Peer Counselors as Agents of Inclusion: A Mixed-Methods Study on Multicultural Competence and Counseling Effectiveness in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness of peer counselors in delivering multicultural-based counseling services within a higher education context in Indonesia. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, data were collected from 33 university students through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with nine participants. Quantitative analysis revealed a strong positive correlation between peer counselor effectiveness and counseling outcomes ($r = 0.666$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that counselor effectiveness explains 44.4% of the variance in counseling success. The qualitative findings further identified four interrelated themes shaping effective multicultural peer counseling: *counselor–client relationship, communication skills, service quality,* and *cultural sensitivity*. Integration of both data sets demonstrated that peer counselors act not only as providers of emotional support but also as agents of inclusion, fostering trust, empathy, and intercultural understanding among students. The findings emphasize that multicultural competence particularly empathy and cultural awareness is essential for enhancing the quality and inclusiveness of peer counseling. This study contributes to the growing literature on multicultural counseling by providing empirical evidence from a non-Western, multicultural context, underscoring the importance of structured training and institutional support to sustain peer counseling as a preventive and promotive model for student mental health in higher education.

Keywords : Multicultural competence; Peer counseling; University students; Mixed-methods study; Cultural sensitivity; Counseling education.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis efektivitas konselor sebaya dalam memberikan layanan konseling berbasis multikultural di lingkungan perguruan tinggi Indonesia. Menggunakan desain mixed-methods, data dikumpulkan dari 33 mahasiswa melalui kuesioner dan wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap sembilan partisipan. Hasil analisis kuantitatif menunjukkan adanya korelasi positif yang kuat antara efektivitas

konselor sebaya dan keberhasilan layanan konseling (r = 0,666; p < 0,01), di mana efektivitas konselor menjelaskan 44,4% varians dalam keberhasilan konseling. Temuan kualitatif mengidentifikasi empat tema utama yang membentuk praktik konseling sebaya yang efektif, yaitu hubungan konselor–klien, keterampilan komunikasi, kualitas layanan, *dan* sensitivitas budaya. Integrasi kedua data menunjukkan bahwa konselor sebaya tidak hanya berperan sebagai pemberi dukungan emosional, tetapi juga sebagai agen inklusi yang membangun kepercayaan, empati, dan pemahaman lintas budaya di antara mahasiswa. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa kompetensi multicultural khususnya empati dan kesadaran budaya merupakan komponen penting untuk meningkatkan kualitas dan keberlanjutan layanan konseling sebaya. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi empiris dari konteks non-Barat yang multikultural, serta menekankan pentingnya pelatihan kompetensi multikultural dan dukungan institusional untuk memperkuat konseling sebaya sebagai model preventif dan promotif bagi kesejahteraan mental mahasiswa di perguruan tinggi.

Kata Kunci: Kompetensi multikultural; Konseling sebaya; Mahasiswa; Studi metode campuran; Sensitivitas Budaya; Efektifitas Konseling.

INTRODUCTION

Student mental health is an issue receiving increasing attention in higher education. Pressure, academic and social demands, and the transition to independent living often create complex psychological challenges. If not addressed appropriately, these conditions can develop into stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders, negatively impacting students' academic achievement and social functioning (Wahyuningsih et al., 2024; Wardhani et al., 2024). One of the main obstacles to addressing this issue is limited access to professional counseling services. Factors such as social stigma surrounding mental health, a lack of human resources, and a shortage of professional counselors in higher education institutions prevent many students from receiving adequate psychological support (Evans & Sejuit, 2021; Hall et al., 2020).

In response to this situation, peer counseling services have emerged as a potentially effective alternative approach. Peer counselors are students trained to provide emotional, social, and psychological support to their peers (Aqillah et al., 2025; Chui et al., 2014; Noviza, 2011; Rohayati et al., 2022). This approach is considered effective because it relies on similarities in age, experience, and a relatively close communication language between counselor and client. This peer relationship fosters a higher level of trust, openness, and empathy compared to more formal and hierarchical professional counseling relationships (Chui et al., 2014). In addition to helping students in need of support, peer counseling programs also provide benefits for the peer counselors themselves, such as improved interpersonal skills, empathy, and social awareness (Moch Syihabudin et al., 2024).

However, in the context of a multicultural society and campus, the effectiveness of peer counseling services depends not only on communication skills and empathy, but also on the competence of the multicultural peer counselors (Le et al., 2024; Nam & Kim, 2025). College students come from diverse cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and social backgrounds. This diversity influences how they express emotions, perceive personal problems, and seek psychological help (Fitrian et al., 2023; Moch Syihabudin et al., 2024; Romiaty et al., 2022). Without a sound understanding of this cultural diversity, the counseling process can experience communication barriers, misunderstandings, and even the potential for unconscious cultural bias (Harahap, 2019; Moch Syihabudin et al., 2024).

According to the theory of Multicultural Counseling Competencies (D. W. Sue & Sue, 1982), multiculturally competent counselors need to possess three main components: (1) self-awareness of personal biases and values; (2) knowledge of other cultures to understand the unique traditions, values, and experiences of those from diverse backgrounds; and (3) multicultural skills in applying counseling techniques that

are sensitive to cultural differences. This third aspect is an essential foundation for creating empathetic, inclusive, and prejudice-free counseling relationships.

In the increasingly culturally diverse context of higher education, the application of multicultural competence in peer counseling is highly urgent. Previous research (Esen Spahi et al., 2023; Evans & Sejuit, 2021; Novianti & Alawiyah, 2022; Siregar et al., 2024) shows that a multicultural approach not only helps students address personal challenges but also strengthens intercultural relationships on campus. However, most previous research has focused on the multicultural competence of professional counselors, while empirical studies of students as peer counselors are still very limited. This creates a research gap that needs to be bridged to understand how students internalize and apply multicultural competence in everyday counseling practice.

This context is also evident in the practice of the Counseling Center Laboratory of the Islamic Guidance and Counseling Study Program, Faculty of Ushuluddin, Adab, and Da'wah, UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu. Peer counseling services in this environment represent a concrete implementation of student-based psychological interventions designed to address the limited availability of professional staff while simultaneously increasing the need for mental health support. Students acting as peer counselors have received training covering empathetic communication skills, counseling fundamentals, and awareness of cultural and value diversity. In practice, peer counselors serve not only as providers of emotional support but also as agents in building an inclusive campus environment that supports students from diverse backgrounds.

However, the effectiveness of this service implementation depends heavily on the level of multicultural competence of the peer counselors. If these skills are not well developed, the potential of peer counseling services to improve students' mental well-being will be difficult to achieve optimally. Therefore, in-depth research is needed to assess and understand students' experiences as peer counselors in applying multicultural competence during the counseling process.

Therefore, this research is expected to provide theoretical contributions to enrich the study of multicultural competence in the context of non-professional counseling, as well as practical contributions to strengthening inclusive psychological support services in multicultural higher education environments. Through understanding students' lived experiences, it is hoped that more effective, empathetic, and responsive models for peer counseling training and practice can be formulated to address diverse cultural needs.

METHOD
Research Design

This study used a convergent mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of peer counselor effectiveness in multicultural peer counseling services (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The quantitative component examined the statistical relationship between peer counselor effectiveness and counseling success, while the qualitative component explored the experiences of students and counselors to enrich and validate the numerical findings. Both data sets were collected simultaneously and analyzed separately before being bracketed during the interpretation stage.
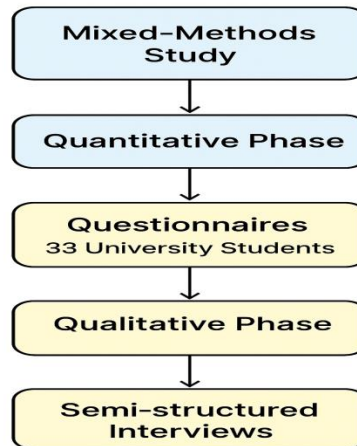
Figure 1. Research model

Participants and Sampling

1. Population: Undergraduate students enrolled at UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu.
2. Sample: 33 students aged 18–24 who had received peer counseling services and peer counseling service providers.
3. Sampling Technique: Purposive sampling was used to ensure representation of peer counselors (service providers) and counselees (service recipients).
4. Inclusion Criteria:
   a. Peer counselors: have completed basic training in peer counseling and multicultural competency.
   b. Counselee: has attended at least two peer counseling sessions.

Quantitative Component

1. Research Instrument
   a. A structured questionnaire was developed to measure:
      1) Peer counselor effectiveness (independent variable) using items on communication, empathy, professionalism, and cultural sensitivity.
      2) Counseling success (dependent variable) using items on satisfaction, perceived usefulness, and personal well-being after counseling.
   b. All items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).
   c. The research questionnaire was validated by six expert lecturers from several universities: the University of Bengkulu, Prof. Dr. Hazairin, SH. University, UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu, Sriwijaya University, UIN Raden Fattah Palembang, and K.H. Abdul Chalim University Mojokerto.
   d. The reliability test (Cronbach's alpha) for the questionnaire yielded $\alpha = 0.87$, indicating high internal consistency.
2. Data Collection Procedure
   The peer counseling questionnaire was announced to counselees after the intervention.
3. Data Analysis
   a. Quantitative data were analyzed using Pearson correlation analysis to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between peer counselor effectiveness and counseling success.
   b. The coefficient of determination (r^2) was calculated to identify how much variance in counseling outcomes was explained by peer counselor effectiveness.
   c. The significance level was set at $p < 0.01$.

Qualitative Component

1. Research Instrument
   a. A semi-structured interview guide was developed, focusing on four themes: (1) counselor-client relationship, (2) communication skills, (3) service quality, and (4) cultural sensitivity.
   b. Sample interview questions include:
      1) "How would you describe the relationship with your peer counselor during the session?"
      2) "How did cultural sensitivity influence your counseling experience?"
      3) with B. Data Collection Procedure
2. In-depth interviews were conducted with 9 participants (3 peer counselors and 6 clients).
   a. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes.

Data Analysis

1. Data were transcribed verbatim and coded using thematic analysis.
2. Initial coding identified keywords related to relationships, communication, professionalism, and cultural awareness.
3. Codes were broken down into categories, which were then synthesized into key themes.
4. Researcher triangulation and inter-rater reliability checks were conducted to minimize bias.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Findings from quantitative and qualitative data were examined during the interpretation stage using a convergent triangulation approach. Quantitative results provided evidence of statistical significance and the strength of relationships, while qualitative findings offered contextual depth and explanations for observed patterns.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

Before presenting the more detailed findings, it is important to note that this study has two main sections: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative results provide statistical evidence regarding the relationship between peer counselor effectiveness and the success of multicultural peer counseling services. Meanwhile, the qualitative results clarify the numerical findings by offering in-depth insights into the lived experiences of students and peer counselors.

The analysis begins with the presentation of descriptive statistics, outlining the demographic characteristics of the participants and general trends in their questionnaire responses. This is followed by a correlation analysis, which examines the strength and significance of the relationship between peer counselor effectiveness and counseling outcomes. Finally, the qualitative findings are presented through a thematic analysis, supported by participant narratives describing key aspects of effective multicultural peer counseling. To ensure clarity, the results are presented in narrative form and with visual aids, including tables and figures, that highlight key points of the analysis. Descriptive Statistics

A total of 33 students participated in this study, consisting of peer counselors and counselees, aged 18–24. The majority of participants were female (63.6%), while males accounted for 36.4%. In terms of cultural background, respondents represent diverse ethnicities in Indonesia, reflecting the multicultural university context.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Participants and Key Variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Age (years)	33	21.2	1.8	18	24

Gender (Male)	12	–	–	–	–
Gender (Female)	21	–	–	–	–
Peer Counselor Effectiveness	33	4.12	0.56	3.00	5.00
Counseling Success	33	4.21	0.61	3.10	5.00

Table 2. Correlation between Peer Counselor Effectiveness and Counseling Success

Variables	r	p-value	Strength	r² (Explained Variance)
Peer Counselor Effectiveness – Counseling Success	0.666	0.000 (< 0.01)	Strong, positive	0.444 (44.4%)

Description:
r = 0.666 → indicates a strong, positive correlation.
p < 0.01 → statistically significant relationship.
r² = 0.444 → means peer counselor effectiveness explains 44.4% of the variation in counseling success, while the remainder is influenced by other factors.

Descriptive analysis of questionnaire responses showed that students rated the effectiveness of peer counselors at a relatively high level (M = 4.12, SD = 0.56) on a 5-point Likert scale. Similarly, the overall effectiveness of counseling services was rated high (M = 4.21, SD = 0.61), indicating that students were generally satisfied with peer counseling services. These findings indicate that participants viewed peer counselors as empathetic, communicative, and sensitive to cultural diversity.

Correlation Analysis

To test the relationship between peer counselor effectiveness and counseling success, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The results showed a strong and statistically significant positive correlation (r = 0.666, p < 0.01). This means that the more effective the peer counselor is in terms of communication, empathy, and professionalism, the higher the reported success of multicultural peer counseling. Furthermore, the coefficient of determination (r² = 0.444) indicates that 44.4% of the variance in counseling success can be explained by peer counselor effectiveness. The remaining 55.6% is likely influenced by other factors, such as individual client characteristics, the availability of institutional support, and external stressors.These results provide empirical evidence that peer counselor effectiveness is an important predictor of the success of multicultural peer counseling services. This finding aligns with Rogers (1961) theoretical framework, which emphasizes the central role of counselor qualities such as empathy and acceptance in achieving positive counseling outcomes.

Qualitative Findings
The qualitative analysis complemented the quantitative results by identifying four main themes:
1)Counselor-Client Relationship
Participants highlighted the importance of a warm, equal, and non-judgmental relationship. Clients felt more comfortable disclosing personal concerns when the counselor demonstrated acceptance and empathy. This aligns with Rogers (1961) client-centered theory, which emphasizes authenticity and unconditional positive regard as the foundation of therapeutic change.
2)Communication Skills
Active listening, adaptive language use, and effective nonverbal communication (e.g., eye contact, tone of voice, body language) emerged as important elements in building trust. Students expressed satisfaction when peer counselors tailored their communication to their cultural backgrounds and emotional states.
3)Service Quality
Professionalism was reflected in confidentiality, ethical behavior, and preparedness. Clients reported feeling "relieved" and "more confident" after sessions, indicating

perceived effectiveness. However, some suggested extending session length and providing additional training for peer counselors to improve service delivery.
4) Cultural Sensitivity

Respect for diversity is a recurring theme. Peer counselors who recognize and value students' cultural and religious backgrounds are perceived as more inclusive and trustworthy. Multicultural competency training allows counselors to avoid imposing personal values and instead focus on the client's unique perspective.

Table 2. Thematic Matrix with Participant Quotes

Theme	Description	Participant Quote
Counselor–Client Relationship	A warm, equal, and non-judgmental relationship fosters client trust and openness.	"I felt safe because my counselor listened without judging me." (Participant 4, female, 21)
Communication Skills	Active listening, adaptive language, and effective non-verbal cues strengthen counseling interactions.	"He adjusted the way he spoke so I could understand better, and his body language made me feel calm." (Participant 7, male, 20)
Service Quality	Professionalism through confidentiality, preparedness, and ethical practice improves client satisfaction.	"I trusted her because she kept my story private and looked very prepared." (Participant 2, female, 19)
Cultural Sensitivity	Respecting diverse cultural and religious backgrounds creates inclusivity and reduces bias.	"My counselor respected my religious background, which made me more comfortable." (Participant 5, male, 22)

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings.

This integration of findings provides a holistic picture of how peer counselor effectiveness contributes to the success of multicultural peer counseling. A strong correlation ($r = 0.666$) quantitatively supports the role of peer counselor effectiveness in shaping counseling outcomes. This is reinforced by qualitative evidence showing that relationship quality, communication, and cultural sensitivity directly influence client satisfaction. Effective peer counselors not only provide emotional support but also serve as agents of inclusion. By fostering a sense of belonging in a multicultural environment, they help reduce academic stress, improve mental health, and strengthen student communities. While the findings are promising, effectiveness is not solely determined by peer counselor performance. External factors such as institutional policies, the availability of professional supervision, and students' readiness to seek help remain influential. This underscores the need for universities to integrate peer counseling with formal mental health services.

Overall, the study findings demonstrate that peer counselor effectiveness has a statistically significant and experientially significant impact. The figures indicate that counselor effectiveness explains almost half of counseling outcomes, while the narratives explain why and how this occurs. This integration strengthens the study's validity by bridging objective measures with subjective experiences. Thus, the mixed-methods approach not only confirms that effective peer counselors improve outcomes but also clarifies the pathways through which relationship building, communication, professionalism, and cultural sensitivity translate into success. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that peer counseling, when integrated within a multicultural framework, significantly enhances counseling effectiveness. It provides empirical evidence that multicultural competence is not an operational skill, but rather a

core requirement for peer counselors (Afandi et al., 2025). For practitioners, this study highlights the need for structured training programs that equip peer counselors with both technical counseling skills and cross-cultural competence.

The results of this study are consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of counselor effectiveness in promoting positive outcomes. For example, Rogers (1961) emphasized that empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard are central to a successful therapeutic relationship. These findings reinforce this by demonstrating that a counselor-client relationship built on trust and acceptance significantly influences counseling success (Kılıç, 2025). Furthermore, the importance of communication skills aligns with the concept of peer education proposed by Topping (2017), where mutual understanding and effective communication serve as the backbone of peer learning and support. Participants in this study emphasized that active listening, adaptive language use, and non-verbal sensitivity are crucial for meaningful counseling (Gladding, 2018).

Consistent with the multicultural counseling framework proposed by Sue & Sue (2009), this study also emphasized cultural sensitivity as a determining factor. When peer counselors acknowledged the cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds of their peers, clients felt more accepted and understood. These findings are consistent with research by Smith et al. (2023), who found that culturally responsive counseling reduced perceived stigma and increased engagement in mental health services.

The reliability and validity analysis of the instruments in this study (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.87) further strengthens the credibility of the findings, in line with Gupta & Copey (2020) , who emphasized the importance of using standardized and reliable instruments when measuring the outcomes of peer education programs. Compared with previous research, this study contributes in three ways. While most peer counseling research has been conducted in Western contexts (Corey & Corey, 2021; Corrigan et al., 2014; Tsong et al., 2019), this study provides evidence from Indonesia, a country with high cultural diversity, thus broadening the global understanding of multicultural peer counseling (Bestari et al., 2024; Kushendar, 2023). The combination of quantitative correlations and qualitative thematic analysis provides a more holistic picture, overcoming the understanding presented by previous studies that often focused on statistical relationships or qualitative insights in isolation (Eisenberg et al., 2013; Gustems carnicer et al., 2019; Travia et al., 2020). By integrating relational, communicative, professional, and cultural dimensions, this study develops a practical framework for understanding peer counselor effectiveness, which can guide future training and institutional policies (Aqillah et al., 2025).

These findings have significant implications for higher education institutions. First, universities should integrate multicultural competency training into peer counselor programs, ensuring that counselors are equipped to work with diverse student populations. Second, institutions should provide ongoing supervision and professional support to improve the quality of peer counseling services. Finally, peer counseling should be recognized not only as a complementary service but also as a preventive and promotive strategy to address mental health challenges in university settings. Despite its strengths, this study has several limitations. The relatively small sample size (N = 33) limits the generalizability of the findings, and reliance on self-report data may introduce bias. Furthermore, although this study focused on counselor effectiveness, other factors such as institutional resources, family support, and peer networks may also influence counseling outcomes. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples

across universities, use longitudinal designs to examine changes over time, and integrate additional variables such as academic performance or resilience may also be relevant given technological advances in education and mental health services.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that peer counselor effectiveness significantly influences the success of multicultural peer counseling services. Quantitative findings confirm a strong positive correlation between peer counselor effectiveness and counseling service outcomes ($r = 0.666$, $p < 0.01$), with peer counselor effectiveness contributing 44.4% of the variance in counseling success. These results suggest that students are more likely to benefit from peer counseling services when counselors demonstrate strong communication skills, high empathy, professionalism, and sensitivity to cultural diversity.

Further qualitative analysis identified four key themes that shape effective counseling practice: the counselor-client relationship, communication skills, service quality, and cultural sensitivity. This fourth dimension emphasizes that technical counseling knowledge must be balanced with relational competence and cultural awareness to foster inclusivity and trust in the counseling process.

Overall, this study provides empirical evidence that peer counselors serve not only as sources of emotional support but also as agents of inclusion in multicultural academic environments. For higher education institutions, the results of this study emphasize the importance of integrating multicultural competency training, providing professional supervision, and implementing peer counseling as promotive and preventive strategies for student mental well-being. For future research, it is recommended that research involve larger and more diverse samples, explore longitudinal effects, and examine the role of institutional and technological factors in shaping the effectiveness of peer counseling. The authors also express their appreciation to all parties who have provided logistical support, academic input, and a collaborative spirit during the research process and the preparation of this manuscript. Without institutional support and cooperation from all parties, this research would not have been able to be carried out optimally.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed substantially to the preparation of this article. The first author was responsible for the research design, data collection, and analysis of the results. The second author was involved in developing the theoretical framework and drafting the discussion. The third author conducted the literature review and final editing of the manuscript to ensure academic appropriateness and scientific novelty. The fourth author performed the final editing, drafting the abstract and conclusion, and adjusting the format accordingly.

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