

# An Integrative Review of Training in Multicultural Competencies for Psychotherapy

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**Abstract:** The research on multicultural competencies depends on the development of methods of assessment and the creation of effective training programs. This article aims to examine and describe how the training of multicultural competencies has been researched in the last 10 years. Guided by an integrative literature review, the research was conducted in the Scopus database. Four categories were found within the 12 articles: (1) creating measures for assessing multicultural competencies; (2) assessing multicultural competencies through a training program; (3) using techniques or multicultural competence in a clinical psychology context; (4) researching a specific cultural group. Finally, results are discussed, bringing up limitations and implications for training and research.

**Keywords:** multicultural competence; psychotherapy training; therapeutic relationship; cultural competence; intercultural competence;

## 1. Introduction

In the 1960s, scholars initiated inquiries within the field of psychology regarding the influence of culture on the efficacy of psychotherapy, as well as a heightened focus on multicultural aspects [1]. This movement stressed the importance of therapists recognizing human differences and developing cultural awareness [1]. In the 1990s, the American Psychological Association and the American Counseling Association [2][3] came to develop multicultural and ethical guidelines in order to assist specific cultural groups from a theoretical model sensible to diversity.

Multiculturalism affirms the plurality of worldviews, the diversity of cultural norms and values, and the complexity of human nature [4][5]. In practical terms, it's necessary for the therapist to recognize the cultural background of their clients, understanding and assessing them from a culture-centered perspective [6]. This turn of paradigm became known as the fourth force in psychotherapy, having multiculturalism as metatheory and praxis, which results in a holistic and integrative view of individual and cultural aspects of clients [7][8].

### 1.1 Models of Multicultural Competence

The multicultural paradigm, besides emphasizing

the recognition of human differences and cultural awareness, brought implications for psychological praxis as it stresses multicultural competencies. Cultural competencies refer to behaviors and attitudes that enable professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural contexts [9]. The widely known Multicultural Competencies (MCC) model is based on three dimensions: awareness, knowledge, and skills [3]. This model brings implications to cultural awareness in the building of therapeutic relationships; and emphasizes the search for knowledge of a client's cultural background and worldview; besides developing intervention and culturally adapted techniques. Another model of this paradigm is Multicultural Orientation (MCO) which structures the way therapists and clients bring cultural factors into therapy. It is based on three pillars: cultural humility, characterized by openness and curiosity to cultural experience; cultural comfort, which stresses the engagement in cultural identity conversations; and cultural opportunities, which focus on openness of meaning connected with cultural identity [10][11].

The application of multicultural competencies is essential for good therapy outcomes. A meta-analysis demonstrated that therapeutic outcomes are affected by the perception of a therapist's multicultural competencies [12]. Besides, The American Psychiatric Association [13] stresses

multicultural competencies in its ethical code and sets guidelines for multicultural training and research. In 2017, The American Psychological Association [14] reaffirmed its commitment to multicultural competencies in training and research. Based on the relevance of multicultural competencies, the advancement of this field depends on the development of methods of assessment and the creation of effective training programs. Although many theoretical models deal with multicultural competencies, the gap between theory and practice interferes with assessing its efficacy [15].

## 1.2 Assessing and Training Multicultural Competencies

The multicultural paradigm emphasizes the education and training of multicultural competencies in order for therapists to become "culturally effective" with their clients. The training and research of cultural topics were also stressed by the Third Interdivisional American Psychological Association Task Force on Evidence-Based Relationships and Responsiveness [16]. Supervisors and psychotherapy educators have to school students to act effectively with the cultural heritage, values, and beliefs of their clients. Besides this, researchers are incentivized to investigate culturally diverse and historically marginalized clients

Multicultural training – essential to advance research about multicultural competencies – refers to the implementation of specific activities that enable the acquaintance of multicultural competencies by therapists. Despite that, both research and training of multicultural competencies face methodologic and practical challenges. Among the obstacles, researchers face difficulty in measuring multicultural competencies; the theory-research gap related to the lack of tests and tools that assess and correlate obtaining of competencies and multicultural training; scarcity of psychometric scales [17][12].

The development of assessment measures for evaluating multicultural competencies is necessary in order to evaluate multicultural competencies and build effective multicultural training programs. A recent study presented a critical review considering empirical studies in cross-cultural psychotherapy over the last 40 years [18]. This research discusses relevant topics, such as therapist's cultural competence, but it doesn't explore how multicultural competence training has been researched. Another academic article reviewed tools for assessing multicultural competencies [19]. However, it is worth highlighting that this study, carried out in 2008, may present limitations due to its time gap. Based on this, the purpose of this study is to describe and examine how the training of multicultural competencies has been researched in the last 10 years.

## 2. Method

An integrative literature review was applied in order to evaluate the state of the art of the training of multicultural competencies in psychotherapy over the last ten years. This methodology looks to integrate and sum up the current literature about a specific topic, giving new perspectives and clipping through a critical analysis [20].

In order to understand the state of the art, the present research didn't trace any proposition prior to it. First of all, the articles selected were read, and then the categories were created. The only criterion was that the articles must focus on multicultural competencies in connection with psychotherapy or therapeutic relationship themes

Scopus was the database chosen to carry out the research, where the following keywords were searched: ("therapeutic relationship" OR "psychotherapy") AND ("transcultural competence" OR "multicultural competence" OR "intercultural competence" OR "cross-cultural competence") AND ("training").

In order to refine the search, the documents were limited to the period between 2013 to 2023. Besides, specific criteria as 'only articles', written in English, and in the field of psychology, were included.

## 3. Results

After establishing the inclusion criteria, a total of 17 articles were initially identified. Upon closer examination, 5 studies were excluded for approaching divergent topics from multicultural competencies in interface with psychotherapy or therapeutic relationship, such as group therapy [21], supervision [22][23], critical review [18], and theory essay [24].

Finally, 12 articles were selected to compose the research. Among them, three were qualitative, one was quantitative, and eight were mixed methods. The articles showed a diverse methodological approach. As for the qualitative, Thematic Analysis [25], Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) [26], and Qualitative Descriptive Research [27], were found. The quantitative article was a Multicultural Competence Test [28]. As far as mixed methods were concerned, three articles developed a scale to assess multicultural competencies, such as Questionnaire [29][30] and a Pilot Study [31]. The other two proposed a training program that applied mixed methods [32][33]. Another one employed Case Conceptualization Content [34]. The last two used measuring scales of multicultural competencies [35][36].

In terms of a general overview, it was identified that the terms intercultural, multicultural, transcultural, and cross-cultural are used interchangeably, without a clear definition among them.

Based on these articles, it was identified four categories of analyses: (1) creating measures for

assessing multicultural competencies; (2) assessing multicultural competencies through a training program; (3) using techniques or multicultural competence in a clinical psychology context; and (4) researching a specific cultural group. In the following section, this discussion will be explored.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1 Creating measures for assessing multicultural competencies**

The advancement of the multicultural competencies field depends on the development of methods of assessment and the creation of effective training programs. Although many theoretical models deal with multicultural competencies, the gap between theory and practice interferes with assessing its efficacy [15]. This research found a total of six articles that assessed multicultural competencies: four of them proposed a new tool of measurement or test, and two others applied a training program, which will be explored in the following section.

Regarding the proposal of measures, researchers have diversified their methods for evaluating multicultural competencies. The Multicultural Orientation Performance Task (MCO-PT) is a tool to assess Multicultural Orientation Performance, and it is at the pilot study stage [29]. The MCO model is based on processes for psychotherapy, and it is grounded on pillars of cultural humility, cultural opportunities, and cultural comfort [11], which enables therapists to understand how MCO changes and advances during a period [29]. Moreover, another study developed the Online Transcultural Competence Questionnaire (OnTracc) to measure multicultural competencies by therapists through an online questionnaire in the German context [31]. The questionnaire construction was based on psychometric properties, including three other factors related to these competencies: awareness, engagement, and challenges [31].

The Multicultural Training and Education Questionnaire (MTEQ) was created to fill the literature gap of quantitative tools to assess multicultural competencies [30]. For now, this study is in the validation phase. Another research developed the Multicultural Counseling and Psychotherapy Test (MCPT), which is a tool to assess multicultural counseling competence (MCC) [28]. Similarly to the MTEQ, the MCPT aims to avoid biases that normally emerge in self-report, such as social desirability bias. By these means, the authors point to the possibility of measuring cultural skills effectively and in a standardized way [28].

One limitation of this topic is that most tests are still in the validation phase [28][30] therefore there is still a gap regarding the applicability of these tools and their following outcomes.

### **4.2 Assessing multicultural competencies through a training program**

As far as training programs are concerned, both articles stressed the relevance of integrating theory and practice in order to develop multicultural competencies [32][33]. The article by Von Lersner et al. [32] evaluated intercultural competence and therapeutic relationships in a training program with 24 therapists. In total, the participants were assessed three times (pre-, post, and follow-up) and, along the process, demonstrated an improvement in knowledge, skills, awareness, and therapeutic relationships domains. Although the target population of the training was immigrants, skill development extends to non-immigrant clients. [32]. Kuo et al. carried out a training with 14 doctoral-level trainees, with the target population being refugee clients [33]. The research was based on the Multicultural Counseling Training (MCT) model, and data was collected using mixed methods. The results bear the relevance to integrating theory into practice in the learning of multicultural competencies [37][38]. The authors also approached the process of the development of multicultural competencies and presented how these cultural themes show during psychotherapy [33].

It was identified limitations regarding this topic. Lersner [32] suggested that conducting the training with refugees or immigrant populations tampered with the results. They pointed out that alternative cultural groups can produce different outcomes.

### **4.3 Using techniques or cultural competence in the clinical psychology context**

The third group of articles approached techniques of intervention and aspects of therapeutic relationships involving cultural groups. Trevino et al. [13] explored windows of cultural opportunities – which is one pillar of the Multicultural Orientation Framework [10][11] –, especially, cultural conversations. They examined how cultural conversations emerge in psychotherapy and how they could be more deeply approached by therapists. The results deepen the discussion of how cultural topics appear in psychotherapy, besides how they can be investigated [25]. Debbiesiu et al. [34] analyzed cultural themes from three cases based on Multicultural case conceptualization [39]. These cases were answered by 61 therapists, and assessed through mixed methods. As a result, they identified nine thematic, having three related to multicultural skills (affect, focus on culture, focus on discrimination). Through qualitative analyses, therapists identified cultural themes solely when clients explicitly introduced them. This suggests that awareness of cultural content is still restricted to explicit discourses. In response, the study of cultural opportunities, as seen before, can contribute to this gap [34].

Although only two articles have been included in this group, other researchers approach similar topics indirectly, such as self-disclosure [26]. The

following section will go more deeply into these techniques applied in specific cultural groups.

#### 4.4 Researching a specific cultural group

Four articles involved multicultural competencies facing a specific cultural group. The articles brought cultural identities such as race, gender, class, religion, and spirituality [35][27][26][36]. Generally, they focus on the mission of the therapist in developing multicultural competencies to better attend cultural groups. Each research stressed specific attitudes, skills, or knowledge according to their studied group.

Two articles examined religion and spirituality as cultural identities from the perspective of therapists [26][36]. As an outcome, therapists who have developed their Spiritual/Religious/Non-religious identity have a better chance and efficacy to expose them through self-disclosure [26]. Subsequently, the therapeutic relationship can be strengthened, because the avoidance of these topics can create barriers in the formation of bonds [40]. Vieten et al [36]. explored the experiences of 184 scholars and clinicians and found 16 basic competencies related to religion and spirituality, based on attitudes, knowledge, and skills. These competencies have to be developed in order to prevent "spiritually avoidant care", which can be defined as the neglect of spiritual and religious topics by therapists [41]. Johnson and Williams [35] investigated racial identity from the perspective of white clinicians. Based on data analysis, it was identified that high levels of colorblind racial attitudes are equivalent to low levels of multicultural competencies [35]. Racial blindness refers to attitudes that neglect racism and racial topics [42]. Then, training that develops sensibility to racial themes is essential to support these groups better. Pugach and Goodman [27] stressed the perspective of low-income women on psychotherapy. As a result of the interviews, eight clusters were identified based on axes of awareness, practices, and relational quality. Among them, negotiation of power, demonstrating flexibility, and offering instrumental support are specific competencies that this group demands [27].

As limitations, there are cultural groups that were not considered, such as ethnicity, disability, and sexuality. Only an article went more deeply into the experience of the client [27]. Based on this, future research can consider the multicultural competencies from the perspective of clients, in order to identify the obstacles that these groups deal with in psychotherapy.

#### 5. Conclusion

This article is an introduction to visualizing the state of the art of the training of multicultural competencies and has implications for training and research. The four categories that emerged from this research were not decided prior to the article selection. Methodology variety, the creation of

measures, and the development of training programs have been answers to the mandate of becoming "culturally effective" [16].

As main findings, researchers have developed assessment tools and training programs for multicultural competencies in order to enable therapists to work effectively with cultural backgrounds. Further, research about multicultural competencies is gradually becoming focused on specific cultural groups, considering the worldview of each one. However, researchers have investigated prioritizing the therapist's perspective instead of the client's. For this reason, new research that emphasizes the client's view can be productive in understanding each therapeutic demand.

A limitation of this present research is related to the singular database whereby the search was conducted: Scopus. Another aspect is the restricted search in the last ten years, besides the inclusion of only articles. If a larger period were considered, and also book chapters and other materials, it is possible that alternative results could be found.

Regarding the implications of training, researchers are encouraged to integrate theory and practice in programs of multicultural competence. Besides this, assessment tools also have been improved in order to decrease bias and present psychometric data. The application of these new tools can support studies of validation – which still need empirical research – and also can produce relevant data to research in multicultural competencies.

Future research can consider the perspective of cultural groups that have not been investigated yet, such as disability, ethnicity, and sexuality. Lastly, the training of multicultural competencies is a prosperous field for Psychology; it's complex for using many methods, cultural groups, and perspectives; but, with further empirical research, it will be possible to identify cultural barriers and train therapists effectively.

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