

Counselor Competence in Enhancing Group Dynamics and Its Influence on Counseling Outcomes: A Systematic Literature Review

Nabella Salsabila Muti¹, Muslikah²

^{1,2}Universitas Negeri Semarang
E-mail: salsabilanabella@students.unnes.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

The success of group counseling does not depend solely on the intervention techniques used by counselors but is also strongly determined by the quality of the dynamics that develop within the group. This study aims to examine counselor competence in enhancing group dynamics and its influence on counseling outcomes. This study employed a systematic literature review approach guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), which includes the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. A total of 10 relevant research articles met the inclusion criteria and were selected for further analysis. The findings indicate that counselor competence consists of several key dimensions, namely relational competence, intrapersonal and multicultural competence, technical and reflective competence, and digital competence. These findings highlight the importance of comprehensive counselor competence development to optimize group counseling practices, including in digital contexts. The implications of this review indicate that the effectiveness of group counseling is strongly influenced by counselors' ability to establish therapeutic relationships, manage group interactions, and adapt their approaches to the needs of group members. Therefore, counselor education and training programs need to place greater emphasis on the development of practical, reflective, multicultural, and digital competencies to support the implementation of effective and adaptive group counseling practices.

Keywords: counselor competence; counseling outcomes; group dynamics; group cohesion; therapeutic alliance

INTRODUCTION

The counselor, as the group leader, plays a central role in managing the complexity and dynamics that occur within the group. Without adequate competence, the group risks losing direction. The main strength of group counseling lies in interactions among members, through which they provide emotional support to one another, exchange perspectives and experiences, and directly develop interpersonal skills. Berg et al. (2018) also highlight cohesion, or a sense of “we-ness,” as an important group dynamic that directly contributes to positive counseling outcomes.

When these dynamics are well managed by the counselor, a therapeutic climate is created that enhances counseling effectiveness. Conversely, ineffective group dynamics can hinder the achievement of counseling goals. Poor group dynamics may even lead to resistance, tension, and decreased motivation among members to participate in counseling sessions. In line with Yalom and Leszcz (2020), healthy group dynamics encourage the group to reach self-directed decisions through thorough problem exploration and by mobilizing its resources to support those decisions. In addition, group counseling helps individuals who experience discrepancies between expectations and reality gain learning experiences through the optimal utilization of group dynamics (Yandri et al., 2022).

For these goals to be achieved, counselor competence plays an important role, encompassing knowledge, skills, and attitudes. A competent counselor is able to manage group interactions, handle conflicts, encourage active participation among members, and maintain a safe and supportive psychological climate. This is supported by the findings of Ermalianti and Ramadan (2022), which show that counselor competence serves as an indicator of counselor performance in achieving counseling effectiveness.

Although research on counselor competence and group dynamics has developed, studies that integrate these variables with counseling outcomes remain limited and tend to be partial. As demonstrated in the study by Gowasa (2025), supportive group dynamics contribute to the improvement of group members’ social skills, empathy, and communication abilities. Meanwhile, Ristianti (2023) emphasized the importance of counselors’ multicultural competence in fostering inclusive and supportive group dynamics within multicultural group counseling settings.

In addition, studies that specifically synthesize the relationships among these three variables remain scarce. Therefore, this study offers novelty by examining the interrelationships among these variables in a systematic and comprehensive manner within a single analytical framework through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Specifically, this study examines how counselor competence contributes to shaping group dynamics and how these dynamics influence counseling outcomes. This review also explores the interrelationships among counselor competencies in shaping adaptive group dynamics, which ultimately contribute to the effectiveness of group counseling outcomes. This study is expected to provide significant theoretical and practical contributions to the development of group counseling services.

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to systematically collect, assess, and synthesize previous research findings in order to obtain valid and comprehensive conclusions based on empirical evidence. SLR enables researchers to integrate and critically examine existing research findings. In practice, the literature search was conducted systematically using keyword strategies and

Boolean operators, such as “AND” and “OR,” to obtain relevant and focused results (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

This study used the PICO framework, consisting of Population, Intervention, Comparison, and Outcomes, as presented in Table I. PICO serves as a guide for researchers in conducting literature searches in scientific databases and helps formulate research questions to identify relevant articles (Schiavenato & Chu, 2021). The literature was collected from several databases, including Google Scholar, ProQuest, Taylor & Francis, ScienceDirect, and SAGE Journals. The search string used was (“counseling participants” OR “group therapy” OR “group counseling”) AND (“counselor competencies” OR “counselor skills”) AND (“group dynamics” OR “group cohesion” OR “counseling outcomes”).

Table I. PICO Analysis

Component	Explanation	Keywords
Population/ Problem	Individuals involved in group counseling	Counseling participants, Group counseling, group therapy.
Intervention	Counselor competence (including skills, knowledge, and attitudes) in facilitating the group	Counselor competencies, counselor skills.
Comparison	Differences in competency domains	Competency dimensions.
Outcome	Improvement in group dynamics and counseling outcomes (behavioral/psychological changes)	Group dynamics, group cohesion, counseling outcomes.

The study selection process then followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, which consist of the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Tugwell and Tovey (2021) also emphasized that PRISMA 2020 aims to ensure broader relevance across various types of reviews and research questions. Articles were identified through selected databases, screened based on titles and abstracts, and assessed for eligibility using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Based on the search results from Google Scholar, ProQuest, Taylor & Francis, ScienceDirect, and SAGE Journals, a total of 486 publications were identified at the initial stage. After the screening process was conducted, articles that did not meet the eligibility criteria were excluded. The inclusion criteria in this study were as follows: (1) empirical research articles; (2) published within the last five years; (3) discussing counselor competence, group dynamics, and/or group counseling outcomes; (4) available in English or Indonesian; and (5) accessible in full-text form. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria included conference proceedings, books, non-systematic literature reviews, editorials, and studies that were not relevant to the focus of the review. In the final stage, only 10 articles met all inclusion criteria and demonstrated high relevance to the objectives of the study; therefore, they were selected for further analysis.

The research questions of this study are as follows: (1) What forms of competence should be possessed by counselors as group leaders in enhancing group dynamics?; (2) How do group dynamics influence counseling outcomes?

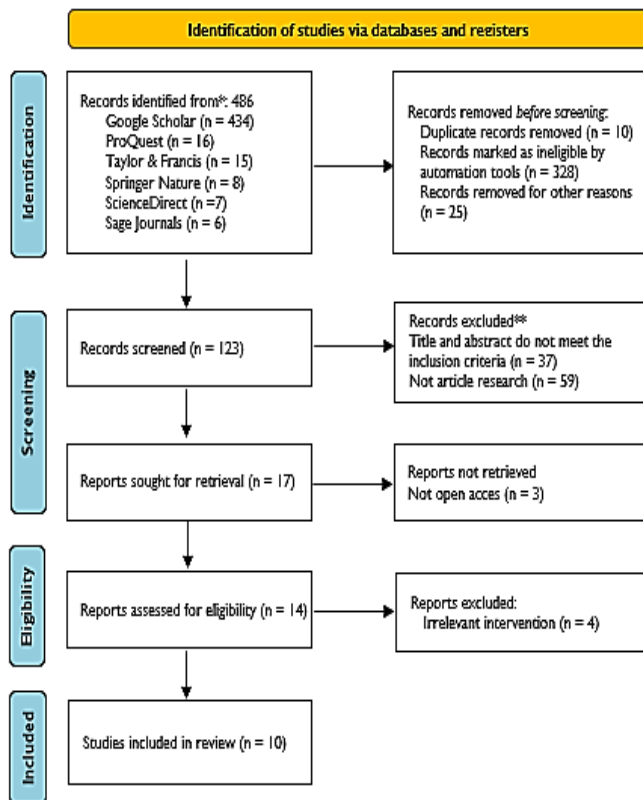


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Table 2. Results of Article Review

No	Title/ Author	Research Findings
1.	Group Cohesion and Alliance Predict Cognitive Behavioral Group Treatment Outcomes for Youth with Anxiety Disorders	(1) Group cohesion (strength of bonds within the group) and alliance (emotional bond between client and counselor) are potential factors in improving GCBT outcomes, with the strongest effects observed in long-term outcomes (up to 4-year follow-up). (2) Initial alliance predicts more outcomes than initial group cohesion, while changes in group

No	Title/ Author	Research Findings
	(Fjermestad et al., 2025)	cohesion predict more outcomes than changes in alliance.
2.	Disability Counseling Competencies : the Influence of Training and Inter-Group Contact (Öksüz & Brubaker, 2025)	(1) There is a gap between self-awareness and perceived knowledge and skills. (2) Program alignment, disability-focused training, contact level, contact quality, and multicultural counseling coursework significantly predict self-awareness scores. Participants with frequent and high-quality contact with individuals with disabilities, inclusive program environments, and disability training tend to report higher perceived skills.
3.	The Virtual Supervision Revolution: Enhancing Counselor Competency in Tele-Mental Health Through AI-Enhanced Feedback Systems (Ranihusna, 2025)	(1) Therapeutic communication skills, session structuring ability, and self-reflection skills significantly improved with AI-based feedback systems. (2) The effectiveness of AI feedback depends more on strong qualitative foundations and structured implementation than on quantitative evaluation or group dynamics alone. (3) The system highlights critical incidents, evaluates empathy expression, and tracks linguistic changes over time,

No	Title/ Author	Research Findings	No	Title/ Author	Research Findings
		which are essential for counselor–client dynamics.			
4.	A Pilot Implementation of Affinity Groups for White School Counselors and Its Impact on Antiracist Practice: The Experiences of Group Members (Dosal-Terminel et al., 2024)	(1) Participants described the group as a safe, authentic, and open space for reflection, dialogue, and connection, where counselor competence (especially cultural humility and self-awareness) enhanced group interaction quality and deepened group dynamics. (2) Antiracist school counseling practices contributed to more effective and inclusive counseling outcomes.		Counseling With Experiential Relational Focus Group on Psychological Counselors' Self-Efficacy and Listening Skills (Tagay, 2022)	efficacy and listening skills, with effects persisting for two months. Group members developed trust, mutual support, and openness. Small, closed, and homogeneous group composition contributed to effectiveness.
5.	The Efficiency of Group Dynamics and Methodical Desensitization Techniques in Marriage Counseling to Lessen Prospective Brides and Grooms Anxiety (Sihotang et al., 2024)	Marriage counseling using group dynamics and systematic desensitization techniques effectively reduced pre-marital anxiety. Counselors guided clients through problem identification, diagnosis, prognosis, treatment, evaluation, and follow-up. Clients who initially withdrew socially began working again, communicated in public settings (though still limited), and felt calmer and more comfortable.	7.	The Therapist, the Group and I: How Therapeutic Alliance Moderates the Effect of Group Cohesion on Outcomes (Vicente et al., 2021)	(1) The effect of group cohesion on outcomes is stronger when therapeutic alliance is high. Strong alliance enhances the therapeutic effect of group cohesion in reducing discomfort and craving. (2) High alliance is associated with reduced discomfort when group engagement increases, while avoidance and conflict increase discomfort and craving. (3) With low alliance, group engagement only improves well-being without significantly reducing discomfort or craving.
6.	Effect of Psychological	Group counseling significantly improved self-	8.	Relationships Between Counselors' Attitudes towards	Spiritual orientation and flexibility positively and significantly influence counselors' attitudes toward spirituality in counseling,

No	Title/ Author	Research Findings
	Spirituality and Effective Counselor Characteristics (Kasapoğlu & Kutlu, 2021)	while intellectual competence has a negative effect. Other variables such as energy, support, goodwill, and self-awareness were not significant predictors.
9.	Modeling Cohesion Change in Group Counseling: the Role of Client Characteristics, Group Variables, and Leader Behaviors (Tucker et al., 2020)	(1) Group cohesion follows a pattern of initial increase, temporary decline (storming phase), and later increase due to trust development. (2) Attachment styles influence cohesion: anxious attachment is positively associated with early cohesion, while avoidant attachment is negatively associated. (3) Overly structured leader behavior may negatively affect cohesion if emotional climate is not considered.
10.	Effect of a Group Leader Training Program on the Group Counseling Skills of Psychological Counselor Candidates (Karahan & Bakalim, 2020)	(1) Group counseling skills significantly improved after a 14-week training program, helping participants understand group dynamics from members' perspectives. (2) Participants reported increased competence, self-efficacy, and professional awareness. (3) Initial anxiety and technical challenges decreased over time and

No	Title/ Author	Research Findings
		were considered part of skill development.

Relational Competence as the Foundation of Group Dynamics

Findings from various studies indicate that relationship quality is a key factor in activating group dynamics. One of the main aspects of relational competence is the ability to establish a therapeutic alliance. In counseling, therapeutic alliance refers to the collaborative relationship between counselor and client, which is essential for effective therapy. The counselor's communication style significantly affects this alliance. Professional communication fosters positive emotional relationships, while cooperative communication is the most influential factor in increasing counseling satisfaction among adolescent clients (Lee, 2025). A strong alliance enhances the effectiveness of the counseling process by facilitating better outcomes and client recovery (Öz, 2024). This indicates that early interpersonal relationships between the counselor and group members form an essential foundation for member engagement in the counseling process. When counselors are able to build warm, empathetic, and supportive relationships, group members tend to feel safer and more willing to participate actively. A strong therapeutic alliance fosters trust, self-awareness, and emotional processing, enabling clients to address trauma more effectively.

Meanwhile, cohesion develops through repeated interactions, openness, and trust among members. If the counselor is not sensitive to the emotional condition of the group, group cohesion may be disrupted. Group cohesion in counseling refers to the sense of belonging and connection among members that can influence therapeutic outcomes

(Arnold et al., 2022). In this regard, the counselor acts as a facilitator who maintains a conducive group climate, especially during critical phases such as conflict or tension, often referred to as the storming phase. The counselor's ability to respond to the emotional dynamics of the group is key to preventing group disintegration and directing conflict into a constructive process. Group cohesion has a stronger impact on counseling outcomes when supported by a strong therapeutic alliance. Conversely, a weak alliance can limit the effectiveness of group dynamics, even when member engagement is relatively high.

Intrapersonal and Multicultural Competence as Enhancers of Group Interaction

Counselor competence encompasses not only technical skills but also self-awareness, cultural humility, and cultural sensitivity, all of which support counselors' flexibility in responding to diverse client needs, including addressing spiritual issues in a more open and positive manner (Dosal-Terminel et al., 2024; Kasapoğlu & Kutlu, 2021). Findings show that groups perceived as safe, authentic, and nonjudgmental tend to demonstrate healthier and more productive dynamics. This is closely related to the counselor's ability to understand members' diverse backgrounds and reflect on their own positionality and biases. Thus, counselors not only act as group leaders but also serve as facilitators who enable open dialogue and collective reflection.

The development of multicultural issues emphasizes the importance of counselors' cultural sensitivity in providing inclusive counseling services (Mulawarman et al., 2021). Multicultural competence includes knowledge of various cultural norms, values, and practices, enabling counselors to provide inclusive and responsive services (Khusniyah et al., 2025). In line with this, Mani and Mansaray (2025) also state that multicultural competence, including cultural sensitivity,

ethical awareness, and adaptive intervention strategies, is essential for counselors. On the other hand, intrapersonal competence, such as self-awareness and emotional intelligence, is also important because it allows counselors to reflect on their biases and understand the influence of their own cultural backgrounds.

Technical and Reflective Competence in Managing Group Processes

The effectiveness of group dynamics is influenced by group size, whether small or large; group type, whether closed or open; member homogeneity; and leadership style (Tagay, 2022; Tucker et al., 2020). In this regard, a rigid leadership style can undermine group cohesion. This indicates that counselor competence also includes the ability to design groups, not merely to facilitate interactions. As group connectedness and openness increase, counselor self-efficacy also improves (Karahana & Bakalım, 2020). The counselor plays a role throughout the entire counseling cycle, from identification, diagnosis, intervention, and evaluation to follow-up. Therefore, skills such as therapeutic communication, session structuring, and reflection are highly essential. Technical competence makes group dynamics more directed and purposeful. This competence can be enhanced through intensive training and feedback. With proper mastery of techniques, counselors can help group members engage actively, manage conflict constructively, and facilitate meaningful exchanges of experiences among members.

Dilnoza (2024) also emphasizes the importance of reflective methods in developing conflict resolution competence, which is crucial for managing group processes. Reflective practices, such as self-assessment and peer feedback, enhance self-awareness and emotional intelligence among group leaders. Thus, technical and reflective competencies cannot be

separated in group counseling practice. Both form a continuous cycle that enables counselors to plan, implement, evaluate, and improve counseling processes systematically, ultimately contributing to positive counseling outcomes.

Digital Competence in Contemporary Counseling

Along with rapid technological advancement, counselors are also encouraged to utilize technology wisely. For example, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) has recently been developed to help enhance counselor competence. In line with this, Ranihusna (2025) states that AI-based feedback systems can significantly improve counselors' therapeutic communication skills, session structuring, and self-reflection. However, their effectiveness depends more on strong qualitative foundations and structured implementation than solely on quantitative data or group dynamics. These systems help identify critical moments, assess empathy, and monitor linguistic changes, all of which are essential in counselor–client relationships.

Digital competence has been identified as a key competency in contemporary counseling, particularly in digital practice (Saidi et al., 2025). In online group counseling services, digital skills are essential for navigating online platforms and ensuring safe and interactive sessions. This competence helps counselors address challenges such as technical disruptions and reduced emotional depth in virtual interactions (Chandel et al., 2025). This is further supported by Harmsen et al. (2026), who found that in online group counseling, particularly in trauma therapy, a positive group climate and high levels of satisfaction are significant predictors of symptom reduction. Thus, in today's digital era, counselors must master digital competence as an integral part of professional practice. Digital competence enables counselors to create

group environments that remain supportive, cohesive, and safe, even in virtual settings.

The Influence of Group Dynamics on Counseling Outcomes

Group dynamics contribute to the effectiveness of counseling outcomes (Fjermestad et al., 2025; Pashak et al., 2024; Sihotang et al., 2024; Vicente et al., 2021), which can be observed through both behavioral and psychological aspects. In line with Kratcoski (2024), group dynamics significantly influence counseling outcomes by creating a supportive environment in which members can learn from one another and share experiences. Positive interactions among group members can enhance motivation and accountability, particularly for individuals experiencing specific issues such as substance abuse or aggressive behavior, thereby increasing the effectiveness of counseling outcomes.

Wang et al. (2023) highlighted that group climate factors, such as engagement and conflict, significantly affect counseling outcomes. Increased group engagement from the initial to the final sessions was associated with greater emotional cultivation among members. Furthermore, consistently high engagement or low levels of conflict within the group contributed to more positive emotional growth. These findings underscore the importance of fostering a positive group climate to optimize the therapeutic benefits of group counseling. In addition, therapeutic alliance established through a strong counselor–client relationship is essential for effective change in group counseling (Arnold et al., 2022).

The Interplay of Multidimensional Counselor Competencies in Shaping Adaptive Group Dynamics

The cross-study synthesis findings indicate that adaptive group dynamics do not emerge

spontaneously; rather, they result from the multidimensional integration of counselor competencies that are interconnected and operate simultaneously. Relational competence serves as the initial foundation for building therapeutic alliance, group cohesion, psychological safety, and trust among group members. The stronger the counselor's relational competence, the greater the possibility of establishing relational depth. Relational depth refers to a profound and authentic therapeutic relationship between counselor and client, characterized by emotional engagement, full presence, and a collaborative process that enables the development of transformative relational experiences (Ray et al., 2021). As a result, group members become more capable of engaging in deeper self-disclosure and developing trust within the group process, which subsequently contributes to the formation of interactions that are conducive, collaborative, and therapeutically meaningful. In this regard, trust becomes a prerequisite for healthy group dynamics.

However, relational competence alone is insufficient without the support of intrapersonal and multicultural competencies, which enable counselors to reflect on personal biases, regulate emotional responses, and understand the diverse backgrounds of group members. The intrapersonal dimension is closely associated with emotional intelligence, which includes counselors' self-awareness. Self-awareness serves as a crucial foundation for multicultural competence because it enables counselors to recognize their values, assumptions, and personal biases before establishing therapeutic relationships within culturally diverse counseling contexts.

Meanwhile, the multicultural dimension requires counselors to possess awareness of personal biases, knowledge of clients' cultural backgrounds, and culturally responsive intervention skills. Furthermore,

multicultural awareness deepens counselors' relational capacity because authentic relationships allow meaningful exploration of cultural differences. Bathje et al. (2026) highlighted multicultural competence as a common factor influencing both the counseling process and outcomes.

On the other hand, technical and reflective competencies play an important role in maintaining the continuity of the group process so that it remains structured and adaptive to the changing dynamics that emerge throughout counseling sessions. Counselors are required not only to apply counseling techniques, strategies, and procedures effectively but also to possess reflective abilities to evaluate the process, understand the group's emotional climate, and adjust intervention strategies flexibly. In this context, self-awareness also serves as the foundation of reflective practice. Without adequate intrapersonal understanding, counselors' reflections on their professional practice are likely to remain superficial. Therefore, the development of counseling skills requires the integration of theoretical knowledge, technical practice, and continuous professional reflection (Henrich, 2021).

Finally, digital competence has become a crucial dimension in establishing a group ecosystem within online counseling settings. This competence includes the ability to translate empathy into virtual spaces, often referred to as digital empathy; manage virtual interactions and client engagement; maintain ethical boundaries and confidentiality on digital platforms; and handle technological distractions. It also involves counselors' ability to utilize technology to enhance group members' participation and accessibility without compromising relational quality. Moreover, the development of AI-based technology has further expanded the dimension of counselors' digital competence, particularly in providing feedback and

supporting counseling processes. Nevertheless, the use of AI still requires ethical considerations and must ensure that technology functions solely as a supportive tool rather than replacing the counselor's role. In line with Halqim and Rukiyati (2024), the integration of technology in counseling can improve service accessibility and effectiveness. The integration of these counselor competencies subsequently supports the creation of a safe, supportive, collaborative, and therapeutic group environment, while positive group dynamics are positively associated with the effectiveness of group counseling outcomes.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as a systematic literature review, the findings depend on the scope, availability, and quality of the selected articles. Although the review process followed systematic procedures and predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, the number of articles analyzed was relatively limited, which may affect the breadth of the synthesis. Second, the reviewed studies varied in terms of research design, participant characteristics, counseling settings, cultural contexts, and outcome indicators. This variation made it difficult to draw direct causal conclusions regarding the relationship between counselor competence, group dynamics, and counseling outcomes. Third, most of the included studies examined these variables separately rather than testing an integrated model. Therefore, future research is recommended to conduct empirical studies using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method designs to examine how multidimensional counselor competencies interact with group dynamics and influence counseling outcomes across diverse counseling contexts.

Global Impact

The findings of this review have important global implications for the development of group counseling practices in both face-to-face and digital settings. In different cultural and institutional contexts, counselors are increasingly required to possess not only technical counseling skills but also relational, reflective, multicultural, and digital competencies. These competencies are essential for creating safe, inclusive, and adaptive group environments that can respond to the diverse needs of group members. Globally, the results highlight the need for counselor education and professional training programs to integrate multidimensional competence development into their curricula, particularly in areas related to therapeutic alliance, group facilitation, multicultural sensitivity, ethical digital practice, and reflective supervision. By strengthening these competencies, group counseling services can become more responsive, accessible, and effective in addressing psychological, social, and educational challenges across different countries and service contexts.

CONCLUSION

The results of this systematic literature review show that counselor competence plays a significant role in shaping adaptive group dynamics, which in turn contribute to successful counseling outcomes. Relational competence, such as the ability to build therapeutic alliance and group cohesion, has been shown to be a strong predictor of counseling outcomes in both the short and long term. In addition, intrapersonal and multicultural competence, including self-awareness and cultural humility, contribute to the creation of a safe and inclusive group environment. Meanwhile, technical and reflective competence enables counselors to manage group processes in a structured and adaptive manner. Digital competence

also allows group dynamics to remain effective in virtual settings. These findings emphasize that group dynamics are not merely the result of member interactions but are actively constructed through counselor competence. Therefore, integrative counselor competency training, including training in digital counseling contexts, is essential to support effective group counseling practices in both face-to-face and virtual settings.

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