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## Multicultural Counselling Competencies with Female Adolescents: A Retrospective Qualitative Investigation of Client Experiences

### Les compétences multiculturelles en counseling auprès des adolescentes : une étude rétrospective qualitative des expériences des clientes

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#### ABSTRACT

As the cultural landscape of North America continues to shift, the helping profession is tasked with the responsibility of delivering culturally sensitive services. This phenomenological study explored the experiences of young women who attended counselling during their adolescence. Using a multicultural counselling competency framework as well as an inclusive definition of multiculturalism, the central phenomenon under investigation was that of participants' perceptions of their counsellors' cultural competence. Results demonstrated that counsellor awareness, knowledge, skills, and the multicultural counselling relationship are important competencies when working with female adolescents. Additional meaningful themes included cultural sensitivity, family interventions, and help beyond counselling. Implications for training and practice are discussed.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Dans le paysage culturel mouvant de l'Amérique du Nord, la profession d'aide se trouve responsable de fournir des services de counseling culturellement adaptés. Cette étude phénoménologique a exploré les expériences des jeunes femmes qui ont utilisées des services de counseling pendant leur adolescence. Se servant d'un cadre de compétences multiculturelles en counseling ainsi que d'une définition inclusive du multiculturalisme, l'étude examine le phénomène central des perceptions des participantes des compétences multiculturelles en counseling de leurs conseillers/conseillères. Les résultats ont démontré que la conscience de soi, les connaissances, et les compétences du conseiller/de la conseillère et la relation de counseling multiculturelle sont des facteurs importants lorsque l'on travaille avec les adolescentes. De plus, la sensibilité culturelle, les interventions auprès de la famille, et l'aide au-delà du counseling se sont avérées des thèmes significatifs. Des implications pour la formation et la pratique sont discutées.

There has been a rapid growth of diversity across North America in the past 40 years that has greatly impacted the cultural make-up of the adolescent population. For example, Canadian statistics indicate that more than a quarter

million immigrants and refugees with permanent residency status currently live in the country. In 2012 alone, close to 90% of the individuals given permanent residency status were between the ages of 15 and 24 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012). Similarly, in the United States, almost 50% of youth represent individuals from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, more than 20% are from migrant families, and more than 15% live below the poverty line (Yeh & Kwan, 2010).

Focusing specifically on the experiences of females, the American Psychological Association (APA) identified girls and women as a vulnerable group that should be given particular attention within the literature (APA, 2007). This identification is due in part to the fact that female adolescents currently face an array of social pressures and often become the target of bullying (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). At the same time, they are continuously negotiating their multiple and intersecting cultural identities and social locations, which are rapidly changing (Kassan, *in press*). To date, a great deal of scholarship has centred on the counselling needs of adolescents. However, this literature can be very broad-based, subsuming a heterogeneity of experiences and diluting the salience of diversity (see Martin, 2003). At the other end of the spectrum, counselling research conducted with adolescents can be very specific, often examining the needs of one particular ethnic group (see Lambert, 2008).

While each end of the spectrum has its conceptual merits, they do not necessarily allow for female adolescents' counselling needs to be understood within the context of their multiple and intersecting cultural identities and social locations. A lens through which to achieve such a task may be that of multicultural counselling competencies (MCC). The importance of delivering culturally appropriate services has been at the forefront of the field of counselling psychology for quite some time. Accordingly, numerous models of MCC have been proposed for work with adult populations (e.g., Collins & Arthur, 2010; Sue, 2001; Toporek & Reza, 2001). While some attention has been given to need of diverse adolescents, the research in this area remains limited.

As MCC continue to gain importance in the field of counselling psychology, many scholars have advocated for an inclusive understanding of multiculturalism, which takes into account clients' multiple and intersecting cultural identities and social locations (e.g., Collins & Arthur, 2010). Specifically, an inclusive definition of multiculturalism assumes that one's cultural background includes an array of factors such as age, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion/spirituality, (dis)ability, language, and social class (e.g., La Roche & Maxie, 2003).

As such, it appears to be critical to assess and explore the multiple and intersecting cultural identities and social locations that female adolescents bring with them as they enter counselling and negotiate relief from their presenting problems. The use of an MCC framework as well as an inclusive definition of multiculturalism can help to develop such broader understandings. Adopting these complementary lenses, this study focused on the experiences of a group of culturally diverse young women who attended counselling during their adolescence. Specifically,

they shared their perceptions of their counsellor's MCC and the cultural factors that were important to them when they attended counselling.

#### COUNSELLING FEMALE ADOLESCENTS

The APA *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Girls and Women* outline several ways in which practitioners can improve gender- and culture-sensitive psychological practice with females from all social classes, ethnic and racial groups, sexual orientations, and ability/disability statuses (APA, 2007). Similarly, the *Guidelines for Ethical Psychological Practice with Women* emphasize how important it is for practitioners to be knowledgeable about the issues and conditions that impact the lives of women in Canada (Canadian Psychological Association, 2007). The Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association's (CCPA) *Code of Ethics* (CCPA, 2007) and *Standards of Practice* (CCPA, 2015) provide few direct guidelines for working with diverse female adolescents.

Within the counselling literature, specific guidelines and models have been developed for work with different groups of girls and young women. For example, Lee (2004) proposed a set of therapeutic recommendations for work with biracial girls. This author suggested that in order to provide ethically and culturally sound therapy to this unique population, a sociopolitical perspective must be adopted and shared within the therapeutic setting. As such, counsellors are urged to focus on identity development and affirmation with their clients, along with increased community connections and communication among the family.

Relatedly, Lambert (2008) developed a counselling model for work with young women from the United Arab Emirates, which represents an adaptation and integration of a systemic and solution-focused approach. Within this framework, the role of culture, religion, gender, and social hierarchy are given particular attention within a family context. The authors encouraged counsellors to work with young women's worldviews and be aware of tendencies to want to change the culture, suggesting that imposing a Western lens could be quite damaging to clients.

Salvo Crane (2013) put forth an approach for working with multiracial daughters of Asian newcomers. The author highlighted the importance of a developmental lens along with multiracial identity models in order to progress toward a comprehensive understanding of clients from such diverse and intersecting backgrounds. Moreover, issues of family expectations as well as power and oppression are thought to be particularly salient for this population, and hence should be considered in therapy. Another consideration includes factors related to immigration and acculturation of the newcomer parent(s) as well as the impact on the second-generation child.

The majority of the models and guidelines that have been developed with specific female populations in mind place a great deal of emphasis on the role of one's worldview and identity development. In working from these conceptualizations, counsellors are urged to develop adequate cultural understanding of their female clients—a notion that touches the core of the concept of MCC. However, similar

to such frameworks, the missing piece within this body of work is the systematic investigation of the concept of cultural competence, particularly as it relates to counselling with female adolescents.

#### MULTICULTURAL COUNSELLING COMPETENCIES

Frameworks pertaining to cultural competence were developed in order to ensure that graduate training programs incorporate appropriate multicultural education in their curricula and in turn lead counsellors to provide ethical, culturally sensitive treatment to diverse clients. Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992) were the first to put forth a comprehensive model of MCC. In this framework, counsellor competencies are equated with (a) *awareness*, identifying one's biases and assumptions; (b) *knowledge*, obtaining an accurate understanding of clients' cultural backgrounds; and (c) *skills*, utilizing counselling interventions that are culturally appropriate. Moreover, some authors have proposed that the multicultural counselling relationship is an essential component of MCC (Collins & Arthur, 2010; Vinson & Neimeyer, 2000). For example, in the construction of the Multicultural Counselling Inventory, the multicultural counselling relationship emerged as a significant scale construct, supporting its inclusion as a cultural competence (Sodowsky, Taffe, Gutkin, & Wise, 1994).

The tripartite model of MCC (Sue et al., 1992) has become the most widely accepted framework of cultural competence. For example, the American Association for Multicultural Counselling and Development endorsed the model in 1996, and six divisions of the American Counselling Association and three divisions of the APA followed suit in 2002 (Roisircar, Arredondo, Fuertes, Ponterotto, & Toporek, 2003). Similarly, this MCC conceptualization plays an important role in numerous licensing regulations (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2001). Furthermore, the APA *Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice and Organizational Change for Psychologists* were based on the tripartite model of MCC (APA, 2002).

Despite its popularity and influence, the tripartite model of MCC (as well as other similar frameworks) has not been widely empirically tested (Chao, 2012). Furthermore, the research that has been conducted has rarely focused on adolescent populations. Hence, it is unclear how the needs of adolescent females are represented (or not) within this conceptualization of cultural competence. Accordingly, some scholars have worked toward shedding light on this question.

#### MULTICULTURAL COUNSELLING COMPETENCIES WITH ADOLESCENTS

To date, the majority of work in the area of cultural competence has been focused on adult populations. However, some efforts have been made to adapt or develop frameworks of MCC that are specific to adolescents. Liu and Clay (2002) suggested that being trained from a model of MCC is not sufficient when it comes to working with children and adolescents. They stressed the importance

of understanding *how* to focus on culture, as it may not always be necessary to address this concept directly when working with a youth. The authors proposed a five-step model to help counsellors consider cultural factors in their work with children and adolescents.

First, Liu and Clay (2002) posited that counsellors should consider which cultural aspects are relevant to adolescents in counselling, with the goal of helping them understand and integrate diversity and multiculturalism in their lives. Second, they proposed that counsellors should have knowledge of the different cultural groups they are likely to encounter in counselling. Third, they argued that decisions should be made regarding how much, when, and how cultural issues should be incorporated into therapy. This entails determining when and where particular cultural variables are found in the foreground or background of adolescents' lives. Fourth, they suggested that counsellors should consider different treatment alternatives and the cultural assumptions embedded in each. Specifically, the authors cautioned against the use of empirically validated treatments, as the majority of studies conducted within the field of psychology have neglected the consideration of cultural variables. Fifth, they advised that the best perceived counselling option should be applied using the cultural variables identified by clients as opposed to those that may have been ascribed by the counsellor.

In addition to examining the MCC needed to work with adolescents, some authors have developed counselling approaches and theories specific to culturally diverse youth. For example, with the goal of offering culturally competent services to diverse youth, Yeh and Kwan (2010) advanced an ecological approach to multicultural counselling. In their model, they emphasized four critical domains, which counsellors need to assess and consider when working with this group. These areas are (a) the peer context, (b) the family context, (c) the school context, and (d) the community and cultural context. Moreover, the authors highlighted the critical role of advocacy when counselling adolescents. It is argued that the focus on systemic changes is necessary in order to improve accessibility and equitability to oppressed and marginalized youth (Goodman et al., 2004).

Similarly, McMahan, Mason, Daluga-Guenther, and Ruiz (2014) suggested an ecological model of professional school counselling. Within this framework, the multicultural school context is said to be critical for the positive development and well-being of adolescent students. The authors proposed a number of assessments and interventions (at the individual, interpersonal/group, institutional, and community levels) that school counsellors should engage in on a regular basis. Clearly, the models proposed to date represent important steps in addressing the specific multicultural counselling needs of children and adolescents. While these frameworks have useful clinical implications, they have yet to be empirically investigated. Moreover, they were developed from an expert position, without the input or voices of culturally diverse youth.

As such, this research set out to empirically investigate the concept of cultural competence from a client perspective. Hence, the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of young women who attended counselling during their

adolescence, focusing on the participants' perceptions of their counsellors' MCC as well as the cultural factors deemed important to them in counselling. In order to investigate this phenomenon across a range of multiple and intersecting cultural identities and social locations, an inclusive definition of multiculturalism was employed. This lens represented a good complement to the MCC framework (Sue et al., 1992), as it allowed for a broader assessment of participants' perceptions of their counsellors' cultural competencies across various domains (Arthur & Collins, in press) as opposed to only one (e.g., ethnicity). The following central research questions guided the study:

1. Based on their counselling experiences during adolescence, what are participants' perceptions of counsellors' MCC?
2. Based on their counselling experiences during adolescence, what do participants identify as salient cultural factors that counsellors need to attend to when working with this population?

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

A phenomenological methodology was employed in this study in order to obtain a rich account of participants' lived experiences. This tradition of inquiry was a good fit for this study, as it aims to describe the subjective perspectives, perceptions, and experiences of several individuals in regards to a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In this case, the central phenomenon under investigation was that of participants' perceptions of their counsellors' cultural competence. More specifically, a descriptive psychological phenomenology was used in order to focus on the meaning of individuals' (as opposed to groups') perspectives (Giorgi, 1985, 2009). This approach emphasizes the subjective and noncritical experiences of participants, one person at a time. Paralleling the hermeneutic philosophy, the psychological approach aims to identify and describe the subjective perspectives of each individual (Schwandt, 2015). Hence, this research design allowed for a profound examination of the phenomenon of interest, yielding to a deep understanding of participants' ideas, values, beliefs, memories, and evaluations of MCC.

### *Procedures*

Once ethical approval was obtained for this study, participants were recruited via electronic mailing lists, online classified ads, and university student services. Criterion sampling was employed in an effort to select participants who could shed light on the research questions being investigated (Morrow & Smith, 2000). Theoretical sampling was also used to recruit participants from diverse cultural backgrounds to speak to the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). Individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 who attended a minimum of one session of counselling during their adolescence were invited to participate in the study. Young adult participants were sought in order to obtain a more self-reflective account of

the phenomenon of interest, after counselling had ceased. As mentioned above, an inclusive definition of multicultural counselling was employed in this study (Arthur & Collins, in press; La Roche & Maxie, 2003; Sue, 2001). Applying this definition ensured that a range of cultural identities and social locations were at play in participants' counselling experiences.

Upon contacting the primary researcher, interested individuals who met the criteria were given an appointment for the completion of the study in a research laboratory at the university. Participants filled out an informed consent form, a contact information sheet, and a demographics questionnaire. Subsequently, they engaged in a 60- to 90-minute one-on-one interview with the primary researcher. They were asked about their perceptions of their counsellors' MCC (as defined by counsellor's awareness, knowledge, skills, and the multicultural counselling relationship) as well as the aspects of counselling they found to be the most and least helpful.

To ensure that all participants had the opportunity to address similar topic areas, a semistructured interview protocol was employed, touching upon the following areas: (a) warm-up questions, (b) reasons for counselling, (c) expectations of counselling, (d) client cultural factors, (e) peer relationships, (f) family background, (g) cultural concerns, (h) cultural similarities and differences, (i) counsellor qualities, (j) most and least helpful aspects of counselling, and (k) process questions. This protocol was devised from the counselling psychology literature pertaining to cultural competency, including the tripartite model of MCC (Sue et al., 1992) and the competency of the multicultural counselling relationship (Sodowsky et al., 1994).

### *Participants*

Twenty participants who self-identified as female and were between the ages of 18 and 23 participated in this study. Data collection ceased at this number, as it is said to provide manageable and transferable information as well as saturation of data in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Shenton, 2004). The women who took part in the study attended counselling during their adolescence (between the ages of 12 and 19) and completed a minimum of five counselling sessions with the same counsellor. The sample of participants was culturally diverse in that 10 individuals identified as White and 10 represented ethnic minority groups; 14 reported being heterosexual and 6 bisexual; 13 disclosed being agnostic and 7 Christian. These individuals sought counselling due to a variety of presenting problems, including depression, family issues, behavioural problems, eating challenges, anxiety, grief, abuse, cutting, bullying, relationship issues, and vocational concerns.

### *Data Analysis*

The qualitative interviews were digitally recorded and later professionally transcribed for data analysis. During this process, participants' identifying information was omitted. The primary researcher analyzed the transcript by following a number of systematic steps outlined by Creswell (2013). Initially, each transcript



was read from start to finish, and then reread with margin notes added. Next, horizontalization of the data was performed for each transcript, where meaningful categories (i.e., important aspects of participants' experiences) were identified. Correspondingly, the data units (sentences or paragraphs) for each category were recorded. This phase of data analysis underwent the process of verification, where an auditor and a judge corroborated the data analysis. Subsequently, all meaningful categories were compared and contrasted across the entire sample of participants. Both textural and structural descriptions of participants' common and unique counselling experiences were developed, and a summary highlighting the essence of the phenomenon of interest emerged.

### *Researchers' Subjective Stance*

The research team included three able-bodied females in their 20s, 30s, and 40s who represented three ethnic groups, three unique immigration histories, two sexual orientations, three religious affiliations, and multiple languages. Some of the team's assumptions about the phenomenon of interest, which were identified at the outset of the study and were bracketed throughout, included (a) adolescence is an important developmental phase, (b) adolescents have specific counselling needs, (c) MCC are important when working with adolescents, and (d) MCC are underrepresented in psychology training and practice. Results of the study revealed some veracity to the researchers' initial assumptions of MCC. That is, participants discussed their counselling experiences in relation to some assumptions more than others, highlighting their specific needs as well as the role of their counsellors' MCC in counselling.

### *Trustworthiness*

Various means were employed to ensure the rigour of the study. For example, bracketing and peer debriefing were used to monitor the researchers' subjective stances (Patton, 2002). That is, the researcher who conducted the qualitative interviews and analyzed the transcribed data kept detailed journals in order to document emerging thoughts and potential biases throughout the research process. Moreover, process-oriented conversations took place among the team prior to the start of the study as well as throughout its development, in an effort to identify thoughts and biases, which needed to be bracketed. A judge and an auditor were also consulted during data analysis in order to verify the emerging results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The judge, a psychology doctoral student with qualitative research experience in the area of multiculturalism, verified the themes identified by the researcher. The auditor, a university psychology professor specializing in multicultural research, acted as a consultant and provided consensual information throughout data analysis. Further, an audit trail was maintained throughout the entire research process (Morrow, 2005). Member checking was also employed to substantiate that the findings accurately reflected participants' accounts of MCC (Creswell, 2013). Finally, catalytic validity was established when debriefing the qualitative interviews with participants (Stiles, 1993). These procedures are be-



lieved to increase the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study (Shenton, 2004).

## RESULTS

Results of this study yielded dimensions of MCC as well as salient cultural factors that were deemed to be important for counselling with diverse female adolescents (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Multicultural Counselling Competencies with Female Adolescents*

Dimensions of MCC			
Awareness	Salience of cultural variables		
Knowledge	General knowledge	Cultural knowledge	Contextual knowledge
Skills	Microcounselling skills	Holistic counselling skills	Concrete counselling interventions
Relationship	Positive counselling relationship	Collaborative, tailored, counselling relationship	Counsellor self-disclosure
Additional Salient Cultural Factors			
Cultural sensitivity			
Agency in family interventions			
Assistance beyond counselling			

### *Dimensions of Multicultural Counselling Competencies*

The first research question addressed clients' perceptions of cultural competence. Results revealed meaningful categories and subcategories related to counsellor awareness, knowledge, skills, and the multicultural counselling relationship.

*Awareness.* Participants assessed the competency of self-awareness based on their interactions with their counsellors as well as their overall comfort in counselling sessions. Some women felt that their counsellors lacked self-awareness and judged this competency to be critical. They associated the lack of counsellor self-awareness with the absence of counsellor empathy and consideration for a particular cultural factor that was salient to them. Thus, when a certain cultural factor was meaningful to them, they expected their counsellors to set aside their own biases and assumptions about this factor. For example, one of the participants stated that her counsellor's failure to openly address the role of his Christian orientation in counselling represented a barrier for her:

Well, perhaps he [counsellor] could've been more open about being a Christian counsellor as opposed to just being a counsellor. Not that he tried to hide it, but it was never communicated openly within the sessions. You know, I could look up at the bookshelves in the room and see religious books—again it was a balancing act how defensive I would become, because it was a very touchy subject for me at that time ... And so if you're going to call yourself a Christian counsellor then how's that going to be impacting how you lead your sessions.

Participants who had a negative assessment of their counsellors' self-awareness reported that they either dropped out of counselling prematurely, disengaged from the counselling process, or overcame their feelings about the lack of awareness on their own without help from the counsellor. As one of the participants explained: "Yeah it was tough. I went a couple of times, I think I went for like four or five sessions, but then eventually, I was like forget it! I dropped out."

*Knowledge.* Findings revealed three major categories: general knowledge, cultural knowledge, and contextual knowledge. General knowledge was characterized by a thorough understanding of clients' presenting problems, circle of friends, and family functioning. The majority of participants felt that their counsellors possessed adequate general knowledge.

Cultural knowledge was defined as specific cultural issues that clients discussed or would have liked to discuss in counselling. Results indicated that counsellors only addressed issues of culture when they were directly related to participants' presenting problems. In the majority of these cases, participants did not feel that their counsellors were sufficiently knowledgeable about the cultural concerns they were addressing in counselling. For example, a participant who entered counselling because she wanted help navigating the process of coming out shared the following statement: "No! I definitely don't think they [counsellors] knew a lot about queer culture at all. I am sure that they knew what a gay-straight alliance was, but I would say anything beyond that, they probably knew pretty much nothing."

Some participants disclosed that while in counselling, they experienced cultural issues that were indirectly related to their presenting problems. However, due to their negative assessment of their counsellors' cultural knowledge, these participants did not bring up these issues in counselling. Many participants voiced that if cultural issues were to be addressed, it was their responsibility to initiate these discussions; otherwise, they would have remained untouched.

Finally, the category of contextual knowledge emerged, wherein the counsellor considers cultural variables in context in order to offer a holistic understanding of clients' concerns. None of the participants recalled addressing cultural variables as contextual factors. All the participants reported that this type of knowledge could be helpful for counsellors in order to understand their clients as holistic and multifaceted individuals. Overall, numerous participants stressed the importance of counsellor cultural and contextual knowledge, explaining that it is important to consider clients in their entirety. For example, one participant was asked:

*Interviewer:* Did you ever talk about your cultural background with her [counsellor]? Being bicultural?

*Participant:* I think, just briefly history-wise, but I don't think ever like, how does it feel to be bicultural in your environment? That would have been helpful to me at the time, living in an all-white town and all.

*Skills.* Results revealed three major categories: microcounselling skills, holistic counselling skills, and concrete counselling interventions. The majority of participants reported that their counsellors employed useful microcounselling skills, which helped them feel comfortable, secure, and validated through their sessions. Moreover, many participants voiced a desire for counsellor skills that facilitated a holistic counselling approach where clients could explore their presenting problems as well as other aspects of their lives. As one participant stated: "We [counsellor and client] talked separately about the family aspect, the friends, the school, my career, my own aspirations, and my goals. And then kind of put it all together in the end."

Finally, for most participants, concrete counselling interventions were reported to be helpful in alleviating their symptoms and eventually their presenting problems. The remaining participants would have liked their counsellors to use these interventions, as they thought they would have allowed them to make more progress. Generally, it was said to be optimal when counsellors tailored their choice of concrete counselling interventions to clients' presenting problems and personal styles, integrating them into a holistic counselling approach. In these cases, the concrete counselling interventions did not feel generic or taken from a textbook. One participant explained: "Well, some of the prescriptions I felt were a little hokey, kind of contrived. It seemed like maybe that advice could have been given to just anyone, as opposed to something that was specific to my situation."

*Relationship.* Findings revealed three major categories: importance of the counselling relationship, type of counselling relationship, and counsellor self-disclosure. All participants highlighted the importance of establishing a positive relationship with their counsellors, which was associated with feeling safe, being comfortable, opening up, and taking risks in counselling. They emphasized the critical role of a collaborative counselling style, as it was thought to give participants a great deal of power in their sessions. For some participants, a collaborative counselling style was perceived as optimal when tailored to their specific needs and overall personality, as illustrated in this quote: "And she [counsellor] was doing it [developing the relationship] in any way that would be easier on me. It was kind of like she catered to my interests ... And she probably did that with other people too."

Finally, regarding counsellor self-disclosure, the majority of participants had a positive assessment of, or voiced a desire for, this type of intervention. Counsellor self-disclosure reportedly led participants to feel validated about their struggles and hopeful for progress, which in turn strengthened the counselling relationship. For example: "He [counsellor] did give me some examples from his teen years or

from other patients ... Well, it was helpful, feeling that you are not the only one in this situation.”

### *Additional Salient Cultural Factors*

With regard to the second research question, centring on the salient cultural factors counsellors need to attend to when working with adolescents, results indicated that when counselling female adolescents, counsellors should consider cultural sensitivity, agency in family interventions, and assistance beyond counselling.

*Cultural sensitivity.* Cultural sensitivity was qualitatively different from awareness in that it pertained to counsellors' compassion and appreciation for participants' cultural backgrounds versus awareness of their own biases and assumptions. Numerous participants discussed whether or not they felt their counsellors were sensitive to their cultural concerns and worldviews. Participants who presented for counselling with specific cultural issues (e.g., bullying, coming out, or generational issues) shared that many of the interventions their counsellors used were not culturally sensitive and reflected judgements or misunderstandings. The lack of cultural sensitivity was so challenging that some participants dropped out of counselling prematurely because they felt their counsellors were not working with them in a productive manner. One participant shared: “I was talking about my boyfriend. I could tell that she [counsellor] thought I shouldn't break up with him ... I could just tell exactly how she was feeling about the whole issue from the beginning.”

A specific component of cultural sensitivity included discussing client-counsellor cultural similarities and differences. Although this discussion rarely occurred, when it did, it was deemed to be very valuable to clients' overall progress. As one participant stated: “We actually did talk about family differences ... and yeah, that provided some insight and made me feel that she was actually listening, because she was sharing what her family was like.” In addition, some participants presumed that this type of discussion would have increased their comfort in sessions and strengthened the counselling relationship.

*Agency in family interventions.* Though participants had a range of reactions to the use of family interventions, they all stated that they were not consulted about the inclusion of family members in their counselling sessions. They explained that they would have liked to have had a say in considering if, when, and how family could be included in counselling. A participant explained how her mother's presence inhibited her:

Had I been able to talk more and feel less restricted by my mom being there or finding out stuff, I think it [counselling] could have been a lot more beneficial. But I was worried about how some things would be relayed to my mom or how our relationship would get worse.

*Assistance beyond counselling.* In addition to their counselling experiences, many participants reported that the changes they made in their lives throughout their adolescence could be attributed to external factors, such as their own maturity, friendships, and family. These factors were said to be significant in their progress:

*Interviewer:* What were the other influences?

*Participant:* Friends and things like that. I talked to them about some of the things I talked about in counselling. And they kind of supported me in what I was doing. And then my mom was always behind me ... and I guess, the more I started to change, it kind of just got the ball rolling and then it kept going.

#### DISCUSSION

In this study, the experiences of young women who attended counselling during their adolescence were privileged, and participants' perceptions of their counsellors' MCC add to our current understanding of this phenomenon. More specifically, findings indicated that the tripartite model of MCC (Sue et al., 1992) and the multicultural counselling relationship (Sodowsky et al., 1994) have conceptual and clinical implications for counsellors working with female adolescents. However, results also demonstrated that the competencies deemed to be important to work with this population are nuanced and complex. As such, it seems that the development of counsellor awareness, knowledge, skills, and the multicultural counselling relationship is not a straightforward process and that client needs can shift in relation to particular life circumstances and contexts.

Results indicated that, according to participants, counsellor self-awareness is essential for culturally competent counselling to occur with female adolescents, and the saliency of cultural factors is an important element of this competency. That is, it seems important for counsellors to assess and attend to the cultural factors that clients deem to be important to their presenting concerns and those that emerge throughout the counselling process, as these factors may evolve and change over time. Thus, by engaging in continuous self-awareness, counsellors can attend to shifting cultural identities that female adolescents discuss in counselling.

Further, although participants in this study found counsellor knowledge to be necessary for culturally competent counselling, cultural and contextual knowledge were identified as important elements of this competency. That is, counsellors may benefit from gaining knowledge of and exploring the role of culture within female adolescent clients' specific cultural concerns, regardless of whether or not they seem related to their presenting problems. This cultural information can provide them with the knowledge necessary to initiate a discussion of cultural concerns, as it may be difficult for clients to raise these issues on their own. A second essential element of knowledge was that of context, which participants felt was required for counsellors to put their presenting problems into a cultural frame in order to broaden their overall understanding. Both cultural and contextual knowledge can aid counsellors in addressing their clients' presenting problems and cultural concerns as well as offer a more holistic counselling experience.

Participants' perceptions of their counsellors' skills were found to be an important factor in culturally competent counselling. Results of this study further identified that, in order to be effective, counsellors need to include microcounselling skills, holistic counselling skills, and concrete counselling interventions in their

work with female adolescents. The use of microcounselling skills and concrete counselling interventions appear to be most effective when they are sensitive to clients' cultural backgrounds and tailored to their specific needs. Thus, counsellors are advantaged when they consider clients' multicultural needs in order to choose culturally appropriate counselling skills. Furthermore, adopting a holistic counselling approach can help counsellors broaden their understanding of clients' presenting problems and related issues.

This study also offered insight into the multicultural counselling relationship (Sodowsky et al., 1994). In addition to positive client-counsellor relationships, participants in this study identified collaborative relationships (which attempt to balance power dynamics and are tailored to clients' preferences) as having greater outcomes. Along these lines, the role of counsellor self-disclosure was found to be helpful to female adolescents as it facilitated the validation and deeper understanding of their presenting problems. Though the importance of counsellor self-disclosure and collaboration has been documented in the feminist literature (Enns, 2012), this study provides further evidence for the inclusion of these skills (and hence the counselling relationship) in MCC.

Overall, findings indicated that the tripartite model of MCC (Sue et al., 1992) and the multicultural counselling relationship (Sodowsky et al., 1994) represent helpful conceptualizations by which to work with female adolescents. However, they also demonstrated that such frameworks might not fully address all of the elements of cultural competence necessary to work with this population. Relatedly, salient cultural factors emerged as meaningful categories in this study that could enhance counselling with diverse female adolescents. For example, in developing cultural competence, general cultural sensitivity on the part of counsellors seems extremely important. Similarly, Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, and Utsey (2013) discussed how fostering cultural humility regarding clients' cultural backgrounds can help with this process. Hence, developing specific competencies is not necessarily sufficient to deliver culturally sensitive counselling. Moreover, results suggested that giving clients agency when attempting family interventions could assist in empowering them and strengthen the multicultural counselling relationship. Finally, it appears important for counsellors to be aware of additional sources of support that female adolescents hold in order to build counselling into that system in a way that complements their lives, as opposed to developing the multicultural counselling relationship in isolation.

### *Implications for Training and Practice*

Results of this study make an important contribution to the MCC literature and provide a unique empirical perspective on the multicultural counselling needs of female adolescents. Essentially, it represents a good complement to existing models of MCC (e.g., Collins & Arthur, 2010) and to clinical recommendations for work with adolescents (e.g., Liu & Clay, 2002). Generally, the cultural competencies needed to work with this population depend on a number of factors. Given that adolescent females are constantly negotiating

multiple and intersecting cultural identities and social locations, it is critical for counsellors to explore the unique cultural needs of each of their clients. It is also necessary to consider that such needs may shift within clients over time. Thus, it is important to assess clients' cultural needs and concerns, within the context of their presenting concerns, on a regular basis. That is, counsellors should not shy away from explicitly asking about and discussing multiple and intersecting cultural identities and social location with their clients. Relatedly, the awareness, knowledge, and skills required to work with female adolescents will shift over time, and the development of these competencies will be critical to maintaining a positive multicultural counselling relationship. Another consideration for enhancing this relationship is to provide female adolescent clients with timely, tailored, collaborative opportunities for agency, which could empower them inside and outside the counselling room.

Findings of this study also support ongoing efforts to include multicultural education in psychology training programs. Studies have demonstrated that counsellors who receive more training in this area typically service an increasingly diverse clientele and place more value on MCC (Arthur & Januszkowski, 2001; Atkinson & Israel, 2003). With this in mind, the dimensions of MCC and salient cultural factors established in this study could be infused into psychology training programs, particular for students who have an interest in working with female adolescents. Furthermore, given that the majority of adolescents seek counselling support within their schools, it would be important to consider how the results of this study could serve an array of professionals working in such settings, increasing interdisciplinary training and collaborative team efforts.

#### *Directions for Future Research*

Given the limited amount of research conducted on MCC with female adolescents, future qualitative and quantitative research is needed to provide support for the core and additional competencies found to be meaningful in this study. Further, including the experiences of adolescent-aged clients who have attended counselling as well as those of counsellors would add an important perspective to the literature on MCC. Studies investigating this phenomenon in client-counsellor dyads could also be useful in nuancing and contrasting perceptions and experiences of cultural competence. To date, no measures exist to assess counsellors' MCC among adolescent populations. Finally, in order to capture the development of MCC more broadly, research on MCC needs to occur across different settings, such as schools, community agencies, and so on.

#### *Strengths and Limitations*

Multicultural research often takes a race-based or culture-specific approach, and while this focus provides an important understanding of MCC, it does not fully capture the complexity of culture. A strength of this study lies in its inclusive definition of multiculturalism, where participants formed a diverse sample of women from different ethnicities, sexual orientations, and religions. The partici-



pants' self-identification of these cultural factors highlights the range of diversity that can emerge when employing such a definition.

Another strength lies in the use of a phenomenological research design, which gave voice to and explored the experiences of women who attended counselling during their adolescence. Attaining an in-depth understanding of MCC from a client perspective fills an important void in the literature and complements the existing quantitative research in this area.

The retrospective client accounts represent a potential limitation. It is hoped that participants accurately recalled their counselling experiences, and it can be argued that they discussed the most salient and meaningful components of MCC, given that they remained important to them at the time of the study. Moreover, participants being older and removed from their counselling experiences potentially allowed for a richer description of their perceptions of MCC (Hein & Austin, 2001). According to van Manen (1997), "phenomenological reflection is not *introspective* but *retrospective*" (p. 10). Thus, participants cannot necessarily understand their experiences while living through them, but can benefit from space to reflect on them. Moreover, many qualitative researchers have posited that participants' subjective experiences should be taken at face value, as they represent what is meaningful and "true" to them (see Creswell, 2013). Thus, in this case, participants' perceptions of their counsellors' MCC are believed to represent their subjective truths.

The inclusion of a female perspective on MCC is positive, as this group has been absent in the literature. While obtaining the perspective of women who attended counselling during their adolescence adds an important viewpoint to the complex phenomenon of MCC, findings may not be transferable to the experiences of males. Moreover, the role of gender identity was not specifically investigated in this study. As such, future MCC research is needed in these areas.

#### CONCLUSION

In providing counselling to female adolescents from a range of cultural backgrounds, it is important to establish MCC that reflect the presenting problems of clients within the larger context of their lives. That is, it is necessary to examine that manner in which clients' multiple and intersecting cultural identities and social locations interact with the issues they are bringing to counselling. Thus, by adopting a MCC framework as well as an inclusive definition of multiculturalism, counsellors are likely to be in a better position to understand adolescent females and their challenges more broadly, which could lead to better counselling outcomes.

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