

THE COMPETENCE OF COUNSELOR IN CONDUCTING SPIRITUAL COUNSELING: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Spirituality is conceptualized as the subjective relationship of an individual with God or, more broadly, as a sacred or transcendent relationship. Spirituality is one of the issues proposed in multicultural studies. Spiritual counseling is an approach to counseling that combines spiritual and religious elements to help individuals actualize their potential and face life's challenges. The competence of counselors is essential in conducting spiritual counseling. This research aims to explore the necessary competencies and strategies to enhance them. This research is a type of systematic literature review. The literature search yielded thirteen articles from five databases, with specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The findings in the research indicate a set of competencies required by spiritual counselors, hereafter referred to as ASERVIC competencies. These competencies can serve as a comprehensive foundation for professional spiritual counseling counselors. Various strategies have been offered for counselors to apply to achieve these competency skills. Referring to these findings, counselors are expected to be responsive in promptly achieving competence to conduct professional spiritual counseling practices.

Keywords: Spiritual Competence, Spiritual Counseling, Counselor Competencies

Introduction

Religion and spirituality are integral parts of every individual's life process. Spirituality, according to Savage, J., & Armstrong, S. (2010), is a state of harmony or alignment with the universe being governed or balanced by God or divine intelligence. Individual belief, awareness, values, subjective experience, feeling of purpose and mission, and/or the pursuit of wholeness and harmony—which may or may not involve a deity—are all considered aspects of spirituality, according to Cates, K. A. (2009). Furthermore, According to Legere (Cates, K. A., 2009), religion is about comprehending that experience, while spirituality is about experiencing it. Religion articulates and captures that experience in a framework, but spirituality concentrates on what occurs in the heart. The Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) claims that spirituality is an inherent and unique capacity and tendency for everyone. These spiritual tendencies drive individuals towards knowledge, love, meaning, peace, hope, transcendence, interconnectedness, compassion, well-being, and wholeness. Religion, in contrast, is a whole system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and establishments that guide people's lives toward what they consider sacred, holy, or of the highest value (Lu, J. et al., 2020). Based on that definition, it can be concluded that spirituality is a personal experience that is subjective, related to beliefs, values, and the search for meaning in life. At the same time, religion is a system that organizes and formulates spiritual experiences through doctrines, rituals, and institutions. In short, spirituality is the essence of experience, while religion is how individuals articulate it.

Discussions related to multicultural issues are inseparable from aspects of religion and spirituality. American Counseling Association (ACA) ((2014) recognizes religion as a part of human diversity. (Dailey, S. F., et al., 2015). Furthermore, Henry & Li (2022) explain that spiritual and religious aspects are integral to multicultural awareness and counseling competence. For counselors, accepting diversity involves more than just acknowledging those who have different cultural, religious, and spiritual beliefs from us. This is an understanding and respect for their potentially diverse beliefs and the needs that arise from them for counseling to address difficulties, pain, loss, and other psychological issues.

Pate & Bondi (Cates, K. A., 2009) assert that Competent multicultural counseling is founded on respect and admiration for each individual's uniqueness. Counseling needs to understand that intercultural awareness encompasses all of culture, ethnicity, race, and religion diversity. Multiculturalism in counseling stresses the need for counselors and trainees to promote social justice by empowering clients from diverse backgrounds. According to Burke et al. (Cates, K. A., 2009), the problem is to strike a balance between respect for religious differences and a feeling of spirituality that encourages appreciation for common themes that improve life while preventing religious dogma from justifying unethical and inhumane behavior.

In positive psychology, one of the potentials possessed by humans is religiosity, which also falls within the spiritual dimension (Muslikah, et al., 2021). In recent developments, the field of Guidance and Counseling services has not only focused on personal, social, learning, and career aspects. However, it has also expanded into the realms of religion and family. This transformation implies that aspects of R/S are part of an individual's needs throughout their life. Bishop et al. (Cates, K. A., 2009) assert that Spirituality is a crucial and integral element of the human experience and development, and it must be recognized and validated from the client's perspective. Research conducted (Christiano, 2024) shows that spirituality and religion often intersect with significant life events, such as trauma and existential crises, highlighting the need for mental health professionals to better understand and integrate spiritual aspects into their practice to support the overall well-being of clients. These results underscore the importance of integrating the spiritual dimension into counseling practices, which is further referred to as spiritual counseling.

Spiritual counseling is an approach to counseling that combines spiritual and religious elements to help individuals actualize their potential and face life's challenges (Rahayu, H., 2021). Gladding and Crockett (2019) define spiritual counseling as a field that recognizes the importance of the spiritual and religious dimensions in an individual's life and mental well-being. Spiritual counseling involves the integration of clients' beliefs and spiritual practices into the therapeutic process (Gutierrez, D. et al., 2020). Referring to the experts' exposition, spiritual counseling is a holistic approach that integrates spiritual and religious elements into the therapeutic process to help individuals actualize their potential, face life's challenges, and enhance their mental well-being.

Spiritual counseling aims to optimize self-potential and achieve true satisfaction by awakening the spiritual strength within (Hadiwinarto, 2018). As (Evans, C., et al., 2022) explains, overall, spiritual counseling addresses various aspects of human development, including intellectual, emotional, social-moral, and spiritual dimensions. Religion and spirituality frequently conflict for clients, but they may also be sources of hope. Spiritual competence is important for counselors to conduct spiritual counseling practices for clients. Religious and spiritual competence is the attitude, knowledge, and skills needed to address the domains of an individual's life ethically and effectively in counseling practice (Hill, R.D., 2021). Although multicultural competence has been incorporated into counseling training since the 1990s, applying competencies addressing

spirituality has progressed more slowly than other fields (Gutierrez, D., et al., 2020). This phenomenon requires special attention to the application of counselor competencies. This is ASERVIC competence (Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling). ASERVIC competencies provide a set of skills counselors must possess and indicate that counselors must integrate religion and spirituality with the client's consent (Evans C. et al., 2022). This spiritual competence complements the code of ethics established by the American Counseling Association (2014) in promoting increased sensitivity and cross-cultural competence in counseling (Hull, C. E., et al., 2016). In line with other multicultural or clinical competency areas, ASERVIC competency aims to ensure counselors can work ethically and successfully with clients from religious and spiritual viewpoints (Vieten C. et al., 2024). This competency was developed as a guideline regarding knowledge, awareness, understanding, and interventions that support and promote spiritually competent practices (Cates, K. A., 2009).

Hodge, D. R. (2018) outlines several reasons for the importance of spiritual competence for counselors. Hodge, D. R. (2018) outlines several reasons for the importance of spiritual competence for counselors. The first is improving religious diversity. Religious differences emphasize cultural differences. As a result, the client's value system influences beliefs and behaviors in a variety of service-related domains, including birthing and childcare, gender and marital relationships, and mourning and burial traditions. Given that values pervade clinical work, it is understandable that disagreements will occur between the counselor and some clients. When working with clients from various religious backgrounds, such value conflicts are more likely to arise. The second is negotiating potential value conflicts. The way counselors handle value disputes can have a big impact on the outcome. Interactions that do not align with the client's viewpoint might harm the therapeutic relationship. In some cases, spiritual insensitivity can be detrimental to the client. In certain tribes, spiritual rituals are vital to healing and health. However, these ceremonies are limited to discussion among other tribe members. Asking about potential interventions can be a challenging experience, and the client may discontinue the service. The third one is related to improving awareness of client challenges. The relationship between the problems faced by the client's spirituality is frequently a complex subject. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), psychopathological symptoms often depend on culture. Normative beliefs and practices can be seen as signs of psychopathology in religious cultures if evaluated from a secular cultural perspective. Suggesting that normative spiritual practices represent manifestations of mental illness usually hurts the therapeutic relationship and subsequent outcomes. The following reason is improving relationships and clinical outcomes. Interactions that align with the client's value system can have a positive impact. Empathetic communication that respects the client's worldview tends to foster good relationships. Spiritually enthusiastic clients, like others, usually respond favorably to practitioners they perceive as engaged in a mutually respectful and affirming exchange. Similarly, therapeutic strategies that align with the client's value system usually enhance client acceptance. Relapse prevention, health facilitation, and recovery can all be accelerated by interventions that align with the client's spiritual beliefs. The last one is accessing spiritual power. Much research has shown that spirituality is a force that can be used to promote health and well-being. Most people believe that spirituality may help them solve their difficulties. Although spirituality has the potential to be beneficial in professional settings, many patients are afraid to discuss it with practitioners. Spirituality is frequently a highly sensitive and personal topic. Clients are generally hesitant to trust practitioners commonly regarded as secular with this religious substance.

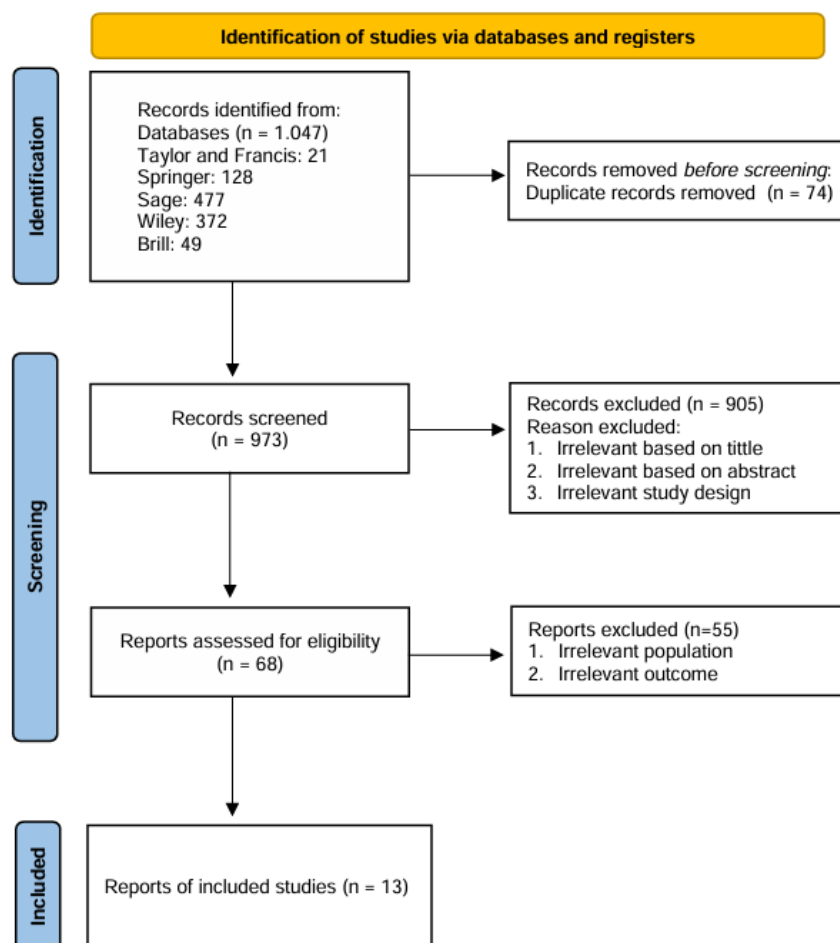
Referring to the above exposition, it can be understood that the competence of counselors is very much needed in carrying out professional spiritual counseling practices. Essential competencies for conducting spiritual counseling need to be understood and possessed by every counselor before practicing.

This literature review needs to be understood by every counselor as both a resource and a practical guide for counselors in developing multicultural competencies, particularly in the dimensions of religion and spirituality, regarding the integration of spiritual counseling services. This literature review aims to explore a series of competencies for spiritual counselors and strategies for developing spiritual competencies based on a systematic literature review of previous research journals.

Method

This research is a literature review categorized explicitly as a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Using specific keywords, the literature search strategy was conducted by accessing several databases: Taylor and Francis, Brill, Wiley, Springer, and Sage Journal. Including and exclusion criteria are applied in the literature search process, covering population, outcome, database, study design, publication years, and field. The study selection process is carried out through four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Next, a quality assessment of the studies is conducted using CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) to evaluate the validity, relevance, and application of the literature obtained to support the systematic review. More clearly, the study selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flowchart as follows:

Figure 1
PRISMA Flowchart



Result and Discussion

Competence of Spiritual Counselors

Effective counseling requires the application of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and the ordinary, and, to benefit the people and communities served, incorporate thoughtful reflection into daily practice and relies on thinking habits, including attention, critical curiosity, self-awareness, and presence (Vieten, C., et al., 2024). Spiritual competency can be regarded as a dynamic process with three interrelated dimensions: (a) knowledge of one's value-based worldview, together with its accompanying assumptions, limits, and biases; (b) an empathic and strength-based comprehension of the client's spiritual worldview; and (c) the ability to develop and implement appropriate, relevant, and sensitive intervention strategies that align with the client's spiritual viewpoint (Hodge, D. R., 2018). The phrase spiritual competence, which is related to counseling, originated in 1995 when the ASERVIC task force produced a set of nine competencies, known as the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies, to assist counselors in understanding how to address S/R concerns in therapy (Dailey, S. F., et al., 2015).

According to Evans et al. (2022), ASERVIC has created and improved several spiritual competencies. Supporting this opinion, the research findings (Gutierrez., et al., 2020) indicate that the competencies of spiritual counselors are regulated by the ASERVIC, which include the ability to understand the S/R perspectives of clients, gather relevant information from clients and other sources, and be aware of the counselor's limitations in understanding the client's spirituality, which is crucial to avoid unethical personal values in counseling practice. A consensus, expressed in the research (Lu, J., et al., 2018) where ASERVIC regulates the competence of spiritual counselors, includes (a) knowledge of spirituality and religion, (b) self-understanding of spiritual and religious perspectives, (c) awareness of the spiritual and religious needs of clients; and (d) knowledge of counseling interventions focused on spirituality and religion.

Research by (Hull., et al., 2016), (Smith, T. B., et al., 2019) found that the spiritual counselor competencies by ASERVIC encompass 14 critical competencies grouped into six content areas, namely: (1) Culture and Worldview, (2) Counselor Self-Awareness, (3) Human and Spiritual Development, (4) Communication, (5) Assessment, and (6) Diagnosis and Treatment. Similar to (Hull., et al., 2016) (Smith, T. B., et al., 2019), earlier research by (Dailey, S. F., et al., 2015) provided different findings indicating that the competencies of spiritual counselors of six factors developed by ASERVIC in 2009, as follows:

Culture and Worldview

A worldview is a person's justification of how and why reality behaves in specific ways, shaped by personal experiences, including spiritual traditions within cultural and familial environments. Religion and spirituality are closely related to cultural identity, as cultural values shape personality, attitudes, and behavior. This competency invites professional counselors to explain the parallels and differences between spirituality and religion, such as the essential beliefs of many spiritual systems, major world religions, agnosticism, and atheism. Professional counselors understand that their clients' views or disbeliefs about S/R are fundamental to their perspective and can influence their psychosocial functioning.

Counselor Self-Awareness

This competency directs counselors to actively investigate their attitudes, beliefs, and values about S/R. Professional counselors constantly assess the impact of their own spiritual and/or religious beliefs and values on clients and the counseling process, as well

as the limitations of their understanding of clients' S/R perspectives. They also recognize S/R resources, including religious leaders who can serve as consultation resources and to whom counselors can refer. Counselors who have not considered their own R/S beliefs run the risk of forcing them on their clients.

Human and Spiritual Development

There is a connection between spiritual and human development. Counselors can better address spiritual concerns when they thoroughly understand human development. Prior to working with a client's S/R views, it is important to understand human development models. A variety of models can be applied and explained by qualified counselors.

Communication

When clients discuss S/R, professional counselors listen to them with empathy and respect. Professional counselors employ S/R ideas that are acceptable to clients and align with their spiritual and/or religious beliefs. Professional counselors are able to identify S/R themes in client communications and discuss them with clients if therapeutically relevant. Addressing the S/R beliefs of the client can aid in accomplishing therapeutic objectives. The counselor's task is to align themselves with the client's S/R expressions in communication. The term spiritual/religious is included in the client's disclosure.

Assessment

Professional counselors strive to understand the client's S/R perspective by obtaining data from the client and additional sources during the intake and evaluation. Religious beliefs must be assessed during intake. The investigation of spiritual/religious beliefs is part of the acceptance process. Determining the client's spiritual function during the acceptance assessment is important.

Diagnosis and Treatment

When diagnosing, the counselor understands that the client's S/R beliefs can either a) improve well-being, b) exacerbate symptoms, or c) contribute to the client's issues. Professional counselors and clients establish objectives that align with their S/R beliefs. Current ideas and research supporting the inclusion of clients' spiritual and/or religious perspectives and practices can be therapeutically applied by professional counselors.

Research (Gladding & Crockett, 2019) shows that the competence of spiritual counselors includes a deep understanding of the spiritual and religious issues clients face. Counselors are expected to know about various religions and spiritual practices. This is quite different from the research conducted by (Hodge, 2018), which shows that spiritual competence is defined by three interconnected aspects, specifically: (a) knowledge of one's values-based worldview and associated presumptions, constraints, and prejudices; (b) a sympathetic and strength-based comprehension of one's clients' spiritual worldviews; and (c) the capacity to develop and carry out suitable intervention techniques, pertinent, and considerate of one's clients' spiritual worldviews. Similar yet different research findings were discovered by (Vieten C. et al., 2024), who found that the competencies of spiritual counselors include the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to ethically and effectively address these individuals' life domains in counseling practice.

Referring to the above description, it can be concluded that there are similarities and differences in previous research findings related to the competence of counselors to conduct spiritual counseling. Most of the findings indicate that the competence of spiritual

counselors is rooted in ASERVIC competencies, which include culture and worldview, counselor self-awareness, human and spiritual development, communication, assessment, diagnosis, and treatment.

Strategies for Developing Spiritual Competence

As mentioned earlier, an evolving collection of attitudes, information, and abilities about different religious worldviews is known as spiritual competence. The dynamic nature of this construct means that spiritual competence can be developed over time by applying several strategies. Research (Johns, R. D., 2017) found that 54% of counselor educators do not believe they are ready to combine spiritual and religious competencies into the counseling curriculum. Supporting these research findings, (Bohecker, L. et al., 2017), who focused on the spiritual curriculum, found strategies that can be used to develop spiritual counselor competencies in counseling, including the integration of training focused on S/R issues into the counselor education curriculum. By adding specialized curriculum areas on spirituality and religion, counselor education programs can provide more consistent and comprehensive training, enabling counselors to be better prepared to address their clients' spiritual needs. Furthermore, (Johns, R. D., 2017) emphasizes that counselor educators need better training and skills to feel more confident and competent in handling religious and spiritual topics. The findings (Gladding, S. T., & Crockett, J. E., 2019) offer several ways counselors can develop spiritual competence, including acquiring knowledge, developing clinical skills, and enhancing counselors' self-awareness.

The findings of the research by (Bohecker L. et al., 2017) and (Johns R. D., 2017) are in line with the earlier research, which proposed strategies including ongoing education, increased self-awareness, and specific curriculum recommendations. Supporting these findings, the research by (Lu, J. et al., 2020) conducted on 109 counseling students involved in a counselor training program shows that there is a positive relationship between the spiritual competence reported by counselor-in-training (CIT) and five predictor variables, namely institutional religious affiliation, level of counselor training, counselor self-efficacy, multicultural counseling competence (MCC), and training environment. Thus, this can serve as a strategy for counselors to enhance their spiritual competence.

Not only focused on the education and training of counselors, another strategy offered by (Hodge, D. R., 2018) in his research found a number of strategies to enhance the competence of spiritual counselors, namely: (a) Self-assessment, which involves identifying personal values and biases that affect social interactions and services, as well as increasing self-awareness in a multicultural context; (b) Consultation, which involves efforts to identify biases and manage emotional responses through discussions with experts and introspection, which also enhances spiritual competence; (c) Religious norms, which involve knowledge of cultural religious values that help counselors recognize the limitations of their worldview and create interventions that align with the client's perspective; and (d) Epistemological humility, which involves the recognition of various ways of acquiring knowledge and the development of a collaborative attitude that values the client's perspective in the therapeutic process.

Referring to the above framework, it can be concluded that spiritual competence can be developed over time by applying several strategies. The literature review results indicate that training, knowledge acquisition, continuing education, self-awareness, self-assessment, consultation, religious norms, and epistemological humility. Through the implemented strategies, it is hoped that the competence of counselors can continue to improve and provide professional spiritual counseling services that support the optimal development of clients in their lives. The limitation of the research is the absence of direct

implementation that tests the effectiveness of the various strategies offered, as this research is a systematic literature review (SLR) positioned as an initial foundation that opens the door for further studies with an empirical approach.

Conclusion

Counselors must possess a set of ASERVIC competencies to carry out professional spiritual counseling practices. These spiritual counselor competencies encompass six essential competency elements that spiritual counselors need to possess: culture and worldview, counselor self-awareness, human and spiritual development, communication, assessment, and diagnosis and treatment. In addition to identifying the competencies of spiritual counselors, this research also finds various strategies that can be applied to develop the professional skills of spiritual counselors, including spirituality-based training in counselor education curricula, enhancing self-awareness, consulting with spiritual experts, and using the values of epistemological humility. With mature spiritual competencies, counselors can provide professional, ethical, effective, and responsive spiritual counseling services to diverse clients' spiritualities. Further research can be conducted with empirical evidence related to the spiritual competence of counselors in the context of counselors in Indonesia, or experiments can be carried out to test the effectiveness of the proposed strategies in enhancing the spiritual competence of counselors.

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Author Contributions Statement

AM contributed as the main author and initiator in writing and completing this article. MH contributed as a lecturer who supervised the completion of this article and quality checking for research, and also with AS as a lecturer teaching the spiritual guidance and counseling course.

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