



Building Competence in Disability: The Role of Life Experience and Specialised Courses in Trainee Counsellors

Rina Ussu Lembang, Aina Razlin Mohammad Roose* & Sheilla Lim Omar Lim

Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Despite the offer of counselling services for persons with disabilities by government agencies in Malaysia since 1998, many counsellors still struggle with low competence in handling disability cases. Given the rising demand for these services, it is essential to assess the competence levels of trainee counsellors and identify factors contributing to their readiness. This study aims to examine the relationship between self-perceived disability competence among trainee counsellors in Malaysia and several key factors, including life experiences related to disability and the completion of rehabilitation and multicultural counselling courses. Utilising a correlational research design, a standardised questionnaire was administered to 201 participants. Statistical analysis revealed strong positive relationships between self-perceived disability competence and the completion of both types of counselling courses, as well as prior disability-related life experience. These findings highlight the importance of integrating life exposure and comprehensive training in rehabilitation and multicultural counselling into counsellor education programs, which is crucial for enhancing counsellors' ability to effectively support individuals with disabilities.

Keywords: rehabilitation counselling, multicultural counselling, self-perceived disability competence, trainee counsellors, persons with disabilities

ARTICLE INFO

Email address: mrarazlin@unimas.my (Aina Razlin Mohammad Roose)

*Corresponding author

<https://doi.org/10.33736/jcshd.7495.2024>

e-ISSN: 2550-1623

Manuscript received: 29 July 2024; Accepted: 17 September 2024; Date of publication: 30 September 2024

Copyright: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the CC-BY-NC-SA (Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, for non-commercial purposes, provided the original work of the author(s) is properly cited.

1 INTRODUCTION

Latest statistics from the Department of Social Welfare (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat - JKM) in 2023 indicate that approximately 637,537 registered persons with disabilities (PWDs) live in Malaysia, constituting about 1.9% of the total population. The well-being of PWDs has become a significant focus in Malaysia, underscored by the government's concerted efforts to address their needs and challenges. With a commitment to fostering inclusivity and ensuring equitable access to opportunities, the Malaysian government has prioritised policies and initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality of life for individuals with disabilities.

Recognising the importance of holistic support, emphasis has been placed on addressing physical barriers and the socio-emotional and psychological challenges this demographic faces. In this context, the field of counselling plays a critical role in supporting PWDs and promoting their well-being. Counsellors have emerged as important figures in providing essential emotional support to PWDs. Beyond addressing practical concerns, counsellors play a crucial role in nurturing mental and emotional well-being, fostering resilience, and facilitating adaptive coping strategies.

Counsellors must be adequately prepared and competent to provide quality services to clients with disabilities. They require the necessary skills, knowledge, and empathy to meet the unique needs of PWDs. These competencies are essential for understanding the diverse experiences of PWDs and for delivering interventions that are both effective and respectful of their specific challenges. Counsellors who are well-prepared can offer more personalised and impactful support, helping PWDs navigate their daily lives, cope with emotional distress, and achieve greater independence.

Although counselling services have been officially offered to PWDs by government agencies since 1998, past research indicates that Malaysian counsellors faced several hindrances in providing their services, such as low competencies in handling disability cases (Mohd Jaladin, 2017; Mohd Salleh & Abdul Majid, 2019), and lack of knowledge and skills to provide counselling services for clients with disabilities (Mohd Salleh & Abdul Majid, 2019). A national study conducted by Mohd Jaladin (2017) reveals that counsellors in Malaysia generally need more confidence and higher competencies in handling counselling sessions with PWDs regarding knowledge, understanding, and skills. Another study by Bali and Othman (2017) reveals that the challenges faced by counsellors in handling counselling with clients with disabilities include the lack of knowledge of specific counselling skills and approaches for this population, unfamiliar with disability issues and needs, communication barriers, and feeling unconfident to handle the counselling sessions with this population. Over the years, the level of counsellors' competency has not improved much. The latest study by Mohd Salleh and Abdul Majid (2019) found that school counsellors' knowledge, skills, and awareness of rehabilitation counselling are moderate and have not reached effective service.

One of the sources of professional competencies in rehabilitation counselling (a specialised niche in counselling for disabilities) is clinical training programmes (Mamboleo et al., 2018). However, historically, the needs and concerns of PWDs have been given inadequate attention in counsellor training (Feather & Carlson, 2019). In Malaysia specifically, rehabilitation counselling has not been offered as a specialised programme at the graduate level. Instead, several local universities with counselling programmes include rehabilitation counselling only as one of the courses embedded within a broader counselling curriculum (Anuar et al., 2018). The lack of professional training has

resulted in counsellors and counsellors-in-training feeling unprepared, anxious, and frustrated about meeting the needs of PWDs (Rivas & Hill, 2018).

Other than disability-related training, past research suggests that accumulated disability-related life experience results in higher levels of overall self-perceived disability competence (Deroche et al., 2020). These experiences may include interactions with family members or friends with disabilities, volunteer work, or professional engagements in disability services. Rehabilitation counselling students reported that rehabilitation counselling coursework and their prior experiences with PWDs are the most substantial factors in developing advocacy competencies (Anderson, 2022).

Given the increasing number of PWDs who may benefit from counselling services, counsellor educators must assess the competence level of trainee counsellors, understand the factors contributing to this competence, and identify the necessary training (Deroche et al., 2020). This research explores the relationship between trainee counsellors' self-perceived disability competence, their disability-related life experiences, and the completion of specialised courses, multicultural counselling and rehabilitation counselling. The following research questions have been established to meet the objectives of this study:

1. What is the relationship between self-perceived disability competency and prior disability-related life experience among trainee counsellors?
2. What is the relationship between self-perceived disability competency and the completion of a rehabilitation counselling course among trainee counsellors?
3. What is the relationship between self-perceived disability competency and the completion of a multicultural counselling course among trainee counsellors?

2 METHODS

This section outlines the research design, participant details, instruments used, and data collection procedures employed in the study to examine the relationships between self-perceived disability competence and various influencing factors among trainee counsellors.

2.1 Design

The study used a correlational approach to investigate the relationships between the main variables of interest: self-perceived disability competence, prior disability-related life experience, and completion of rehabilitation counselling and multicultural counselling courses.

2.2 Participants

The recruited participants were trainee counsellors enrolled at a public university in Malaysia. Three hundred thirty-eight potential respondents were contacted through electronic recruitment methods, including WhatsApp and email. By the conclusion of the data collection period, 201 completed surveys were received. This sample size is adequate and meets Cohen's (1992) guidelines, which suggest a minimum of 169 participants to ensure robust statistical analysis and reliable results in correlational studies. The substantial response rate enhances the generalisability of the findings within the context of this university. It provides a solid foundation for assessing the self-perceived disability competence among trainee counsellors.

2.3 Instrument

The online questionnaire used in this study is divided into two parts: the biographical section and the disability competence section.

Biographical section. The biographical section included items to indicate their age, gender, year of study, disability-related life experience, multicultural counselling course completion, and rehabilitation counselling course completion.

Disability competence section. Self-perceived disability competency among trainee counsellors was measured using the Counselling Clients with Disabilities Survey (CCDS; Strike et al., 2004). CCDS is a 60-item scale measuring professionals' self-perceived competence level in working with PWDs. It has three sub-scales that measure different aspects of disability competency: Self-Awareness, Perceived Knowledge, and Perceived Skills. Each sub-scale comprises 20 statements, and the respondents indicate their agreement or disagreement on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). A high total score indicates greater self-reported competence, and a low score indicates less competence. The psychometric properties of the CCDS were reliable with internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for the total scale has been reported as .94 (Strike et al., 2004), .87 (Hollimon, 2007), and .78 (McLennon, 2012). The three subscales have yielded alpha coefficients of .46 to .67 for Self-Awareness, .58 to .87 for Perceived Knowledge, and .62 to .90 for Perceived Skills (McLennon, 2012; Strike et al., 2004).

2.3 Procedure

The primary researcher, also the first author, disseminated a recruitment letter and a web-based survey link electronically via WhatsApp and emailed it to 338 trainee counsellors across all academic years, from the first year to the fourth year. This approach was chosen to maximise outreach and convenience, ensuring participation from a broad and diverse pool of respondents. By the end of the data collection period, 201 completed surveys were received, yielding a response rate of approximately 59%. While past studies on counsellor competence focused on counselling practitioners as samples (e.g., Mohd Jaladin, 2017; Mohd Salleh & Abdul Majid, 2019), the broader recruitment strategy used in the present study sought to provide a more comprehensive representation of trainee counsellors. Furthermore, unlike previous studies that predominantly focused on theoretical aspects of counsellor training, our study specifically targeted self-perceived competence in handling disability cases, incorporating life experience and specific coursework as variables of interest. This methodological distinction allows for a deeper exploration of how real-world exposure and targeted training influence trainee counsellors' perceived readiness, offering new insights and potentially challenging the assumptions of past research that might have overlooked these factors.

3 RESULTS

To address the first research question, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to assess whether a significant relationship existed between self-perceived disability competence and prior disability-related life experience. As shown statistically in Table 1, the results revealed a significant

and strong positive relationship ($r = .891$, $p < 0.01$) between self-perceived disability competence and prior disability-related life experience. These findings suggest that trainee counsellors who have previous experiences or exposure to disability-related situations are more likely to perceive themselves as more competent in working with individuals with disabilities.

Table 1. Pearson correlation between self-perceived disability competence and prior disability-related life experience.

| | | Self-perceived | Life experience |
|-----------------|---------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Self-perceived | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .891** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | N | 201 | 201 |
| Life experience | Pearson Correlation | .891** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | N | 201 | 201 |

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Regarding the second research question, a Pearson correlation analysis explored the relationship between self-perceived disability competence and multicultural counselling course completion. Table 2 shows a significant and strong positive correlation between self-perceived disability competence and multicultural counselling course completion ($r = .892$, $p < 0.01$). This finding suggests that trainee counsellors perceived themselves as competent when equipped with multicultural counselling knowledge.

Table 2. Pearson correlation between self-perceived disability competence and completion of multicultural counselling course.

| | | Self-perceived | Knowledge of multicultural counselling |
|----------------|---------------------|----------------|--|
| Self-perceived | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .892** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | N | 201 | 201 |
| Knowledge | Pearson Correlation | .892** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | N | 201 | 201 |

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To address the third research question, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine whether a significant relationship existed between self-perceived disability competence and

completion of a rehabilitation counselling course. As shown in Table 3, the analysis indicated a strong positive relationship ($r = .875$, $p < 0.01$) between self-perceived disability competence and rehabilitation counselling course completion. This finding suggests that trainee counsellors perceived themselves as competent when equipped with rehabilitation counselling knowledge.

Table 3. Pearson correlation between self-perceived disability competence and completion of a rehabilitation counselling course.

| | | Self-perceived | Knowledge of rehabilitation counselling |
|----------------|---------------------|----------------|---|
| Self-perceived | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .875** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | N | 201 | 201 |
| Skills | Pearson Correlation | .875** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | N | 201 | 201 |

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4 DISCUSSIONS

The current study aimed to investigate the self-perceived disability competency among trainee counsellors and identify the factors influencing this competency. The analysis focused on three main factors: prior disability-related life experience, completion of a multicultural counselling course, and completion of a rehabilitation counselling course. The results revealed significant and strong positive relationships between self-perceived disability competence and each of these factors, offering valuable insights into the elements that contribute to a counsellor's confidence and perceived ability to work with individuals with disabilities.

On average, participants in this study reported the highest level of competency in self-awareness ($M=75.83$), followed by self-perceived knowledge ($M= 73.63$) and self-perceived skills ($M= 64.43$). The results showed that participants' self-perceived competency level is at mid-range. The lowest level of competence related to self-perceived skills may be associated with a lack of practical experience with PWDs (Deroche et al., 2020).

The significant positive correlation between self-perceived disability competence and prior disability-related life experience ($r = .891$, $p < 0.01$) suggests that personal exposure to disability-related situations is crucial in shaping counsellors' perceptions of their competence. Trainee counsellors with prior experience in disability contexts likely develop a deeper understanding and empathy towards individuals with disabilities. Such exposure provides practical insights and firsthand knowledge that theoretical learning alone cannot offer. As Chapin et al. (2018) highlighted, real-world experiences are instrumental in building the self-efficacy of counsellors,

enabling them to feel more competent and prepared to address the unique challenges faced by individuals with disabilities.

Similarly, the strong positive relationship between self-perceived disability competence and the completion of a multicultural counselling course ($r = .892, p < 0.01$) emphasises the importance of multicultural education in counsellor training. Multicultural counselling courses are designed to equip trainees with the knowledge and skills to work effectively with clients from diverse backgrounds, including those with disabilities. These courses often cover topics such as cultural sensitivity, diversity awareness, and inclusive practices, which are essential for fostering an inclusive counselling environment. Feather and Carlson (2019) argue that multicultural competence is a cornerstone of effective counselling practice, and this study's findings support this view. Trainee counsellors who have completed multicultural counselling courses are likely better prepared to understand and address their clients' complex, intersecting identities, thereby enhancing their self-perceived competence.

The completion of a rehabilitation counselling course also showed a significant and strong positive correlation with self-perceived disability competence ($r = .875, p < 0.01$). Rehabilitation counselling courses specifically focus on the needs and challenges of individuals with disabilities, providing trainees with specialised knowledge and practical skills to support this population. These courses cover various topics, including disability rights, accessibility issues, and adaptive technologies, critical for effective counselling interventions. Leahy (2018) notes that specialised training in rehabilitation counselling is essential for developing the expertise required to work with individuals with disabilities. The findings of this study suggest that such specialised training significantly enhances trainee counsellors' confidence in their ability to provide competent and effective services to clients with disabilities.

These findings have profound implications for counsellor education programmes. Integrating opportunities for direct engagement with disability-related situations into the curriculum can significantly enhance trainee counsellors' self-perceived competence. Practical experiences, such as internships, volunteer work, and case studies involving individuals with disabilities, can provide valuable real-world learning opportunities. Additionally, comprehensive multicultural and rehabilitation counselling courses should be integral to counsellor education programmes. These courses provide essential theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and cultural competence for effective counselling practice.

Despite providing valuable insights, this study has several limitations. It relied on self-reported measures, which may not fully reflect participants' actual counselling abilities. The findings may only be generalisable in the specific context of a public university. The cross-sectional design offers a snapshot, while longitudinal studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding. The study focused solely on self-perceived competence and did not include client or supervisor feedback.

Additionally, the exclusive use of quantitative methods may overlook the depth of qualitative research. Future research should consider incorporating qualitative research designs such as interviews and focus groups. These offer a more nuanced understanding and allow for deeper insights into trainee counsellors' self-perceived competence in working with individuals with disabilities. By incorporating longitudinal studies, we can understand how these competencies develop over time and the long-term impact of various educational interventions. Additionally,

exploring the influence of race and ethnicity on self-perceived disability competence can help identify cultural factors that shape trainees' attitudes, knowledge, and skills.

Furthermore, future research should also continue to explore other factors that may influence self-perceived disability competence, such as cultural competence, empathy training, and the role of supervision. Understanding the intersectionality of disability and cultural identities can inform the development of culturally responsive training approaches and interventions to better support trainee counsellors in serving diverse populations. Thus, these research directions aim to advance counsellor training programmes and improve the delivery of inclusive and effective counselling services to individuals with disabilities.

This study highlights the importance of prior disability-related life experiences, multicultural counselling education, and rehabilitation counselling education in enhancing self-perceived disability competence among trainee counsellors. The results contribute to understanding the factors that influence trainee counsellors' preparedness and confidence in working with individuals with disabilities. Addressing these key factors within counsellor education programmes can better prepare future counsellors to provide inclusive and effective services to PWDs. By fostering a more inclusive counselling practice, these efforts will contribute to the overall quality of mental health care and promote a more inclusive society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research received no specific grant from public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agencies.

REFERENCES

Anderson, D. M. (2022). *Rehabilitation counselor competency when working with SCI and physical disabilities* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Walden University.

Anuar, A., Aren, M., Ghazali, N. M., Aden, E., & Yahya, F. (2018). Accommodating students with disabilities in higher education: Rehabilitation counseling perspectives. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(14), 167–174. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v8-i14/5038>

Bali, N., & Othman, M.H. (2017). Keterlibatan dan cabaran guru bimbingan dan kaunseling sekolah terhadap murid berkeperluan khas. *Asian Social Work Journal*, 2(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.47405/aswj.v2i2.15>

Chapin, M., McCarthy, H., Shaw, L., Bradham-Cousar, M., Chapman, R., Nosek, M., Peterson, S., Yilmaz, Z., & Ysasi, N. (2018). Disability-related counseling competencies. American Rehabilitation Counseling Association (ARCA) Task Force on Competencies for Counseling Persons with Disabilities. <https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/competencies/arca-disability-related-counseling-competencies-final-version-5-15-19.pdf>

Cohen, J. (1992). Quantitative methods in psychology: A power primer. *Psychological Bulletin*, 112(1), 155–159. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.112.1.155>

Deroche, M. D., Herlihy, B., & Lyons, M. L. (2020). Counselor trainee self-perceived disability competence: Implications for training. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 59(3), 187–199. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12183>

Feather, K. A., & Carlson, R. G. (2019). An initial investigation of individual instructors' self-perceived competence and incorporation of disability content into CACREP-accredited programs: Rethinking training in counselor education. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 47(1), 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12118>

Hollimon, M. T. (2007). *Self-perceived competence and attitudes of counseling psychology graduate students regarding people with disabilities* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Auburn University.

Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat. (2023). *Statistik pendaftaran OKU*. [https://www.jkm.gov.my/jkm/uploads/files/STATISTIK%20PENDAFTRAAN%20OKU%2031012023%20\(2\).pdf](https://www.jkm.gov.my/jkm/uploads/files/STATISTIK%20PENDAFTRAAN%20OKU%2031012023%20(2).pdf)

Leahy, M. J. (2018). Rehabilitation counseling professionals' competencies. In V. M. Tarvydas & M. T. Hartley (Eds.), *The professional practice of rehabilitation counseling* (2nd ed., pp. 15–30). Springer Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826139047.0001>

Mamboleo, G., Blake, J., Taylor, J., Daniels, J., & Thorne, K. (2018). Rehabilitation counseling competencies for working with veterans: Delphi study findings. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling*, 49(3), 30–38. <https://doi.org/10.1891/0047-2220.49.3.30>

McLennon, S. M. (2012). *Knowledge, attitudes, and skills related to disabilities among psychologists: Are we competent to practice in this multicultural domain?* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Seton Hall University.

Mohd Jaladin, R.A. (2017). Perceived multicultural counseling competence of Malaysian counselors: An exploratory study. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 45(2), 127–148. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12069>

Rivas, M., & Hill, N. R. (2018). Counselor trainees' experiences counseling disability: A phenomenological study. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 57(2), 116–131. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12097>

Mohd Salleh, S., & Abdul Majid, R. (2019). Persepsi guru bimbingan dan kaunseling dalam menjalankan kaunseling kerjaya di kalangan murid berkeperluan khas. In *e-Prosiding Persidangan Antarabangsa Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan 2019* (pp. 1-11). Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor.

Strike, D. L., Skovholt, T. M., & Hummel, T. J. (2004). Mental health professionals' disability competence: Measuring self-awareness, self-perceived knowledge, and self-perceived skills. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 49(4), 321–327. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0090-5550.49.4.321>