





# Perceptions of Psychological Counselors on Working with Clients From Different Cultures\*

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## ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of psychological counselors on working with clients from different cultures. Accordingly, the extent of the knowledge of psychological counselors on multicultural counseling approach and their perceptions of this approach, the theoretical competencies thereof, and cultural differences were examined in line with the main purpose of the study. The study was conducted using the basic qualitative design. The study group consists of 17 psychological counselors (eleven females and six males) who were continuing their post-graduate education at Gazi University Institute of Educational Sciences in the Spring Semester of the 2020-2021 Academic Year. Data were collected online with semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that a significant portion of the participants did not consider themselves theoretically competent in the multicultural counseling approach. It was further concluded that the majority of the participants had positive perceptions of cultural differences. On the other hand, the holistic evaluation of the answers indicated that the extent of knowledge and awareness of the significant portion of the participants on cultural differences are rather poor and insufficient. It is recommended to implement psychoeducational programs and training on the subject, to give compulsory courses on multicultural counseling approach in Guidance and Psychological Counseling undergraduate programs, and to direct students to exchange programs to experience cultural differences.

### Keywords:

Multicultural counselling approach, cultural sensitivity, clients from different cultures

## 1. Introduction

Multicultural Counseling Approach is becoming widespread and accepted in different parts of the world as a meta-theory based on the point of view that the basic assumptions about counseling practices are not universal as it has been thought for a long time, but are shaped in the Western culture in which it emerged (Barrott, 2014; Bektaş, 2006; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2000; Pedersen, 1998). Multicultural counseling approach, which first emerged as a need for racial diversity with the concern of adapting traditional interventions for White/European Americans, the dominant group in America, to African, Latino, Indian, and Asian Americans (Sue et al., 1992), is defined as the “fourth force” in the relevant literature after psychoanalytic, behavioral, and humanistic theory (Pedersen, 1998). The scope of the concept of culture, which formerly used to be valid mostly for racial differences, has expanded recently. Today, the concept of culture includes many other dimensions other than race, such as age, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and religion (Sue et al., 1992).

“Multiculturalism”, which focuses on the coexistence of different cultures within the framework of respect without suppressing or excluding each other (Pedersen, 1998), has also been evaluated from different perspectives in Turkey. Kağnıcı (2019) states that Turkey has a multicultural structure that includes many

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different races such as Turks, Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, individuals from different sexual orientations, the elderly, and the disabled. It is possible to add the asylum seekers who have migrated to Turkey from Syria due to the civil war in their countries since 2011 along with those of Afghan and Iraqi origin living in Turkey. According to Erkan (2020), on the other hand, the dimension that should be focused on within the scope of cultural difference in Turkey is not ethnicity and that the effects of education and socio-economic status are more evident in the emergence of cultural differences. In this sense, it is possible to argue that Turkey is a culturally heterogeneous geography.

Despite the distinct cultural differences between subgroups, multicultural counseling approach focuses on individual cultures based on the uniqueness of the person. In fact, it is emphasized that each individual has a personal and unique culture in line with their own personality, values, preferences, and interests. This concept of culture further includes many other factors such as the individual's gender, clothing style, and aesthetic understanding (Barrott, 2014). From this point of view, it can be argued that even two siblings in the same family may belong to different cultures (Bektaş, 2006). Pedersen (2000) emphasizes that all interactions have a multicultural structure when the concept of culture is considered comprehensively. In this respect, multicultural psychological counseling may be defined as an approach that does not only focus on the differences between groups but also takes into account individual differences. Thus, it is seen that multicultural counseling is not an approach that should be applied only in multicultural geographies; multicultural competence has become a basic competence area for psychological counselors considering the uniqueness of all individuals and their belonging to a personal culture.

The cultural diversity that has existed throughout history has become more evident as a result of factors such as technological advances, migration movements, and developing communication networks. This situation, related to daily life, is also reflected in the psychological counseling process. In fact, online psychological counseling became more widespread throughout the COVID-19 epidemic; consequently, psychological counselors have had the opportunity to provide assistance to clients from different cultures. While this can be a development opportunity for psychological counselors, it can also lead to some difficulties arising from the cultural differences between them and their clients.

Professional organizations emphasize it as an ethical obligation that psychological counselors should be sensitive to cultural differences in the counseling process. Accordingly, the ethical codes stipulated by the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) emphasize that psychological counselors should assess their clients by taking into consideration many factors such as age, color, culture, gender, sexual orientation, language, race, religion, spirituality, socioeconomic status and carry out the counseling process with an appropriate approach. Similarly, Turkish Psychological Counseling and Guidance Association (2018) stipulated an ethical rule stating that psychological counselors need "to be aware of the needs and problems of individuals belonging to different segments of society", "to make an active effort to understand the different cultural backgrounds of individuals" and "to adapt the methods and techniques they use to the needs of an individual."<sup>‡</sup> As a matter of fact, Bond (2017) argues that awareness of cultural diversity and the professional ethics of psychological counseling are closely related in the counseling process. In this context, multicultural counseling approach reflects an ethical approach that covers all theories (Pedersen, 1998), rather than a single counseling theory.

Psychological counselors' explicitly mentioning the cultural differences in the counseling process is argued to improve the therapeutic relationship while not mentioning these differences may damage the therapeutic relationship (Barrott, 2014). Microaggressions that can be explained as intentional or unintentional ignoring, belittling, and humiliating behaviors involving negative attitudes and acts targeted against a group or person (Sue et al., 2007) may occur when psychological counselors fail to address cultural issues due to the fear of disturbing their clients and to negatively affect the counseling process. Indeed, Hook et al. (2016) stated in their study that 81% of the clients participating in the study were of the opinion that their counselors exhibited microaggression towards them at least once during the counselors process. The participants indicated that the primary reason for this situation is the psychological counselors' avoiding to discuss cultural issues by denying stereotypes and prejudices about cultural issues. In a study by Kassan and Sinacore (2016), in which

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the perceptions of female adolescents regarding multicultural counselors experiences were examined, a significant portion of the participants stated that their counselors did not address cultural issues and these issues were not addressed even if they did not initiate such a conversation. On the other hand, in the study by Owen et. al. (2011), it was concluded that the clients perceived their counselors' orientations about different cultures to be improving therapeutic alliance and this contributed positively to the psychological well-being of the client. Therefore, the perceptions of the clients with regard to the way psychological counselors deal with cultural differences are considered to be significant for the efficiency of the counseling process.

In a qualitative study, Çetin et al. (2018) examined the perceptions and prejudices of the school counselors about cultural differences and Syrian students and how they coped with these cultural differences. Research findings revealed that although most psychological counselors positively evaluated cultural differences, approximately 25% of them still had negative perceptions. For the purpose of the scale development study, Lüleci (2014) found that 71 out of 258 psychological counselors participating in the study exhibited poor multicultural attitudes. Within the context of the study conducted by Güçlücan (2016), some of the psychological counselors declared that they do not work with any client from a different culture than their own. The researcher did not find these answers realistic given the broad definition of culture and concluded that these psychological counselors may have had a lack of knowledge about the cultural characteristics of their clients or that they may have directed their clients from different cultures to other colleagues. In both cases, the multicultural counseling competencies of the psychological counselors were argued to be poor. Based on the results obtained from these studies, it can be concluded that many psychological counselors may have incomplete knowledge about the effect of culture on the counseling process and have adopted a negative perception of working with clients from different cultures.

In many studies in the field of multiculturalism in Turkey, culture has been handled only with the refugee dimension (e.g. Uğur et. al., 2021; Yalçın Güler, 2020). This may put cultural differences into a narrow mould. In addition, there is a limited number of qualitative studies on multiculturalism in psychological counseling. In a study similar to this study, Güçlücan (2016) investigated the current difficulties faced by psychological counselors when working with clients from different cultures and the possible difficulties they anticipate they will encounter. Although similar points were examined in this study, general perceptions of working with clients from different cultures, views on multicultural counseling approach, and perceptions of competence were examined. In addition, it was also investigated which cultural similarities were thought to positively affect the counseling process. This may be important in terms of providing information to counselors and supervisors in the process of cultural transference. In light of all this information, considering that the multicultural counseling approach, which emerged in the United States, has been dealt with mostly in the racial dimension in Turkey, we think that this study will provide comprehensive information about the cultural perceptions of psychological counselors in the counseling process.

For all these reasons, "the perceptions of psychological counselors in Turkey about working with clients from different cultures" is considered to be a subject worth examining. To this end, the main purpose of this research is to examine the perceptions of psychological counselors about the cultural differences in the counseling process. In line with this main purpose, answers were sought to the following questions:

- What is the extent of knowledge of psychological counselors regarding multicultural counseling approach?
- What are the perceptions of psychological counselors on the multicultural counseling approach, its practices, and the theoretical competencies thereof?
- What are the perceptions of psychological counselors on cultural differences?

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Research Model**

This research is a descriptive study and was conducted using basic qualitative research design. Basic qualitative research design focuses on individuals' interpretations of events. In this method, data are characterised and the focus is on the frequency of repetitive patterns (Merriam, 2018).

## **2.2. Study Group**

Convenience sampling method, in which easily accessible participants are selected from the sample as it facilitates the implementation (Creswell, 2014; Krippendorff, 2004), was used in this study. The participants consist of those who are pursuing their Master's degree at Gazi University, Institute of Educational Sciences, Department of Psychological Counseling and Guidance and who have previously taken or currently taking the "Individual Counseling" course. The study was conducted with 17 psychological counselors (11 female and 6 male) aged between 22 and 35. The participants held bachelor's degrees from 13 different universities.

## **2.3. Data Collection Tools**

A semi-structured questionnaire consisting of 16 questions, 4 of which addressed demographic information and 12 of which were related with the research subject, was prepared by the researchers as a data collection tool for the purpose of the study. Expert opinion was obtained from researchers. Then, at the end of a preliminary interview held with 5 people, 3 questions in the questionnaire were found to be vague and were involved in the scope of other questions. For this reason, 3 questions were removed from the questionnaire at the end of the preliminary interview. Following these steps, the questionnaire was finalized with a total of 13 questions, including four questions about demographic information, three closed-ended and six open-ended questions.

## **2.4. Data Collection Process**

The data were collected online, through semi-structured interviews conducted over the Zoom program at the end of the Spring Semester of the 2020-2021 Academic Year. Confirmation of Participation was obtained from the participants in order to ensure the reliability of the study. Confirmation of Participation is a method that requires the researcher to send the transcripts of the interviews and the codes created in this context to the participants and to use them in the study after obtaining their consent (Merriam, 2018). For this purpose, the interviews held with the consent of the participants were recorded, then the answers given by the participants to the questions were transcribed into texts and shared with the participants after the content analysis was performed. Collected data were used after the participants approved the finalized version of their answers.

## **2.5. Data Analysis**

The descriptive analysis method was used in which the information obtained was classified according to the predetermined themes (Yıldırım, & Şimşek, 2018). In this study, while naming the categories related to the answers given by the participants, the information in the literature on the field was utilized. An independent researcher further checked a part of the descriptive analysis performed by the researchers, authors revised and corrected inconsistent points in line with the researcher's suggestions.

## **2.6. Validity and Reliability**

Some strategies suggested in the literature to ensure the validity and reliability of qualitative research were used. Accordingly, credibility means that the results of the research process are clear, consistent, and verifiable; transferability refers to the degree to which results in qualitative research are consistent across different contexts; consistency means that the findings of a study can be replicated with a similar study group under similar conditions; confirmability means that the research data is least affected by the subjectivity of the encoders and is evaluated objectively in its raw form (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Krippendorff, 2004). In order to ensure credibility, the expert opinions of four researchers regarding the questions addressed in the research were taken, the interviews were recorded, transcribed into text without adding comments, and coded and then shared with the participants to ensure their confirmation. In order to ensure transferability, the statements of the participants were transcribed into text with detailed descriptions without adding comments. To ensure consistency, an independent encoder coded some of the transcribed texts of the participants' statements, and the inconsistencies were reviewed and corrected accordingly. In order to ensure confirmability, the comprehensibility of the questionnaire and the extent to which the questions serve the purpose of the research were checked by a preliminary application before proceeding to the main application. In addition, the recorded statements of the participants were transcribed and coded and were used as study findings after

receiving confirmation from the participants. Also, the confirmability of the content analysis of the research findings was tried to be ensured by making use of the categories in the relevant literature.

## 2.5. Ethical

This study was conducted after the ethical approval of Gazi University Ethics Commission numbered E-77082166-604.01.02-86800 and dated 04.05.2021.

## 3. Findings

Overall results indicate that although a significant portion of psychological counselors has a positive perception of working with clients from different cultures, most of them did not consider themselves theoretically sufficient in multicultural counseling approach. In addition, it can be concluded that there is not sufficient awareness both individually and institutionally in the field of multicultural counseling in Turkey. Also, psychological counselors think that they would mostly cope with cultural differences in the counseling process by using their emotions and content reflection skills.

### 3.1. Knowledge About Multicultural Counseling Approach

The findings about psychological counselors' need for acquiring knowledge, their state of acquiring knowledge, and the ways of acquiring knowledge in multicultural counseling approach are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Knowledge About Multicultural Counseling Approach*

Themes	Codes	f	%
Need for acquiring knowledge	Yes	6	33.29
	No	11	64.71
Having knowledge	Yes	12	70.59
	No	5	29.41
Ways of acquiring knowledge	Literature review	9	39.13
	Reading book/ book chapters	6	26.09
	Courses	3	13.04
	Course content	3	13.04
	Traning	1	4.35
	Traning curriculum	1	4.35

**3.1.a. Need for acquiring knowledge about multicultural counseling approach:** Psychological counselors were asked whether they needed to acquire any further knowledge about multicultural counseling approach. As a result, 6 (35.29%) of the psychological counselors stated they needed further knowledge about the multicultural counseling approach, whereas 11 (64.71%) stated that they did not. Three of the 6 psychological counselors, who mentioned that they needed to acquire knowledge, stated that they were interested and curious about this subject, one of them was working with individuals from different cultures, and one of them needed to acquire knowledge in the context of an assignment in a related course and another psychological counselor needed to acquire knowledge for self-improvement.

**3.1.b. Having knowledge about multicultural counseling approach:** Psychological counselors were then asked whether they had received knowledge about multicultural counseling approach before. Results showed that 12 psychological counselors (70.59%) acquired knowledge about multicultural counseling approach whereas 5 (29.41%) did not. Based on this finding, it can be concluded that a significant portion of psychological counselors has knowledge about multicultural counseling approach.

**3.1.c. Ways of acquiring knowledge about multicultural counseling approach:** Twelve psychological counselors, who stated that they had knowledge about multicultural counseling approach, were then asked how they acquire their knowledge about the approach. It was seen that 9 of them acquired their prior knowledge through literature review, 6 of them by reading a book or book chapter, 3 of them by directly attending a course related to the approach, 3 of them in a course content, whereas one psychological counselor participated in a training about the approach. One psychological counselor stated that multicultural counseling approach came up as a topic in a training she attended.

### 3.2. Perceptions on multicultural counseling approach and the theoretical competencies

Codes related to perceptions of the psychological counselors with regard to multicultural counseling approach and its practices and their perceptions on the theoretical competencies related to this approach are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *The Perceptions on Multicultural Counseling Approach, Its Practices, and The Theoretical Competencies*

Themes	Codes	f	%
Perceptions on multicultural counseling approach and its practices	Necessity	9	40.91
	Cultural diversity in Turkey	6	27.27
	To be taught as a course	4	18.18
	Relationship with online counseling	2	9.09
	Universality	1	4.55
Perceptions on the theoretical competencies	Not sufficient at all	5	29.41
	Partially sufficient	10	58.82
	Sufficient	2	11.76

**3.2.a. Perceptions on multicultural counseling approach and its practices:** Psychological counselors were asked the question “What do you think about the multicultural counseling approach and its practices?” and 14 out of 17 psychological counselors shared their thoughts on this subject. Table 2 indicates that 9 psychological counselors emphasized the necessity of multicultural counseling approach and its practices. Also, 6 psychological counselors emphasized the cultural diversity in Turkey and stated that psychological counselors should display a culturally sensitive attitude. Below are examples of the statements of psychological counselors who held this view:

*“Multicultural psychological counseling is an approach that will have a significant place in the future. There are many subcultures particularly in our country. Each of them has different mechanics, their own family structures, and lifestyles. If we adopt a value judgment limited only to our own culture, we may find these differences strange and this attitude may negatively affect the counseling process when working with someone from different cultures. Understanding the client is one of the basic competencies that a counselor should have.” (PC16)*

4 participants were of the opinion that multicultural counseling approach should be included and taught within the curriculum of the bachelor’s degree academic program on psychological counseling and guidance. Two participants emphasized that multicultural counseling approach has become more important with the improvement in communication networks and online counseling practices. Below are the exemplary statements of psychological counselors in this category:

*“Online counseling sessions have become quite common now. I may have clients not only from Turkey but also from a different country. For example, a client from the United States may seek counseling from someone in Turkey. Therefore, I need to improve myself in multicultural counseling.” (PC12)*

**3.2.b. Perceptions about theoretical competencies on multicultural counseling approach:** Counselors were presented with three options to express their competencies within the context of their theoretical knowledge of multicultural counseling approach. Five participants answered the question about their knowledge level of multicultural counseling approach as not sufficient at all, 10 as partially sufficient and 2 as sufficient. These findings indicated that very few of the counselors considered themselves competent based on their knowledge of multicultural counseling approach.

### 3.3. Perceptions on Cultural Diversities

Table 3 exhibits codes related to the psychological counselors’ perceptions of working with clients from different cultures, cultural dimensions that psychological counselors perceive as different between their clients and their own cultures, counseling skills that they think will help them cope better with the difficulties arising from cultural differences in the counseling process, cultural differences and similarities that psychological counselors think may complicate/facilitate their work with their clients.

**Table 3.** *Perceptions on Cultural Diversities*

Themes	Codes	f	%
Perceptions on serving clients from different cultures	Opportunity	9	52.94
	A challenging process	5	29.41
	Neutral	2	11.76
	Denying Differences	1	5.88
Cultural dimensions perceived as different	Religious Belief	5	15.62
	Family structure/history	5	15.62
	Age	4	12.5
	Gender roles	3	9.38
	Location of Residence	3	9.38
	Gender	2	6.25
	Educational background	2	6.25
	Sexual orientation	1	3.13
	Nationality	1	3.13
	Value judgments	1	3.13
	Socioeconomic status	1	3.13
	Psychological maturity	1	3.13
	Other	1	3.13
None	2	6.25	
Counseling skills to help them cope better with the challenges arising from cultural differences	Reflecting feelings	10	34.48
	Reflecting content	8	27.59
	Paraphrasing	2	6.9
	Self-disclosure	2	6.9
	Personalization	2	6.9
	Self-involving statement	1	3.45
	Asking open-ended questions	1	3.45
	Linking	1	3.45
	Concretizing	1	3.45
	Minimal encouragement	1	3.45
Cultural differences that are considered to be challenging	Sexual orientation	8	30.77
	Religious belief	5	19.23
	Age	2	7.69
	Socioeconomic status	2	7.69
	Value judgments	2	7.69
	Gender roles	1	3.85
	Psychological maturity	1	3.85
	Educational background	1	3.85
	Parenting style	1	3.85
	Family structure	1	3.85
Other	1	3.85	
None	1	3.85	
Cultural similarities that are considered to facilitate the counseling process	None	5	19.23
	Educational background	4	15.38
	Religious belief	3	11.54
	Location of residence	3	11.54
	Socioeconomic status	3	11.54
	Gender roles	2	7.69
	Gender	2	7.69
	Age	2	7.69
	Family structure	1	3.85
	Developmental features	1	3.85

**3.3.a. Perceptions on serving clients from different cultures:** Psychological counselors were then asked, "What do you think about serving clients from different cultures? What are your views on the impact of the cultural differences with your client on the counseling process?". Table 3 reveals that 9 psychological counselors perceived serving clients from different cultures as an opportunity that may contribute to their personal and professional development while 5 psychological counselors interpreted this as a compelling situation that raises anxiety. Two participants used neutral expressions about serving clients from different

cultures. One psychological counselor stated that adapting the counseling process into to the client's cultural differences would be a biased attitude. This may be an indication of the counselor's lack of knowledge about multicultural counseling approach. Below is an exemplary statement of one of the psychological counselors who defined serving clients from different cultures as an opportunity.

*"I think that serving clients from different cultures will contribute to my professional development. People from different cultures live in our country. Therefore, knowing the characteristics of someone who receives counseling from me makes me happy as it will contribute to my professional development."* (PC15)

**3.3.b. Cultural dimension(s) perceived as different:** Psychological counselors were then asked, "Are there any cultural dimension(s) that you think are different about your clients? If yes, in which dimensions do you think there are differences?". Religious belief (f=5, 15.62%), family structure (f=5, 15.62%) and age (f=4, 12.5%) were the most frequently mentioned categories by psychological counselors. Two psychological counselors stated that they did not perceive any cultural differences between them and their clients.

The statements of a psychological counselor who answered this question as he observed differences with the clients in terms of family structure and religious belief are presented below.

*"Both of my clients have different religious beliefs than mine, they are more conservative than me. Their family structures are also different from mine, one of them is the child of a divorced family and both parents got married later and the other has a large family and many siblings."* (PC16)

The statements of a psychological counselor who answered this question that there is a difference between her and the client in terms of nationality and sexual orientation are presented below:

*"One of my clients was both Iranian and a lesbian. We were different in both aspects. However, this has never been a problem for me. In fact, I could not even recognize the difference between a heterosexual relationship and a homosexual relationship while I was talking with my client about his relationship in counseling."* (PC3)

**3.3.c. Counseling skills that may help to cope better with the difficulties arising from cultural differences:** Psychological counselors were then asked, "Which counseling skills do you think help you to better cope with the difficulties arising from cultural differences between you and your clients?". Reflecting feelings (f=10, %34,48) and reflecting content (f=8, %27,59) were the most frequently mentioned categories by psychological counselors. An exemplary statement of the psychological counselors who answered this question as reflecting feelings is presented below:

*"Reflecting feelings helps us make our clients feel that we understand them. For example, when a lesbian client opens up to me, I can make her feel that I understand her through reflecting feelings. In this way, I think I can get closer to my client."* (PC17)

Another counselor answered this question that self-disclosure might help them cope with the difficulties arising from cultural differences with the client:

*"If I have had a problem similar to that of my client from a different culture, I think that self-disclosure would be beneficial. I think this attitude gives the client the message "You are not alone" and makes us feel that our relationship is equal."* (PC14)

**3.3.d. Cultural differences that are considered to be challenging:** Psychological counselors were then asked, "Which cultural difference(s) do you think might be challenging with your clients in any counseling session?". Sexual orientation (f=8, %30,77) and religious belief (f=5, %19,23) were the most frequently mentioned categories by psychological counselors. A psychological counselor stated that there is no cultural diversity that might challenge the counseling session held with the client. The statements of a psychological counselor who answered this question that it might be challenging to serve a client with a different sexual orientation are presented below:

*"I don't know whether being gay, lesbian, or having other sexual orientations are purely a result of childhood experiences or are genetic-oriented. Therefore, I may find it difficult to serve a gay or trans-gender individual."* (PC5)



The statements of a female psychological counselor who answered this question that it might be challenging to serve a client with differences in their perspectives on gender roles are presented below:

*"I'd find it very difficult to serve a female client who is under the control of a man and who is very attached to him. In such situations, my feminist side comes out and I start to act reactive. I am of Eastern origin and this is a problem that I often witness around here. When I see such women, I feel anger; therefore, I am afraid of reflecting this feeling in the counseling environment."* (PC11)

**3.3.e. Cultural similarities that are considered to facilitate the counseling process:** Psychological counselors were then asked, "Which cultural similarity/similarities do you think would facilitate your counseling session with your clients?". Table 3 indicates that 5 psychological counselors answered this question as being similar in any cultural dimension with their clients would not contribute positively to the counseling process. Other psychological counselors presented answers in nine different categories. The statement of a counselor who stated that a possible cultural similarity with the client will not contribute positively to the counseling process as it will cause counter-transference:

*"I do not think that any cultural similarity between me and my client will positively affect the counseling process, on the contrary, I think it will negatively affect it. I think that having more cultural similarities with my clients will increase my interpretations and I will rather try to support them. In fact, I have already been experiencing this situation and I think it affects the process negatively. For example, if my client is a woman who has been exposed to violence, I realize that I am there with my protective and female identity. These characteristics do not need to be included in the counseling session. These are characteristics that are not covered within the identity of the counselor, but in my personal identity. I need to help the clients make sense of their situation without trying to manipulate them."* (PC1)

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

In the present study, the perceptions of psychological counselors, who have been attending a post-graduate education, on the effects of cultural differences in the counseling process were examined. Responses of the participants regarding their knowledge about multicultural counseling approach revealed that 12 participants had prior knowledge about this approach; however, 6 of them needed to gain knowledge about this subject beforehand. The number of participants who needed to gain knowledge about this approach is less than those who had previously acquired knowledge. Therefore, it can be argued that a significant portion of the participants learned this approach randomly rather than due to necessity.

The majority of the participants' responses with regard to the ways of obtaining knowledge about multicultural counseling were literature review and reading a book or book chapter. Based on these answers, it is possible to argue that a significant portion of the participants individually obtained knowledge about multicultural counseling approach. On the other hand, it was understood that the formal ways of obtaining knowledge, such as through courses or training, were mentioned less. The main reason for this outcome may be the poor institutional awareness of multicultural counseling approach and its necessity in Turkey. The significance of multicultural subjects and courses within the scope of academic education on psychological counseling and guidance is emphasized (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1991; D'Andrea et al., 1991). On the other hand, the courses related to multicultural counseling approach within the scope of academic education on psychological counseling and guidance in Turkey were found to be insufficient in number and content (Akalin & Türküm, 2021; Kağnıcı, 2013). Studies are showing that psychological counselors' attendance in training (courses, lessons, seminars, etc.) on this subject positively affects their perception of competence (Aydın, 2014; Barden & Greene, 2015; Castillo et al., 2007; Kim & Cho, 2022; Yalçın Güler, 2020).

It is a remarkable finding that only 2 participants evaluated themselves as competent about the level of theoretical competence in multicultural counseling approach. Constantine et al. (2004) concluded that psychological counselors perceived themselves as more competent. On the other hand, the situation may be different in Turkey. As a matter of fact, Çetin et al. (2018) argued that only 9 out of 28 counselors assigned at schools considered themselves sufficient in providing psychological counseling to individuals from different cultures. It is possible to conclude that the results of the two studies are consistent. The fact that multicultural counseling approach entered the Turkish literature much later than international literature may be suggested as a factor that negatively affects the knowledge, awareness, and competence perceptions of counselors.

Participants were asked about their views on multicultural counseling approach and its practices. The two most frequent themes derived from the answers to this question are that this approach is necessary and may be beneficial due to the cultural diversity in Turkey. Similarly, in a qualitative study conducted by Constantine et al. (2004), it was stated by the participants that the effect of multicultural counseling approach on counseling sessions has increased. On the other hand, it is a remarkable finding that 2 participants in this study emphasized the relationship between online counseling and multicultural counseling approach. Considering that obstacles such as time and space disappear in the online counseling process, (Barak et al., 2009; Barnett, 2005; Sussman, 2004; Zeren, 2020), it can be said that psychological counselors are more likely to provide counseling services to people from different regions and cultures. For example, a counselor in the city to provide assistance to a client living in a village or another country. In this respect, it is possible to argue that online counseling sessions, which have become widespread during the COVID-19 pandemic, will further increase the need for multicultural counseling approach.

Participants were asked about their perceptions of providing counseling services to clients from different cultures, and the answers given to this question showed that more than half of the counselors perceived this as an opportunity. In a similar study examining the perceptions of counselors assigned at schools on cultural differences and Syrian students, Çetin et al. (2018) found that most participants evaluated cultural differences positively. It is possible to say that the findings of the two studies are similar. In addition, five psychological counselors in that study stated that providing counseling services to clients from different cultures can be a challenging process. Responses provided by the participants claiming that this may be a challenging process indicated that they experienced anxiety because they did not feel competent enough to carry out a multicultural counseling process, and they did not know enough about different cultures. In the related literature, it is also emphasized that the interaction of individuals belonging to different cultures with each other may be a stressful process (Berry, 2015; Pedersen, 1998; Utz, 2015). Based on these findings, it would be possible to argue that psychological counselors can experience less difficulty while providing counseling services to individuals from different cultures by obtaining information about different cultures and becoming more competent in applying multicultural counseling approach.

When asked in which cultural dimension(s) they thought that they differed from their clients, two counselors answered that there were no differences between them and the clients in any cultural dimension. However, Pedersen (2000) pointed out that the concept of culture has a multidimensional and broad meaning emphasizing that all interpersonal interactions have different cultural characteristics. In this respect, the answers these participants gave were thought to be deceptive in reflecting the truth, and they may have incomplete knowledge about the definition and scope of culture. Similarly, Güçlücan (2016) pointed out that psychological counselors did not have sufficient knowledge about this subject. Hook et al. (2016) revealed that in case counselors tend to ignore their clients' cultures during the counseling process, albeit often unconsciously, this situation was perceived as a microaggression by the clients. The reason behind this microaggression is stated as the fact that psychological counselors do not have sufficient knowledge and awareness about the cultures of their clients (Hook et al., 2016). Comas-Diaz and Jacobsen (1991) argued that ignoring the cultural differences between the client and the counselor, consciously or unconsciously, may indicate counter-transference. In both cases, the statements of the counselors regarding that there is not even a single cultural difference between them and the client may be an indicator of the poor awareness of the counselor regarding the client's culture or a counter-transference. It can be concluded that this may hinder the healthy progress of the psychological counseling process.

When the participants were asked which counseling skill(s) would help them to cope more easily with the difficulties arising from cultural differences between them and their clients, the responses that stood out in the first two rows were reflection of feelings and reflecting content. In the relevant literature, the reflection of feelings and reflecting content are stated as similar skills (Young, 2019). A significant portion of the participants stated that reflection of feelings and reflecting content can make a client from a different culture feel better understood. In support of this finding, in a study conducted by Fuertes et al. (2002), psychotherapists stated that they used basic counseling skills when providing counseling assistance to clients belonging to different races and that an empathetic understanding would give their clients the feeling of being better understood. Similarly, Young (2019) stated that reflection of feelings provides the client the message

that the counselor understands their experiences. Another significant point is that the client is encouraged to tell more through reflection skills (Ivey et al., 2002). Accordingly, reflecting feelings and content, which are considered important skills in the context of multicultural counseling, were stated in the relevant literature as providing assistance to the counselor to understand the client's cultural background and the way of making sense of the world (Ivey et al., 2002; Pedersen & Ivey, 1993 as cited in Büyüksahin Çevik, 2014). On the other hand, in a study conducted by Kassan and Sinacore (2016), most of the clients stated that the counselor's self-disclosure had a positive effect on the therapeutic relationship by making them feel culturally comfortable, safe, and approved. In this context, it is possible to argue that making the client feel understood while providing counseling services to clients from different cultures is a key point in terms of the use of basic counseling skills.

When the psychological counselors were asked which cultural difference(s) between them and their clients would challenge their counseling services, only one participant stated that she would not have any difficulty in case of any cultural differences. Responding to this question by stating any cultural dimension may be significant in that psychological counselors were able to notice their prejudices and shortcomings as human beings, and they saw the potential danger of counter-transference that may arise in the counseling session. Sexual orientation came to the fore in the first place among the answers given to this question. So much so that a significant portion of the psychological counselors stated that they were worried about the way they could follow in the counseling session as they had not met an individual with a different sexual orientation before. Güçlücan (2016) observed that the group of psychological counselors who provided counseling services least frequently were the clients with different sexual identities. It may seem ordinary that psychological counselors are also concerned about providing counseling to a group that is always present albeit invisible (Arredondo et al., 1996; Moodley, 2007) in society. On the other hand, counselors' being in environments where they may encounter groups belonging to cultural minorities with the purpose of gaining knowledge about the cultures of these groups is considered a multicultural counseling competency (Sue et al., 1992). In this respect, psychological counselors can obtain knowledge from different sources about people with different sexual orientations. For example, counselors may participate in the communities created by these individuals to better understand their cultural structures, interact with the members of this group, and improve their knowledge on this subject. Reading books, watching movies, participating in discussions, or doing scientific research on this subject may also contribute to obtaining knowledge on this subject (Constantine et al., 2004).

The participants were also asked which cultural similarity/similarities between them and their clients might positively affect the counseling session. The answers provided to this question pointed to the diversity in different categories such as educational background, religious belief, location of residence, socioeconomic status, and gender roles. It seems difficult to holistically analyze the answers given by each participant based on their own experiences, family structure, and world-view. There was no study in the literature directly investigating this issue. In this respect, the findings obtained on the basis of this question can contribute significantly to the literature. Five psychological counselors stated that being similar in any cultural dimension with their clients would not contribute positively to the counseling process. It is also significant that a few of these participants pointed out that this may cause counter-transference. Kottler (2017) stated that psychological counselors can conveniently provide counseling to clients who they think are similar to them in terms of basic belief, socioeconomic status, race, and religious belief, even if they do not explicitly express so. On the other hand, Sue et al. (1992) define the tendency of counselors to feel comfortable with the cultural differences between them and their clients as a multicultural counseling competence. Counselors' thoughts that any cultural similarity between them and their clients will positively affect the counseling service may be attributed to the fact that they do not feel comfortable enough about these cultural differences in the counseling process. On the other hand, there are studies in the literature emphasizing the cultural aspect of counter-transference (Bonovitz, 2005; La Roche, 1999). It was argued that psychotherapists in some cultural minority groups may exhibit counter-transference by identifying themselves with clients from their own culture (Comas-Diaz & Jacobsen, 1991; Evans, 1985; Gorkin, 1986). In this respect, it is possible to conclude that some of the participants who stated that any cultural similarity with their clients would not positively contribute to the counseling process had an awareness of the risk of developing cultural counter-transference. In addition, one participant stated that although having similarities with the client in terms of age and gender would positively affect the counseling process, this situation could indicate a counter-transference. It is possible to

conclude that this participant is also aware of the potential danger of cultural counter-transference that may arise during the counseling process. On the other hand, participants who answered this question by pointing to any other cultural dimensions and their clients would positively affect the counseling process should question how the cultural similarities could positively affect the counseling session and investigate and analyze whether this indicates a counter-transference may be significant in terms of the quality of the psychological counseling service to be provided.

In a nut shell, this study may be crucial for counselors to recognize their perceptions about working with clients from different cultures. These perceptions may be prejudices. They may lead to negative results in the form of intercultural transference in sessions. Multicultural counseling training will be an essential element at this point.

## **6. Limitations and Recommendations**

The study has two significant limitations: The first is that the study was carried out with the participation of psychological counselors who were not active practitioners but were receiving postgraduate education. Another limitation of the study is that research data was collected from a single region of Turkey. It will be more beneficial to increase the diversity of data by collecting from participants from different geographies and with different experiences.

This part of the study presents some further recommendations for researchers and practitioners in the light of the results obtained from the research. Researchers may conduct a comparative analysis examining the psychological counselors' perceptions of providing assistance to clients from different cultures with the participation of individuals from different regions and educational backgrounds (bachelor's degree, master's degree, and Ph.D.). Thus, it will be possible to reveal the differences in perception that may vary from region to region or according to different educational backgrounds. Perceptions of psychological counselors about providing counseling services to clients from different cultures can be examined with the participation of psychological counselors actively working with a wide range of clients. Thus, the data obtained can better reflect the current situation. Considering that counselors' poor awareness of their clients' cultural background is an ethical problem, further studies can be recommended on the execution of psychological counseling supervision practices in a culturally sensitive manner.

This study further revealed that a significant portion of the participants acquired their current knowledge on multicultural counseling approach through their individual research or incidentally rather than in a planned and programmed way within the scope of their academic education. In this context, training (such as seminars and courses) on multicultural counseling approach can be organized for psychological counselors under the umbrella of the Ministry of National Education or the Turkish Psychological Counseling Association. This study revealed that psychological counselors do not have sufficient knowledge and awareness about multicultural counseling approach. There are studies in the literature showing that the education and trainings to be provided on multicultural counseling approach improve students' awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity to culture (Aydın, 2014; Barden & Greene, 2015; Castillo et al., 2007; Chao et al., 2011; Yıldırım, 2020). Therefore, multicultural counseling approach, particularly Cultural Psychology, can be taught as a sub-branch of psychology and offered as a compulsory course in the bachelor's degree and post-graduate degree academic programs of universities on Psychological Counseling and Guidance. Psychoeducation programs can also be developed and implemented in order to improve the knowledge and to raise awareness of students studying Psychological Counseling and Guidance. Another way to improve the knowledge and raise awareness of psychological counselors about cultural differences is by interacting with different cultures and increasing the diversity of life experiences (Barreto, 2013; Constantine et al., 2004). In this context, directing students studying in the Psychological Counseling and Guidance academic programs to domestic and international exchange programs may contribute to improving their cultural knowledge and raising awareness.

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