

**Exploring School Counselors' Social Desirability, Multicultural Counseling
Competence, and Demographics in the Midwest**

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Abstract

Multicultural counseling competence is vital for school counselors to meet the diverse needs of school communities. Furthermore, school counselors are called upon to develop and maintain their multicultural counseling competencies throughout the course of their careers. This study explored perceived multicultural counseling competencies of school counselors ($N=320$) in three Midwestern states. Data sources were the Multicultural Counseling Inventory (MCI), Marlowe-Crown Social Desirability Scale, Short Form-C (MC-C), and demographic questions. Results demonstrated statistical significance between gender, years of experience, and social desirability across subscales of the MCI. Implications for school counselors and school counselor educators are provided.

Keywords: social desirability, school counselors, multicultural counseling competence

Exploring School Counselors' Social Desirability, Multicultural Counseling Competence, and Demographics in the Midwest

In order to meet the increasingly diverse needs of students and school communities, school counselors must commit to continued awareness and development of their multicultural counseling competencies (MCCs) (Collins, Arthur, Brown, & Kennedy, 2015; Levy & Plucker, 2008; Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016; West-Olatunji, Goodman, & Shure, 2011). Practicing school counselors believe MCCs are “an important part of their responsibilities as a counseling professional” (Mayorga, Furgerson, Cook, & Wardle, 2012, p. 43). Furthermore, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) asserts that school counselors provide culturally responsive school counseling by, “enhancing their own cultural competence and facilitating the cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills of all school personnel” (ASCA, 2015, p. 19).

Research supports the field’s emphasis on MCC, and indicates that culturally competent school counselors are helpful to students while addressing diversity, and integral for fostering more inclusive educational environments for diverse student populations (Constantine et al., 2001; Guzmán, Calfa, Van Horn Kerne, & McCarthy, 2013; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). However, while most school counselors would agree higher MCCs may help them better serve student populations, mixed MCC research (Holcomb-McCoy & Day-Vines, 2004; Packer-Williams, Jay, & Evans, 2010) raises several points for consideration along instrumentation selection, social desirability, MCC predictors, stages of professional identity, and demographic factors such as work setting and geographic location.

Research on MCC instrumentation is well documented (Guzmán et al., 2013; Holcomb-McCoy & Day-Vines, 2004; Mayorga et al., 2012; Packer-Williams et al., 2010). The majority of MCC instruments within psychology and counseling related fields are anchored by Sue et al. (1992) *knowledge, awareness, and skills* concepts. These concepts laid the conceptual groundwork to initiate a robust effort to conceptualize, operationalize, and effectively measure MCC (Donnell, 2008). Founded upon these constructs (Sue et al., 1982), the Cross-Cultural Counseling Inventory-Revised (CCCI-R) (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Hernandez, 1991), Multicultural Counseling Awareness Scale-Form B (Ponterotto, Sanchez, & Magids, 1990), Multicultural Awareness-Knowledge—and Skills Survey (MAKSS) (D’Andrea, & Daniels, 1991), and Multicultural Counseling Inventory (MCI) (Sodowsky, Taffe, Gutkin, & Wise, 1994), are the most widely cited MCC instruments. Specifically, within school counseling, two MCC instruments are noteworthy.

Since its inception, the Multicultural Counseling Competence and Training Survey (MCCTS; MCCTS-R) (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999) has received considerable attention for its purposeful focus on school counselors’ MCC (e.g., Holcomb-McCoy, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy & Day-Vines, 2004). The MCCTS was designed to assess school counselors’ MCCs across three dimensions: *multicultural terminology, multicultural knowledge, and multicultural awareness*. In addition, the One School Many Differences (OSMD) instrument (Tadlock-Mario, Zyromski, Asner-Self, & Sheng, 2012) was developed in congruence with the competencies of ASCA and the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD). The OSMD assessment was designed to further understanding

of the essential role of school counselors' MCC, as school counselors are uniquely positioned in schools to foster more inclusive educational environments for diverse student populations (Tadlock-Mario et al., 2012). Unlike the MCCTS-R, the OSMD remains relatively underutilized among MCC researchers.

Social Desirability in MCC Research

Social desirability or the “presentation of oneself in an overtly favorable light” is well documented in social and behavioral disciplines (Tracey, 2016, p. 224). In the counseling and MCC literature, respondents may rate themselves higher (more socially desirable) to appear more multiculturally competent. Therefore, controlling for social desirability in MCC research remains an important tool to address limitations of self-report and self-perceived behaviors (Constantine & Ladany, 2000). Despite social desirability having a presence in MCC research (e.g., Constantine & Ladany, 2000; Constantine, Juby, & Liang, 2001; Sadowsky, Huo-Jackson, Richardson, & Corey, 1998), using self-report measures to understand MCC remains a limitation in school counseling research (Guzmán et al., 2013; Owens, Bodenhorn, & Bryant, 2010) and warrants further examination (Dodson, 2013; Packer-Williams et al., 2010).

School Counselor MCC Research

Several quantitative studies have explored school counselors' self-perceived MCCs across different topics, levels of training, and populations. For example, Packer-Williams et al. (2010) discovered integrating multicultural trainings and other diversity practices were not helpful, timely, or significantly important to practicing school counselors. This study indicated such trainings contributed to increased self-awareness and knowledge regarding the importance of MCC; however, participants lacked skill

integration in daily practice (Packer-Williams et al., 2010). Similarly, Robles-Piña (2002) evaluated school counselors' opinions of the types of MCC trainings (i.e., specific curriculum, integration in general curriculum, semester-long courses, workshops, etc.) received during and after graduate school. Robles-Piña (2002) discovered students' MCC scores were highest when MCC experiences or trainings were integrated into graduate school curriculum. Similarly, Constantine et al. (2001) discovered school counselors reported higher MCCs as a result of taking more multicultural counseling courses during their graduate training. Other examinations found a positive relationship between practicing school counselors' self-efficacy and multicultural self-efficacy along *terminology*, *knowledge*, and *awareness* scales of the MCCTS-R (Owens et al., 2010). In addition, research on graduate school counseling students' self-perceived MCCs for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students revealed significantly lower levels of preparedness and MCC (Schmidt, Glass, & Wooten, 2011).

Mixed methods research has also explored school counselors' perceived MCC. A study integrating the MCCTS-R and the Multicultural Critical Incidents Vignettes (MCIV), indicated self-perception of MCC did not predict competence when participants were asked to demonstrate application of MCC through a series of vignettes illustrating how multiculturalism manifests in the daily experiences of practicing school counselors (Guzmán et al., 2013). This noteworthy study illuminated the need for additional research, training, and practice to bridge the gap between self-awareness and the skills necessary to become a culturally competent school counselor. Qualitatively, West-Olatunji, Goodman, and Shure (2010) uncovered that multicultural supervision enhanced experienced school counselors' MCCs, yet demonstrated little differences

among novice school counselors. Of interest, West-Olatunji et al. (2010) found school counselors that reported higher non-school counselor responsibilities (e.g., scheduling, administrative tasks, bus duties) had lower competencies across delivery and direct contact dimensions.

MCC and Demographic Variables

Developing one's self-perceived MCC seems to be largely focused on individual demographics. As such, a large percentage of the MCC literature uses *awareness*, *knowledge*, and *skills* (Sue et al., 1982) constructs to gauge variance of MCC among different demographic groups of school counselors. Unfortunately, understanding of the relationships between MCCs and school counselor demographics remains unclear. For example, positive relationships were noted in perceived levels of MCC for urban school counselors (Robles-Piña, 2002), non-white school counselors (Guzmán et al., 2013), and across different regions of the United States (Mayorga et al., 2012). In contrast, rural school counselors (Robinson & Bradley, 2005) and school counselors from particular states (i.e., Texas, Virginia) reported lower self-perceptions of MCC (Dodson, 2013). Gender, racial identity, and ethnicity are variables that have also produced mixed results (Dodson, 2013; Vinson & Neimeyer, 2000). In addition, professional organizations that oversee training standards and professional identity such as ASCA and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) seem to have little impact on self-perceived MCC (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999; Mayorga et al., 2012). Arguably the most scrutinized demographic variable, school counselors' years of experience, seems to generate inconsistent results as well (e.g., Guzmán et al., 2013; Owens et al., 2010). Considering prior evidence,

MCC researchers suggest previously examined demographic variables and additional new variables need further examination to enhance understanding of factors contributing to school counselors' MCC (Dodson, 2013).

Purpose of Study

Further exploration of social desirability, school counselors' MCC, and demographic variables is needed to increase understanding and improve culturally competent school counselor education and practice. Given the inconsistent MCC findings for school counselors, this study assessed a large population of school counselors' self-reported MCCs in three Midwestern states: South Dakota, North Dakota, and Nebraska. The following research questions guided the design and implementation of this study:

1. Is there a statistically significant relationship between demographic variables and social desirability?
2. Is there a statistically significant difference on MCI subscales by ASCA versus non-ASCA affiliation, CACREP versus non-CACREP accreditation, and gender demographic variables?
3. Is there a statistically significant difference on MCI subscale scores and educational training location, type of internship training, or current type of location as a school counselor?

Method

Procedures

Participants were recruited through emails obtained electronically from district, school, and state board of education websites. Approximately 5% of the sent emails were returned "undeliverable," resulting in 1540 email requests for participation. An incentive for participation was offered by prompting participants to submit an email

address to enter a drawing for a \$75 gift card upon completion of the study.

Subsequently, one school counselor was randomly selected and notified.

Participants were provided an introduction and description of the study, including IRB approval, purpose of the research, lead investigators' contact information, and an electronic link to the survey platform, Psychdata. Participants were also reminded they could end the survey at any time. Two reminder emails were sent by the lead researcher one and two weeks after the initial email invitation. The survey link was closed one month after the initial email invitation was sent. Approximately 20 minutes were needed to complete the survey for each participant.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to gather data. The MCI (Sodowsky et al., 1994) was selected due to previous use in school counselor MCC research (e.g., Dodson, 2013; Robinson & Bradley, 2005; Robles-Piña, 1992), subscale emphasis on the counseling relationship, and ability to meet seven of nine quality standards set forth by the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (American Educational Research Association, 2014; Gamst & Liang, 2013, Green et al., 2005). The MCI is a 40-item, 4-point Likert-type scale comprised of four subscales: *skills*, *multicultural knowledge*, *multicultural awareness*, and *counseling relationship*.

The Marlow Crown Short Form-C (MC-C) (Reynolds, 1982) was selected to help control for respondents' social desirability. The MC-C is a 13-item, true or false type scale. Items on the MC-C include prompts such as, "No matter who I'm talking to, I'm always a good listener." Demographics such as gender, ethnicity, years of experience

working as a school counselor, and type of location for training (urban, urban cluster, and rural) were also included.

Results

SPSS version 24 software was used for analysis. The majority of respondents were White (88.5%), self-identified as female (82.9%) and male (17.15%), and reported a variety of graduate training, practicum, and internship locations (urban, rural, and urban cluster). The mean years of experience as a school counselor was 12.91. Most participants graduated from CACREP accredited programs (75.8%) and approximately half reported ASCA membership (55.6%).

Years of Experience and Social Desirability

For research question one, the correlation between demographic variable “years of experience” and social desirability was examined using bivariate correlation coefficients. The average years of experience and social desirability was relatively small per Pearson’s coefficients for effect size. Correlation coefficients among years of experience, social desirability, and subscales of the MCI are reported in Table 1. A few correlation coefficients with subscales (see *skills* compared to *multicultural awareness*) were noted. Additionally, social desirability was found to be statistically significant at $p < .001$ with the *counseling relationship* subscale. These results suggest that as years of experience increased, school counselors’ social desirability about counseling relationships also increased. There was no statistically significant difference between social desirability and demographic variables *gender*, *ASCA* versus *non-ASCA* affiliation, or graduating from *CACREP* versus non-*CACREP* institutions.

Table 1.

Summary of Correlations (n), Means, and Standard Deviations for Scores on the MCI Subscales, and Years of Experience as a Function of Social Desirability

Variable	M	SD	N	1	2	3	4	5
Skills	2.84	0.39	322					
MA	2.78	0.56	290	.86** (290)				
CR	3.41	0.37	321	.00 (321)	.10 (290)			
MK	3.19	0.38	321	.72** (321)	.54 (290)	.14* (321)		
Yrs Exp	12.91	9.56	320	-.04 (320)	.53 (289)	.07 (320)	-.04 (320)	
Social D	1.58	0.12	309	-.02 (309)	.03 (282)	.19** (308)	-.05 (308)	.05 (307)

Note. MCI = Multicultural Counseling Inventory. MA, CR, and MK represent Multicultural Awareness, Counseling Relationship, and Multicultural Knowledge subscales, respectively. Yrs Exp = Years of Experience, Social D = Social Desirability. Numbers in parentheses located underneath correlation coefficient values represent the number of cases used to compute the correlations. Missing data were eliminated pairwise to maximize power.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Demographic Items and MCI Subscales

To address research question two, independent t-tests were conducted to compare differences between demographic items and school counselors' MCI subscales. Demographic questions such as ASCA versus non-ASCA affiliation, CACREP versus non-CACREP accreditation, and male and female genders were independent variables, while MCI subscale scores were dependent variables. For gender, respondents were provided a blank box to fill in or skip their gender identification to account for non-binary gender identities. All respondents entered either *male* or *female*. There was a significant difference in the scores for males ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.44$), and females ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.35$) in *counseling relationship* subscale ($t = 2.16$, $p = < .05$). There was also a significant difference in the scores for males ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.42$) and females ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.37$) in *multicultural knowledge* subscale

($t = 2.32, p = < .05$). The effect size for *counseling relationship* ($d = 0.31$) and *multicultural knowledge* ($d = 0.34$) were found to be small to medium. There was no statistically significant difference in mean levels of gender, ASCA versus *non-ASCA* affiliation, or graduating from *CACREP* versus *non-CACREP* institutions for *multicultural awareness* and *skills* subscales as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2.

Results of t-test on Gender for School Counselor Self-perceived MCC and MCI Subscales

MCI Subscales	Male			Female			95% CI for Mean Difference		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>		
Skills	55	2.80	0.41	267	2.85	0.39	-.07	.15	0.67	320
MA	50	2.83	0.54	240	2.77	0.56	-.23	.11	-0.68	288
CR	55	3.30	0.44	266	3.42	0.35	.01	.22	2.16*	319
MK	55	3.08	0.42	266	3.21	0.37	.01	.24	2.32*	319

Note. MCC = multicultural counseling competence. MA, CR, and MK represent multicultural awareness, counseling relationship, and multicultural knowledge subscales, respectively. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit, UL = upper limit.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Finally, for research question three, one-way ANOVAs were performed on several demographic variables. No significant difference was detected between MCI subscale scores between type of educational training location (i.e., urban, rural, urban cluster), type of internship training (i.e., urban, rural, urban cluster), or current type of location as a school counselor (i.e., urban, rural, urban cluster). There was a significant effect of years of experience on *skills* $F(4, 320), p = .02$ and *multicultural awareness* $F(4, 320), p = .00$ subscales but not for *multicultural knowledge* $F(4, 320), p = .90$ or *counseling relationship* $F(4, 320), p = .06$ subscales as depicted in Table 3.

Table 3.*Regression Analysis Predicting MCCs from Years of Experience*

Predictor	B ^a	95% CI		t	p
		LL	UL		
(Constant)	10.68	-2.38	23.76	1.61	0.11
Skills	-7.95	-14.85	-1.06	-2.27	.02*
MA	5.60	-14.85	-1.06	2.27	.00*
MK	-0.27	-4.67	4.12	-0.12	0.90
CR	2.86	-0.14	5.86	1.87	0.06

Note. MCC = Multicultural Counseling Competence. MA, CR, and MK represent Multicultural Awareness, Counseling Relationship, and Multicultural Knowledge subscales, respectively. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = lower limit, UL = upper limit. Skills subscale results indicate negative significance, while multicultural knowledge is positively significant.

*R² = .05, p = .005. The linear combination of multicultural competencies can be predicted by years of experience.

^a Unstandardized B

Interestingly, data reveals that MCI subscale *skills* was negatively correlated with years of experience. This finding suggests that school counselors' perceived MCCs decrease as years of experience increased. Additionally, the *multicultural awareness* subscale was positively correlated with years of experience.

Discussion

The results of this study exploring social desirability, self-perceived MCCs, and demographic variables for a sample of school counselors in the Midwest warrants further discussion. When controlled for by social desirability, school counselors' years of experience and MCI subscale scores revealed interesting findings. Years of experience and MCCs across *skills*, *multicultural knowledge*, and *multicultural awareness* subscales were not statistically significant. However, school counselors' years of experience and social desirability were positively correlated with the *counseling*

relationship subscale. This finding indicates that as school counselors gain years of experience, they perceive MCC pertaining to the counseling relationship to be more socially desirable than other MCC domains. It is possible the emphasis on the counseling relationship illuminates the unique role of school counselors as student advocates, and their perceptions regarding the importance of the counseling relationship on providing culturally competent services for all students. Increased understanding of the school counselor-student relationship and MCC may provide support for reduced school counselor-student ratios, as it is difficult to develop generative counseling relationships with caseloads that exceed the national ratio recommendations put forth by ASCA (2012). In addition, this finding merits further attention to better understand whether school counselors perceive themselves as competent to foster counseling relationships with diverse students, or wish to appear more capable than their MCCs suggest.

Years of experience were also found to have a significant negative relationship with the MCI subscale *skills*, and a positive relationship with the MCI subscale *awareness*. Due to this inverse relationship between *skills* and *awareness*, it is possible lived experiences and exposure to diverse school communities over time, raises school counselors' awareness of multiculturalism, while simultaneously calling into question the skills being taught in counselor education classrooms. Such understanding of the discrepancy between awareness and skills is a call to action for counselor educators, and the need for ongoing school counselor professional development. These findings supplement previous MCC research questioning school counselors' skills (e.g., Guzmán et al., 2013; Packer et al., 2010), illuminating a possible dearth of culturally competent

counseling skills in experienced school counselors. Further attention of school counselor education and ongoing professional development is necessary, as these findings also suggest that school counselors perceive themselves as having more multicultural competence shortly after completing graduate school (i.e., multicultural course activities, curriculum), as opposed to later in their careers.

Based on these results, it is possible that as school counselors enter the field, they perceive themselves as having the necessary skills to be a culturally competent school counselor, but over time, they begin to doubt their skills. In congruence with other MCC research (Dodson, 2013), this study calls into question participants' educational backgrounds, as CACREP versus non-CACREP accredited programs did not result in statistical significance. Therefore, regardless of educational background, it is possible that as years of experience increase there is a significant need for ongoing professional development to maintain MCCs. Further, practicing school counselors have less access to extant research and educational experiences to enhance their MCCs, and the school counselors in this study did not provide evidence that ASCA affiliation increased their MCCs. These findings support previous research (Dodson, 2013; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999) that suggests CACREP and ASCA standards may not create a significant difference in guidance for developing and maintaining MCCs for practicing school counselors. These findings also highlight the importance of continuing to explore MCCs for school counselors, and the ways in which MCC in knowledge, skills, and beliefs can be intentionally strengthened throughout school counselors' careers.

In contrast to previous research (Dodson, 2013; Owens et al., 2010), this study resulted in significant findings in levels of cultural competence of school counselors by gender along subscales *counseling relationship* and *multicultural knowledge*. For both subscales, participants identifying as female reported higher perceived MCCs. These findings suggest that gender identity may play a role in MCC among some populations; however, more research may shed light on what specific factors (i.e., work environment, nature of counseling relationships, interpersonal and intrapersonal processes) may influence self-perception of MCCs. Furthermore, comprehensive research including non-binary gender identities is essential for further understanding.

Other demographic variables under examination in this study such as school counselors' employment setting, type of field-based educational experiences (e.g., practicum and internship), and type of multicultural education did not result in statistically significant differences across any dimensions of self-perceived MCC. It is not surprising the employment setting did not yield significant results, as the participants in this study are assumed to work in similar contexts. However, it is interesting that school counselors' field-based experiences and multicultural education did not affect MCC. Further exploration of the types and locations of school counseling training programs in diverse areas may provide more insight into these demographic variables. Moreover, increased understanding of the demographics of school communities may be helpful for understanding the ongoing professional development needs of school counselors in the Midwest and other regions.

Limitations

The sample in this study was limited geographically, as respondents were recruited from three Midwestern states. There are several other states that represent the Midwest region of the US, thus, this sample is not entirely representative and overrepresentation of certain regions may have occurred. This study did not utilize random sampling procedures, thus, limiting generalizability of the findings. This research also suggests that more diverse school counselor respondents were needed, as studies without diverse samples may result in overrepresentation of one race or ethnicity such as in this sample (Robinson & Bradley, 2005). It is likely the sampling procedures in this study needed to reflect more cultures and ethnicities. Finally, perceived multicultural competence in self-report form limits results. Inclusion of the MC-C was intended to control for respondents' tendencies to respond due to perceived social desirability, however, more research with MCCs and social desirability measures is needed.

Implications for Future Research

The results of this study establish a foundation for future exploration of school counselors' MCCs in a variety of areas. For example, findings indicating school counselors' MCC regarding their counseling skills decreases as years of experience increase is of concern. More research is needed to determine why school counselors' MCCs decline over time. Such insight is imperative for assessing MCCs throughout school counselors' careers, and for developing ongoing professional development opportunities for school counselors to address this perceived skill deficit.

The results of this study also provide evidence that self-report measures of school counselors' MCCs are impacted by social desirability. The relationship between school counselors' perceptions of the counseling relationship and social desirability must be studied further to determine if school counselors have the foundation to develop and maintain culturally competent counseling relationships with diverse student populations. Understanding of this important school counselor-student dynamic is limited through self-report measures and self-perception, thus, demonstrating a need for measures of MCCs that include students' perceptions of their school counselors. Further, future research is needed to develop measurable constructs for assessing MCCs such as specific counseling behaviors that promote culturally competent school counseling practices. Exploring school counselors' MCCs through self-report measures alone is a substantive limitation of the field, and future research is necessary to develop mechanisms to support school counselors' MCCs throughout their careers.

Conclusion

If school counselors are going to meet the diverse needs of all students, ongoing MCC remains an imperative. This study revealed many Midwestern school counselors' perceived MCCs are comparable to other regions and groups of school counselors. However, these results also highlight the importance and evolution of MCCs overtime, and the ways in which school counselors must adapt accordingly. Increased, ongoing professional development is essential for ensuring school counselors are confident and competent to work with diverse school communities. Furthermore, school counselors must commit to reflective practices to ensure continued growth and MCC.

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