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The Journey of International Mental Health Counseling Students: Call for Action

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ABSTRACT: *This qualitative phenomenological study examines the experiences of international master's students in mental health counseling with marginalized identities in the United States, using an intersectional framework to illuminate the challenges they face and to advocate for systemic change. Despite their presence in counselor education programs, research on their educational experiences, admission processes, and supervisory needs is limited. Through semistructured interviews with 10 selected participants, four themes emerged: acculturation and adjustment, intersectional experiences, expectations from faculty and programs, and the intersection of visas and licensure. The findings reveal that participants frequently navigated isolation, discrimination, and inadequate institutional support while striving to adapt academically and professionally. The structural disconnect between visa timelines and licensure requirements emerged as a significant barrier. This study underscores the importance of applying an intersectional lens within counselor education and offers targeted recommendations for programs, faculty, and supervisors seeking to support this underserved and understudied population.*

Keywords: counselor education, international counseling students, intersectionality, program experience, visa and licensure

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INTRODUCTION

International students, defined as individuals who relocate to a different country for educational purposes, have become prominent in higher education institutions worldwide (University of Southern California, 2021). In the 2021/22 academic year in the U.S., a significant surge in enrollment occurred, with close to 400,000 international students pursuing graduate studies, a 17% increase from the previous year. This figure notably exceeded the number of undergraduate international students for the first time in decades (Institute of International Education, 2023). Extensive research has consistently demonstrated the invaluable contributions of international students to enriching cultural diversity within higher education institutions and, by extension, to the economic growth of the United States (Ammigand et al., 2018; Institute of International Education, 2023).

However, international students are not immune to a range of distinct challenges stemming from cultural disparities, financial constraints, language barriers, unfamiliar living conditions, and feelings of social isolation (Ammigand et al., 2018; Kim & Mumbauer, 2019). Empirical evidence suggests that international students are disproportionately affected by acculturative stress, interpersonal conflicts, dilemmas concerning repatriation, discriminatory treatment, and heightened levels of anxiety and depression (Ammigand et al., 2018; Kim & Mumbauer, 2019; Lertora & Croffie, 2020; Li et al., 2019).

Within counseling specifically, the context presents unique barriers beyond those documented for international students in other disciplines. Master-level counseling training requires sustained personal disclosure and identity exploration in the classroom, supervised clinical hours that directly intersect with visa timelines, and licensure requirements that vary by state and are rarely communicated to international students at the time of admission (Lertora & Croffie, 2020; Ng, 2006; Yoon & Portman, 2004). The challenges and needs of these students vary considerably based on individual identities, cultural backgrounds, ethnicity, nationality, intersecting social positions, and the specific characteristics of their counseling programs, as well as the restrictions imposed by their student visas (Ching et al., 2017; Lertora & Croffie, 2020). As such, this study sought to explore the lived experiences of international counseling master's students through a qualitative phenomenological lens, using intersectionality as the guiding framework, to offer a deeper understanding of their shared experiences and to promote systemic change.

INTERNATIONAL COUNSELING STUDENTS

Despite the broader growth in international graduate enrollment, the number of international students remains small yet growing within CACREP-accredited master's programs specifically. According to CACREP vital statistics data, international students represented 1.09% of the 60,403 master's students enrolled in CACREP-accredited programs in 2022, increasing to 1.24% of 66,104 master's students in 2024 (CACREP, 2023, 2025). While this upward trend is encouraging, the persistently low representation stands in contrast to Ng's (2006) finding that

international students were present in at least 41% of CACREP programs in Spring 2004, suggesting that while overall numbers are growing modestly, the proportion of international students within individual programs remains strikingly low, leaving most to navigate their training as the sole international student in their cohort.

This isolation is compounded by the documented adverse experiences that international students face specifically within counseling programs. Research consistently shows that interactions with faculty, supervisors, and domestic peers often lead to feelings of rejection, isolation, and discrimination (Amparbeng & Pillay, 2021; Jang et al., 2014). International counseling students report being treated as outsiders, struggling to maintain peer relationships, encountering cultural bias from faculty, enduring mistreatment related to their visa status, and experiencing isolation within the academic environment (Cruz-Virella, 2017; Li & Zizzi, 2018; Yan & Pei, 2018). Lertora and Croffie (2020) attributed much of this to low enrollment itself: when so few international students are present, faculty, peers, and administrators develop limited awareness of their needs, leaving students isolated as they navigate identity formation, acculturation, visa complications, and postgraduation uncertainty simultaneously.

Beyond social and relational challenges, international counseling students frequently express surprise in the U.S. counseling classroom, with emphasis on personal disclosure, active participation, self-reflection, and pedagogical expectations that differ markedly from their prior educational experiences and that intersect directly with cultural and linguistic identity (Kim & Mumbauer, 2019; Lertora & Croffie, 2020; Li & Zizzi, 2018). Taken together, these experiences underscore that the challenges facing international counseling students are not simply a subset of the broader international student experience but are shaped by the specific demands of counselor education, demands that interact with their intersecting marginalized identities in ways that the literature has only begun to address.

ACCULTURATION AND ACCULTURATIVE STRESS

Acculturation, in the context of international individuals, refers to the process of cultural and psychological change that occurs when individuals come into sustained contact with a new culture, environment, and host community members (Berry, 2006). This process can influence cultural beliefs, values, behaviors, and individual and group identities. Berry (1997) identified four potential outcomes of acculturation: assimilation, in which individuals adopt the dominant culture while relinquishing their own; integration, in which both cultures are retained; separation, in which the original culture is maintained while rejecting the dominant one; and marginalization, in which individuals are excluded from both.

For international students, acculturation involves adjusting to or adopting characteristics of the host community's culture, including its institutions (Bista & Gaulee, 2019; Xie et al., 2026). Previous research has emphasized the complex, multifaceted nature of acculturation, highlighting the importance of considering the individual, social, and cultural factors that shape the process (Torres et al.,

2012). Factors such as social support, cultural identity, and experiences of discrimination have been shown to influence the acculturation of immigrant and minority populations (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Nilsson et al., 2008; Schwartz et al., 2010; Torres et al., 2012; Wadsworth et al., 2008).

Acculturative stress, the psychological response to changes experienced by international individuals (Poyrazli et al., 2004), has emerged as a prominent stressor in scholarly studies on international students (Ammigand et al., 2018; Amparbeng & Pillay, 2021; Ching et al., 2017; Ekanoye, 2020; Hansen et al., 2021; Interiano & Lim, 2018; Kuo et al., 2018). It is consistently identified as the primary contributor to anxiety and depression among international students in the United States (Ching et al., 2017; Ekanoye, 2020; Hansen et al., 2021). Individual differences such as demographic variables, coping strategies, social support, and personality traits influence students' reactions, adjustment, and levels of stress and anxiety (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Kim & Mumbauer, 2019; Lertora & Croffie, 2020; Sümer et al., 2008).

In particular, social support has been identified as a primary predictor of acculturative stress, happiness, depression, and anxiety among international students (Poyrazli et al., 2004; Rudra, 2025; Sümer et al., 2008), with students reporting lower social support exhibiting higher levels of depression and anxiety (Poyrazli et al., 2004, 2007).

These acculturative pressures are particularly acute for international students enrolled in master's-level counseling programs, who must simultaneously manage adjustment to a new culture while engaging in the sustained personal self-reflection and clinical identity development that counselor training demands (Amparbeng & Pillay, 2021; Lertora & Croffie, 2020). Unlike peers in other disciplines, counseling trainees are expected to disclose aspects of their cultural identity in the classroom and develop therapeutic relationships with clients from the dominant culture, making their own unresolved acculturation a directly relevant professional concern.

DISCRIMINATION AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Discrimination, defined as the unfair treatment of individuals on the basis of identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, encompasses both direct and indirect forms (Altman, 2020). Direct discrimination involves being treated unfairly on the basis of characteristics protected by law, such as race or gender (Zhang et al., 2016), whereas indirect discrimination occurs when ostensibly equal policies disadvantage certain groups. For example, an international student who struggles with English fluency may receive the same time on exams as domestic peers do, placing them at an inequitable disadvantage.

Intersectionality of identities refers to the multiple identities that individuals carry and how those marginalized identities intersect within unequal environments and oppressive systems, creating profound experiences of discrimination and microaggressions for individuals with multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 2017; Lee, 2014). These identities include but are not

limited to age, ethnicity, race, culture, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, ability status, and immigration status (McIntosh, 2019).

A qualitative study by George Mwangi et al. (2019) involving 13 African international graduate students in the U.S. explored the structural factors, opportunities, and challenges affecting their experiences. The study concluded that African international students' adaptation process differs from that of students from other regions because of their status as racial and ethnic minorities, making them susceptible to nativism, racism, and discrimination.

Research has shown that international students tend to perceive more discrimination than domestic students do in the U.S., particularly on the basis of the intersectionality of their identities, such as their appearance, culture, race, religion, country of origin, and language. European, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand international students tend to report less racism and discrimination than Asian, Indian, Latin American, Middle Eastern, and African students do (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Cruz-Virella, 2017; Joshi et al., 2021; Kim & Mumbauer, 2019; Lertora & Sullivan, 2019).

Postel (2020) reviewed more than 35 qualitative and quantitative studies on international students' experiences and reported that white international students perceived the U.S. as welcoming, whereas students of color reported negative experiences related to their culture, language, and race, leading to feelings of inferiority, isolation, and hostility. Students' cultural values also shape how they interpret and express these experiences (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). Joshi et al. (2021) reported that international students may be unprepared for structural and cultural barriers, leading them to internalize discrimination and microaggressions. Amparbeng and Pillay (2021) further reported that internalized discrimination can fuel anger, helplessness, and prejudice toward the host culture, undermining academic and social well-being.

For international counseling students specifically, discrimination occurs not only in social and academic contexts but also within clinical training and supervision settings, where cultural bias can directly undermine professional identity development and trainees' sense of competence as emerging clinicians (Ekanoye, 2020; Jang et al., 2014). Students who hold multiple marginalized identities, including racial minority status, international identity, and language minority status, face compounded barriers to professional development that are distinct from those encountered by international students in other disciplines.

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND ITS IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

English fluency is a critical factor associated with international students' acculturation, social adaptation, academic performance, and career prospects (Postel, 2020; Ching et al., 2017; Lertora & Sullivan, 2019). Students who lack English proficiency often refrain from classroom participation, and this can expose them to unwelcoming attitudes, negatively affecting confidence, self-esteem, and academic performance while increasing the risk of discrimination, anxiety, and depression (Postel, 2020; Ching et al., 2017). Accents can also

prompt judgment about competence, personality, and social status on the basis of listeners' biases and stereotypes, while students with Americanized accents are often perceived as more intelligent and better educated (Ching et al., 2017; Lertora & Croffie, 2019). Lee and Rice (2007) documented these dynamics directly, finding that international students experienced faculty impatience and peer avoidance linked to perceived language deficiencies, compounding their academic and social isolation.

In counseling programs, language proficiency is given additional professional weight, as verbal communication is the primary clinical tool evaluated in practice and supervision settings. International counseling students whose language patterns or accents differ from dominant norms may encounter implicit bias not only from peers and faculty but also from supervisors assessing their clinical competence and from the clients they serve (Ching et al., 2017; Kim & Mumbauer, 2019). Lertora and Sullivan (2019) documented how language-based stigma shapes the professional experiences of international counseling students, intersecting with cultural identity and clinical self-efficacy in ways that extend well beyond the academic challenges documented in the broader international student literature.

INTERSECTIONALITY AS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Intersectionality, originally theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 2017) within critical race theory, posits that individuals hold multiple, simultaneous social identities, including race, gender, class, religion, immigration status, and language, that interact within systems of power and privilege to produce distinct, compounded experiences of marginalization (Crenshaw, 2017). This framework moves beyond additive models of identity, recognizing that the convergence of marginalized identities generates experiences that cannot be fully understood by examining any single dimension alone (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Applying an intersectional lens to international counseling students is particularly warranted, as this population navigates a dense overlap of marginalized identities—racial or ethnic minority status, international and visa-holder status, language minority identity, and, in many cases, gender, religion, and socioeconomic disadvantage—all within institutional contexts not designed with their presence in mind. Prior research has largely examined these dimensions separately, leaving their compounding, interactive effects underexplored (Joshi et al., 2021). This study employs intersectionality as an active analytical lens, not merely a descriptive label, to examine how this convergence of identities shapes participants' lived experiences in counselor education and to advocate for systemic change.

METHOD

Research Design

A qualitative approach using a transcendental phenomenological design was employed to understand the essence of international counseling students' experiences. The transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) was selected for its commitment to examining lived experience from a position of openness, setting aside the researcher's preconceptions through *epoche* to encounter the phenomenon as participants experience it (Creswell & Poth, 2019). This tradition was chosen over other qualitative approaches because the goal was not to generate new theory but to describe the shared essence of a particular lived experience, one that has been named in prior literature but never examined through an intersectional lens at the master's level. Its emphasis on horizontalization, treating each participant's experience as equally significant, also aligned with the study's commitment to centering marginalized voices. Phenomenology focuses on meaning construction within context, which maps naturally onto intersectionality's attention to how structural systems shape individual experience.

Participants

Ten participants were selected from a pool of 21 through purposeful stratified sampling to maximize diversity across marginalized identity categories, including race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and country of origin, and to achieve data saturation, which is consistent with recommended sample sizes for phenomenological designs (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) hold an F-category student visa; (b) be enrolled in a mental health counseling master's program in the United States; and (c) self-identify as a member of an underrepresented cultural, ethnic, or racial group. All participants were enrolled in English-medium graduate programs and had met their programs' English language admission requirements; no additional proficiency screening was administered, as successful enrollment in a U.S. graduate counseling program was treated as evidence of sufficient English proficiency for participation. Demographic information is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Information

Name	Age	Gender	Country	Race	Religion	Location	Year
Sandra	27	Female	Venezuela	Hispanic/Latina	Roman Catholic	NY	2nd
Amy	26	Female	India	Asian (Indian)	Hindu	TX	1st
Peter	24	Male	Malaysia	Chinese	Buddhism	NY	1st
Marie	24	Female	Nigeria	Nigerian	Christian	TN	2nd
Christina	20	Female	South Africa	Black	Christian	Not Applicable	2nd
Sarah	23	Female	India	Indian	Hindu	NY	2nd

Name	Age	Gender	Country	Race	Religion	Location	Year
Sonia	25	Female	Hong Kong	Asian	Atheist	NY	1st
Lily	52	Female	Ecuador	Latino/Hispanic	Catholic	NE	3rd
Crystal	26	Female	China	Asian	None	NY	2nd
Lina	23	Female	India	Indian	Hindu	NY	1st

Recruitment

Recruitment advertisements were distributed through social media (Facebook and LinkedIn) and professional association listservs, including ACA, AMCD, and CESNET. The primary researcher also directly contacted mental health counseling departments and faculty across the country via email. Participants who completed both interviews received a \$50 gift card.

Procedure

IRB approval was obtained from Pace University prior to recruitment. Eligible participants completed an online screening survey, provided informed consent, and submitted their demographic information through Qualtrics. Each participant completed two semistructured interviews via Zoom, each lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The first interview addressed five domains: (a) overall program experience; (b) the influence of intersecting identities on their experience; (c) prior knowledge of the counseling field and licensure requirements; (d) perceptions of institutional and faculty support; and (e) postgraduation plans and visa and licensure concerns. Representative questions included "*Can you tell me how your identities have influenced your experience as an international counseling student?*" and "*To what degree were you informed about the licensure procedure as an international student?*" The interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed using Rev, a HIPAA- and HECVAT-compliant transcription service. The second interview served as a member-checking session; eight of ten participants completed it.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) four-step transcendental phenomenological method. In the first step, *epoche*, the researcher bracketed assumptions through journaling and field notes before and after each interview. In the second step, *phenomenological reduction*, each transcript was read multiple times before being imported into NVivo 12 for systematic data management. Inductive open coding was applied across two coding passes per transcript, generating codes emerging from the data. The irrelevant and repetitive data were removed through horizontalization, and meaningful units were grouped into preliminary clusters. In the third step, *imaginative variation* and axial and

thematic coding were applied through iterative splitting and lumping procedures until themes and subthemes emerged; a codebook maintained in NVivo 12 and Microsoft Word tracked all the codes, themes, and definitions throughout. In the fourth step, *synthesis*, the themes were integrated into a unified narrative capturing the essence of the participants' shared experience, refined, and illustrated with representative quotes.

Trustworthiness and Confidentiality

Trustworthiness was established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported through member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing with critical friends and supervisory consultation. Dependability was addressed through a detailed codebook and audit trail. Confirmability was supported through sustained bracketing, journaling, and field notes. Transferability is supported by a thick description of the sample, setting, and procedures.

Researcher's positionality

The primary researcher is a first-generation Iranian American woman who lived in three countries and navigated immigrant and international student identities across cultural contexts. She has experienced discrimination based on place of birth, religion, immigration status, language, and accent. While perceived as white-passing in the United States, her identity as an Iranian immigrant and Middle Eastern woman remains salient and, at times, more defining than her perceived racial category. This intersection of identities shaped her attunement to participants' intersectional experiences. To minimize bias, she employed ongoing journaling, bracketing, and consultation with critical friends and her dissertation committee throughout the data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2019).

FINDINGS

Participants provided insight into their personal and academic experiences in mental health counseling programs; discussed adjustment and transition; discussed the role of identity in their lived experience; and discussed their expectations from programs, faculty, and supervisors. Four themes emerged: 1) Acculturation and Adjustment in the U.S.; 2) Intersectional Experiences; 3) Student Expectations from Programs, Faculty, and Supervisors; and 4) The Intersection of Visas, Licensing, and Student Experience.

Acculturation and Adjustment in the U.S.

This theme captures participants' shared experiences with acculturation and adjustment in the U.S., including cultural differences, social support, academic surprises, and program experiences. Adjustment was shaped not only by cultural differences but also by the expectation to assimilate quickly without

acknowledgment of participants' distinct burdens as racial and ethnic minorities. Christina (black female, 2nd year) described this pressure as follows:

It is different from what I was previously used to, so I had challenges definitely with the adjustments and everything. I sometimes had doubts. I do not know if I was going to truly make it with all the challenges, and you do not know if people will accept you. It is a new environment with new cultures, and people have a certain expectation from you, the fact that you are a minority.

She further added:

They kind of expect you to just be normal, like the rest of them. Despite all the differences and all the changes, they expect you to adapt as fast as you can and fit in, which is difficult definitely.

Experiences with social support and community varied, although the majority struggled with socializing and belonging. Peter (Chinese male, 2nd year) described an unexpected form of isolation:

The social part, I kind of struggle until today. For me, it is the other way around—I made friends with locals, but I cannot seem to make friends with international people, which I do not feel the sense of belonging.

Peter further shared in his second interview that he is no longer friends with his local friends and that socialization continues to be a challenge for him. In contrast, Amy (Indian Female, 1st year) found community through her campus Indian Student Association:

We have an Indian Student Association. There are many Indian students actually here. It is truly good to have a community here. It feels good. Therefore, I can have the best of both worlds.

Most participants reported that the counseling curriculum was less demanding than their home country programs were and valued the emphasis on experiential learning. However, students from East Asian backgrounds struggled with personal disclosure in reflection assignments. Sonia (Asian Female, 1st year) observed the following:

I do see an enormous difference in the way that we write papers. I do realize that our paper writing styles are very different if we are from different ethnic backgrounds. For reflection papers, a lot of my peers are very, very personal in terms of they take a very strong standpoint.

Admission and Academic Experience with Peers, Faculty, and University

Participants shared both positive and negative experiences with administrators, departments, faculty, and peers throughout their enrollment. Several participants described positive faculty interactions, with the faculty

perceived as supportive and approachable. Sonia shared an exchange with a professor that contrasted sharply with her prior educational experience:

She went over the questions with me, but then she said, 'So I would like you to focus on what you have gotten instead of wrong. Let us not focus on the wrong answers in the future.' That was pretty shocking for me, but in a nice way because back when I was at school in Hong Kong, profs would not say that.

Negative experiences were concentrated at the institutional and peer levels. A consistent pattern across participants was departments lacking basic knowledge about international student logistics. Lily (Hispanic Female, 3rd year) described the toll of this gap:

My department, they do not know anything about international students, CPT, OPT, or how many credits I can get every semester. In that moment, I'm very worried; I'm very stressed. I cry a lot when I did not know. International students need to know that. If I lost an exam, or I did not find a place, for me, it is over. In addition, whatever I put in two years.

Sarah (Indian Female, 2nd year) similarly reported that neither she nor her peers were informed about licensure hour requirements at admission:

I was not told about the 3,000 hours for anything when I came into the program. Neither was anyone else in the program. I actually talked to them about that because I thought maybe I missed something again. I tend to blame myself.

The institutional invisibility of international students was also reflected in peer interactions. Christina described navigating peers who held low expectations of her:

It is like I have to work extra from the rest of the students because they expect you to fail or not perform better than them. Therefore, you have to work extra to prove them wrong. It is truly difficult.

Intersectional Experiences

Participants' experiences were deeply shaped by the intersections of their identities, including race, religion, age, language fluency, ethnicity, gender, and international identity. Notably, nine of the ten participants were the sole international students in their class or program, a structural condition that amplified the salience of every other marginalized identity they carried.

Peter shared his experience as an international student whose English proficiency set him apart from other international peers:

I do not think this is a common experience for all international students. During orientation, I did make a few international friends. In addition, after that, I kind of got excluded. One of the reasons is probably that they

needed to take the English class for the transition where I did not need to. (Language Fluency)

Lily described the cumulative weight of multiple intersecting identities as follows:

Many classmates have assumptions about what I am because I am Latino; there are assumptions about my culture. They think, oh yeah, less educated or less capable. Additionally, it is so difficult, because my English is not as fluent as I want it to be. In addition, I think age is another condition — I think all my classmates are pretty young. (Ethnicity, Language Fluency, Age, and International Identity)

Christina reflected on how her intersecting identities as a black woman and an international student generated professional self-doubt:

Maybe you cannot fit in or you're not able to give any advice or counseling to especially people from the majority group. Sometimes I so much doubt my competence. I definitely ask myself, 'Why is this person behaving this way? Why are they treating me this way? Did I make a mistake or something?' (Race and Gender)

Marie (Nigerian Female, 2nd year) captured the weight of being the only one:

Sometimes I feel like an endangered species. When I took my first class, it was very shocking for me because I was the only Black person in the class—only Black and the only international student. (Race and International Identity)

Discrimination vs. Feeling Accepted

An emergent subtheme highlights contrasting perceptions of discrimination, underscoring the influence of intersecting identities. Lina (Indian Female, 1st year) expressed surprise at not experiencing racism, and Crystal (Chinese Female, 2nd year) shared a sense of community that disrupted her expectation of feeling like a minority:

I feel like a majority here. I do not feel like a minority, to be honest, because there are so many Chinese. I think the international student population—Chinese—may be the greatest percentage, followed by Indian. Therefore, I never feel like a minority, if that makes sense? (Ethnicity and Community)

Unlike those relatively positive experiences, Lily and Sarah each shared direct experiences of discrimination. Lily described being ethnically mislabeled and stereotyped:

That is the first time I felt discrimination, from my color. People said, 'You are from India?' I tried to figure it out, like why... they associated me with other cultures, or with other groups. In addition, also, the kind

of stigma about if you are Latino, you are lazy, or things like that. Or you are less educated. When you go to a store, some people are more worried about what you do in the store. (Race and Ethnicity)

Sarah connected racial dismissal to institutional processes:

As a person of color, I have noticed that a lot of people dismiss you very easily... in regard to paperwork, it makes such a big difference, and that is when I get frustrated because international students are usually the second-class citizens kind of thing. It takes a lot of asking and prodding and a lot of following up on my end to be able to get something done. (Race, International Identity, and Immigration Status)

Student Expectations from Programs, Faculty, and Supervisors

All the participants expressed expectations for programs, faculty, and supervisors, including high-quality training, CACREP accreditation, international student representation, direct mentorship, multicultural training, and culturally competent faculty and advisors. Amy and Lily emphasized the need for educators to be informed about international student logistics:

I feel, overall, the whole country, the educators, especially in the field of counseling, they should be more informed about international students... they should be more informed about STEM and non-STEM, and how it looks for international students.

Lily added:

Considering that they are not familiar with their environment in regard to choosing and applying for an internship site. I only know the campus and this town, and that is all.

Sandra expressed a need for supervisors to engage with her cultural background in clinical training:

An expectation would have been for my supervisors to take into consideration my Hispanic background in terms of how I also approach clients... I would have wanted them to ask me questions about how I feel or how I did things in my family.

Marie emphasized the need to be seen and acknowledged in the classroom:

The majority of students in the class are domestic; thus, it is important to try to make or ask questions about perhaps what would look like in international students' countries or something like that.

Intersection of Visas, Licensing, and Student Experience

This theme reflected participants' shared experiences with student visas and professional licensure. Many students lacked awareness about how visa timelines

align with licensing requirements prior to their arrival in the U.S. Sandra described the ongoing stress of managing her visa status alongside academic and clinical demands:

Therefore, in addition to my studies, in addition to my internship and in addition to everything else, I had to also have multiple browser windows open in parallel. In addition, one of them was to make sure that my I-20 did not actually expire.

She further described the structural barrier created by OPT limitations:

OPT, the optional practical training, which is only for a year if you're not in STEM. However, in order for you to get enough hours to get your licensure, which you worked so hard for in your study, you need at least two years. In addition, we do not have that, I guess, privilege compared to STEM majors.

Marie expressed the existential uncertainty that this mismatch produced:

It is sad because... based on the OPT stuff, we only have one year and then you need more than a year of course to gather hours to get a license. It kind of makes me feel like, am I wasting my time? Because I also want to get a license here.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate how the convergence of multiple marginalized identities shaped the lived experiences of international counseling students in ways that existing research, which has largely examined acculturation, discrimination, and institutional barriers in isolation, has not fully captured. Viewed through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 2017; Collins & Bilge, 2020), the four themes reveal that participants' challenges were not simply additive but compounding: each identity dimension intensified the effects of others, producing experiences of isolation, exclusion, and institutional invisibility that no single identity category alone can explain.

Acculturation and adjustment were shaped not only by cultural differences but also by the intersection of international identity with race, language, and socioeconomic position. Participants with family networks or coethnic communities reported smoother transitions, while those who did not experience compounded isolation, which is consistent with research linking social support to adjustment among international students (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Hansen et al., 2021). Critically, the expectation to adapt quickly, described by several participants, reflects what intersectionality scholars identify as the invisible labor imposed on those occupying multiple subordinate positions: participants were expected to perform academic and cultural assimilation simultaneously, without institutional recognition of the distinct burdens their intersecting identities carried.

The intersectional experiences theme extended prior research in a meaningful way. While existing studies document discrimination among international

students broadly (Postel, 2020; Joshi et al., 2021), this study reveals how the specific combination of identities, rather than any single characteristic, determines the nature and intensity of discrimination. The black and Latinx participants experienced direct and overt discrimination, whereas the East Asian and South Asian participants reported more subtle exclusion, often tied to language proficiency. Notably, higher English fluency did not uniformly confer social inclusion; for some participants, stronger language skills created distance from other international peers, producing a different form of isolation. This extends Postel (2020) and Ching et al. (2017) by demonstrating that language proficiency intersects with racial and ethnic identity to produce varied and sometimes contradictory social experiences. Nine of the ten participants were the sole international students in their program, a structural condition that amplified the weight of every other marginalized identity they carried.

Faculty and institutional experiences also diverged along intersectional lines. Participants in smaller programs with lower student-to-faculty ratios reported more supportive faculty interactions, a finding that diverges from much of the prior literature (Amparbeng & Pillay, 2021; Jang et al., 2014; Woo et al., 2015) and suggests that structural program characteristics moderate the impact of individual faculty attitudes. However, negative experiences were consistently tied to administration and departments rather than to individual faculty members, indicating a systemic rather than interpersonal problem. Departments were largely uninformed about visa requirements, OPT/CPT timelines, and STEM versus non-STEM program implications for licensure, extending the institutional gap identified by Lertora and Croeffie (2020) and underscoring that international students' challenges are structurally produced and not individually navigated.

The visa and licensure theme surfaced as perhaps the most striking intersectional dynamic of the study. The structural mismatch between the 12-month OPT window available to non-STEM graduates and the supervised hours required for licensure in most U.S. states functions as an institutional mechanism that effectively forecloses professional futures for this population. When viewed through an intersectional framework, this barrier is not merely a logistical inconvenience but a convergence of immigration status, professional identity, and institutional policy that disproportionately disadvantages international counseling students relative to both their domestic peers and international students in STEM fields. These findings call for advocacy beyond the program level, extending to accreditation bodies and policymakers whose decisions structurally shape who is able to enter and remain in the counseling profession.

Taken together, these findings contribute to the growing body of scholarship on international students in counselor education (Lertora & Croeffie, 2020; Joshi et al., 2021; Duenyas et al., 2020) by demonstrating that an intersectional framework is not only appropriate but also necessary for understanding this population. Examining any single identity dimension in isolation risks obscuring the compounded, structurally produced nature of their experiences and, consequently, producing recommendations that are insufficient to the complexity of what these students navigate.

Recommendations for Counseling Departments, Educators, and Supervisors

This study offers several recommendations for counseling departments, educators, and supervisors. Departments should develop clear knowledge of the legal and practical challenges faced by international students, including visa requirements, CPT/OPT processes, and their intersection with licensure timelines. Prior to enrollment, students should receive information about financial considerations, employment prospects, and supervised hour requirements (Zhai & Scheel, 2019), and a designated point of contact for international student concerns should be available throughout the program. International student identity should be incorporated into multicultural counseling curricula, with elective courses supporting professional development for both U.S.-based and home-country career pathways; programs should also consider pursuing STEM designation to expand postgraduation OPT eligibility. Counselor educators are encouraged to demonstrate cultural humility and competence, attend to students' intersectional identities, and create psychologically safe environments from diverse perspectives, including through formal mentorship programs that pair international students with faculty, alumni, or peers (Boswell et al., 2015; Chung et al., 2007). Finally, supervisors should facilitate cross-cultural dialog, address power dynamics in supervision, and guide supervisees in examining their own cultural assumptions.

Strengths and Limitations

This study contributes to the counselor education literature through its intersectional focus on master's-level international students. Participants were recruited via self-identification as members of underrepresented cultural, ethnic, or racial groups, ensuring representation beyond traditional census categories, with intentional diversity across countries of origin, racial/ethnic identities, and religions. A qualitative phenomenological design, member-checking interviews, consultations with critical friends, and zoom-based data collection further strengthened rigor and minimized researcher-participant barriers.

Despite these strengths, the study faces common qualitative research limitations. The small sample size of 10 participants restricts generalizability. While efforts were made to ensure diversity, representation from Middle Eastern countries was absent. Ambiguities regarding participants' program years and regional bias toward the northeast U.S., predominantly young adults with a mean age of 27, further limit broader applicability.

Recommendations for Future Research

International counseling students remain underrepresented in U.S. qualitative research. Future studies should expand sample diversity, particularly by including students from the Middle East, and deepen inquiry into identity intersectionality, supervisory practices, and culturally responsive counselor education interventions. Research could also focus on recently graduated students on active

Optional Practical Training, exploring their experiences with securing employment and accumulating licensure hours, as well as the unique challenges facing international counseling students enrolled in STEM-designated programs.

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- ☒ None
- ☐ Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- ☐ Some sections, with extensive editing
- ☐ Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- ☐ Entire work, with extensive editing

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