultural counselling competencies. Low multicultural counselling competence and high multicultural counselling competence classified participants, based upon the similarity of their scores on the four scales of the MCI. Analysis of Variance F -values of the skills, knowledge, awareness, and relationship mean scores indicated there were significant differences across the two groups, $F(4,172) = 81.9, p < .001$. The Univariate F -values in Table 2 reveal that counsellors with high multicultural counselling compe-

TABLE 2

Counsellor High and Low Multicultural Counselling Competence

	High		Low		F-Value
	X	SD	X	SD	
Competence Scales	$(N = 87)$		$(N = 90)$		
Skills	40.5	2.7	36.2	4.2	64.0 **
Awareness	30.6	3.4	23.6	4.0	154.7 **
Knowledge	37.5	3.4	33.0	3.6	73.2 **
Relationship	14.7	3.0	16.7	3.4	17.6 **
Counsellor Characteristics	$(N = 78)$		$(N = 78)$		
Age	46.2	8.3	47.2	9.5	.5
Level of education	3.0	0.7	2.9	0.6	.9
Years since graduation	11.7	8.0	12.0	9.0	.0
Professional experience	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	.3
Multicultural coursework	1.5	1.1	1.0	0.9	8.9*
Multicultural clients	30.6	29.4	17.7	22.4	9.5*

Note: * $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$

tence have significantly higher mean scores on the skills, awareness, and knowledge scales but a significantly lower mean score on the relationship scale, with the largest difference between groups evident in multicultural awareness, $F(1, 176) = 154.7, p < .001$.

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted on age, level of education, professional experience, multicultural casework, and caseload variables associated with the multicultural counselling competency categories. As shown in Table 4, the MANOVA revealed an overall significant difference in these variables across groups, $F(6, 149) = 2.7, p < .05$. An examination of the univariate F-values revealed that counsellors with higher multicultural counselling competence had a significantly higher percentage caseload of culturally diverse clients ($F(1, 155) = 9.5, p < .01$) and had taken significantly more course work on multicultural counselling ($F(1, 155) = 8.9, p < .01$). There were no significant differences in age, level of education, years since graduation, and number of years of professional experience between the two groups of counsellors.

Predicting multicultural counselling competency. A Backward Wald Logistic Regression was conducted to determine how counsellor characteristics could be used to predict multicultural counseling competency and to identify which counsellor characteristics were the strongest predictors. The following independent variables were entered into the Logistic Regression analysis: age, gender, attending multicultural seminars, number of multicultural courses completed, caseload of minority clients, ethnicity, the year of graduation from post-secondary training, the number of years practicing as a counsellor, supervision, consultation. Using these variables, the Logistic Regression was able to correctly classify 66% of counsellors with high multicultural counselling competence and 70% of the counsellors with low multicultural counselling competence (Chi-square = 30.8, $p < .01$), correctly classifying 68% of all counsellors. Table 5 presents the beta and Wald values for the independent variables that were the strong predictors of counsellor competencies. An examination of the beta and Wald values show the strongest predictors to be the caseload of culturally diverse clients and completion of professional seminars on multicultural counselling. When the levels of significance were relaxed ($p < .08$), completion of course work on multicultural counselling and case consultation also emerged as predictors of counsellors' multicultural counselling competence.

DISCUSSION

The results from this study underscore the importance of adequate education and training for counsellors who work with culturally diverse clientele. Counselling curriculum that includes generic counselling skills and interventions needs to be infused with material on how culture may influence counselling process and outcome. Notwithstanding the importance of knowledge about the values of practices of specific cultural groups, counsellors must be mindful of the ways in which culture shapes their own values and beliefs. The reciprocal influences of culture in the counselling relationship require that both self-awareness and

knowledge about other cultures be considered as mutual goals for developing multicultural counselling competencies (Richardson & Molinaro, 1996).

Counsellors require strategies to move beyond self-awareness and recognition of the cultural values that emerge in counselling relationships. A fundamental question emerged from the multicultural counselling experiences of participants in this study: "Once we become aware of differences in cultural values, how do we bridge conflicting world views for effective counselling?" Counsellors may benefit from resources on cross-cultural conflict and mediation such as the Interpersonal Cultural Grid (Pedersen & Ivey, 1993; Singelis & Pedersen, 1997), a taxonomy of behaviours and expectations used to help people from culturally diverse backgrounds discover common goals. Another consideration for counsellors is the process of value clarification during counsellor-client interactions. Counsellors may experience stress about the nature of value conflicts, feel uncomfortable about whether or not to disclose their personal opinions, and uncertain about the risk of imposing their values on culturally diverse clients (Holliday, Leach, & Davidson, 1994). Although counsellors may have preferences about explicitly articulating their values, interactions with clients will contain implicit expression of values and inevitably influence the counselling relationship (Sue & Sue, 1999). Case examples and vignettes may be useful training tools to assist counsellors to consider multiple perspectives and to develop strategies for helping clients explore contrasting perspectives (e.g., Morali, 1999). Value conflicts have the potential to lead to new understandings that can be instructive for both clients and counsellors.

Although the rationale for multicultural counselling competencies has been strongly presented (e.g., Sue et al., 1992; Sue et al., 1998), there is relatively little research evaluating how they are developed. Course work in counsellor education programs can provide important background information in the knowledge domain and encourage students to engage in a process of self-reflection. However, the results of this study suggest that theory alone may not be the best way to prepare counsellors for working with culturally diverse clients. Counsellor education programs need to expose students to members of culturally diverse groups and provide opportunities for skill development through practicum placements and cross-cultural supervision (Arthur, 1998). Given the wide variations in curriculum addressing multicultural counselling (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1991) it is timely to review counsellor education programs in Canada and to evaluate the ways that "best practices" in curriculum prepare graduates with multicultural counselling competencies.

The results of this study suggest that practitioner experiences after graduation are influential for the development of multicultural counselling competencies. Whereas less than half of the counsellors in this study attended professional seminars, accessed supervision or consultation regarding culturally diverse clients, participation in these professional activities was associated with higher levels of multicultural counselling competencies. Although there may be mitigating personal or systemic barriers that account for these circumstances, there are ethi-

cal considerations that cannot be discounted (Canadian Psychological Association, 1996; Pedersen, 1995; Pettifor, in this issue). However, it should not be taken that attendance alone will lead to higher levels of multicultural counselling competencies. Beyond promoting participation in professional development, the quality of training and relevance for professional counsellors must be taken into consideration.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The results from this study raise many questions about how we can create the types of experiences for counsellors that will support the development of multicultural counselling competencies. Opportunities for professional development are crucial for counsellors to examine issues related to cultural encapsulation, gain knowledge and information about culturally diverse populations, and to develop strategies for overcoming value conflicts in counselling relationships. This study underscores the need for counsellors to be proactive towards steps to improve their competencies for working with culturally diverse clients. The leadership and support of counselling agency administrators and professional associations are needed to promote individual and organizational development (Sue et al., 1998). This includes developing resources and practices that support access to consultation and supervision. Although it appears that counsellors may resolve cultural issues through a "generic" approach to all clients or through "trial and error" methods, practicing with lower levels of multicultural counselling competencies may also leave clients at risk for harmful assessments and interventions. Recent developments in counsellor supervision (e.g., Brown & Landrum-Brown, 1995) suggest that cultural influences should be considered as an integral feature of the dynamics within all counselling relationships.

Although the discussion outlines several directions for future professional practice, there are limitations to the study that require acknowledgment. First, the sample size may be prohibitive for generalizing results. Second, this study has relied on the self-reports of counsellors regarding their ratings of multicultural counselling competencies. There is speculation that counsellors who have been

Table 3

Characteristics Predicting Multicultural Counselling Competence

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Sig. Wald</i>
Multicultural training					
Seminars	.91	.38	.14	5.6	.018
Caseload	.02	.01	.14	5.8	.016

trained in multicultural counselling may appreciate the diversity found in their caseload and be more realistic about their levels of expertise. It may be that the responses of participants either under- or over-represent their actual competency levels. Research is needed that expands the evaluation of counsellor competencies to include client perspectives. Although the study has suggested key factors that are related to higher or lower levels of multicultural competencies, existing guidelines do not provide standards and methods to evaluate counsellors' progress in developing multicultural counselling competencies (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue et al., 1998). Future research needs to demonstrate how counsellor education can promote the transfer of multicultural counselling competencies in the areas of self-awareness, knowledge, and skills to effective practices with clients.

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