

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“You Don’t Belong Here”: Lived Experiences of Marginalization and Discrimination among International Counseling Students

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ABSTRACT

An interpretive phenomenological analysis was conducted to explore the marginalization and discrimination experienced by 10 international counseling students (3 master’s and 7 doctoral) in CACREP-accredited programs. Five master themes were identified from semi-structured interview data. Participants’ experiences revealed *subtle and covert marginalization*, *institutional invisibility of international identity*, and *interlocking systems of oppression*, while responding to these challenges through *acculturation and self-advocacy*, and building *supportive networks*. Moving beyond the traditional acculturation-focused research on international students, the current findings highlight how relational, institutional, and systemic barriers create inequitable learning environments for international counseling students. Implications address the need for tailored support for international counseling students and call for systemic changes among faculty, programs, and the field of counselor education. By centering on the marginalization and discrimination faced by international counseling students, this study seeks to promote belonging, systemic inclusion, and equitable professional development environments.

1 | Introduction

With the increasing global mobility in education, the presence of international students in counselor education programs in the United States has grown significantly over the past few decades (Behl et al. 2017; Joshi et al. 2021). According to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Vital Statistics, the number of international counseling students (ICs) increased from 360 (0.87%) in 2015 (CACREP 2016) to 1025 (1.39%) in 2024 (CACREP 2025a). While international students benefit from learning different cultures and developing their professional capacities during their stay in the United States, the advantages are not one-sided (Sherry et al. 2010; Lee and Rice 2007). Recruiting high-achieving stu-

dents internationally enhances academic excellence on college campuses (Wu et al. 2015). International students also provide financial benefits and increased revenues to universities (National Association of Foreign Student Advisors [NAFSA] 2021). Most importantly, international students make a significant contribution to campus multiculturalism and diversity by promoting multicultural awareness and cross-cultural communication in both academic and personal interactions (Kim et al. 2019). This provides a compelling rationale for retaining international students in counseling programs, particularly given that one of the primary goals of counselor education programs is multicultural training to better serve a rapidly diversifying clientele (Baker and Moore III 2015; CACREP 2024).

At the same time, the growing significance of ICSs and their contributions to counselor education programs have inspired research on their educational experiences. Acculturative challenges in the U.S. education system are among the most extensively researched topics about ICSs (Behl et al. 2017; Jang et al. 2014; Kuo et al. 2021; Ng 2006; Ng and Smith 2009). ICSs face challenges in adjusting to new academic, sociocultural, and linguistic environments, which have significant relationships to acculturative stress (Behl et al. 2017). Academically, adjusting to different classroom cultures, such as open discussions, self-disclosure, and confrontation, may trigger acculturative challenges (Consoli et al. 2022; Mittal and Wieling 2006). These challenges can be even more pronounced due to the gaps in sociocultural understanding or limited verbal communication skills, which create disconnections between ICSs and their professional and personal relationships (Consoli et al. 2022; McDowell et al. 2012). While these acculturative challenges are shared by many international students, ICSs encounter heightened pressure to acculturate because the counseling profession requires sophisticated cultural and linguistic understanding (Jang et al. 2014; Kuo et al. 2021). Moreover, most previous research has employed conceptual designs, quantitative analyses, and qualitative methods emphasizing shared patterns within participants (e.g., Consensual Qualitative Research [CQR]) to identify common challenges among ICSs (Behl et al. 2017; Jang et al. 2014; Joshi et al. 2021; Kuo et al. 2021; Ng 2006; Ng and Smith 2009), which creates space to explore the more nuanced and individualized processes of how individual students make meaning of their lived experiences.

Although previous research highlights the individual-level adjustment process, little attention has been paid to how relational and institutional dynamics support or hinder ICSs' educational experiences. When the focus is solely on individual-level acculturation, the responsibility for change is left entirely on ICSs and systemic barriers that significantly affect their experiences remain unexamined (Sherry et al. 2010). The 2024 CACREP Standards emphasize "continuous and systematic efforts to attract, enroll, and retain a diverse group of students (Section 2. E.)" and "intentionally create and effectively maintain an inclusive and equitable learning community (CACREP 2024, Section 1. I.)." Despite a growing body of research on culturally inclusive counselor education, the field still focuses primarily on American-centric perspectives and, as a result, overlooks the systemic barriers that disproportionately affect ICSs (Joshi et al. 2021). Therefore, this study examines the marginalization and discrimination experienced by ICSs, using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), to understand relational and systemic barriers in their learning environment.

2 | International Students and Marginalization

In efforts to promote inclusive environments in higher education, previous research on international students has investigated interpersonal, systemic, and institutional barriers that lead to marginalization and discrimination against international students (George Mwangi et al. 2019; Gomez et al. 2011; Lee and Rice 2007; Yao 2018). These experiences include subtle exclusion and alienation, cultural stereotyping, limited access to resources and opportunities, and explicit harassment (George Mwangi et al. 2019; Gomez et al. 2011; Lee and Rice 2007; Yao 2018).

Additionally, international students with intersecting marginalized identities tend to be more vulnerable to marginalization and hostile experiences. For instance, international students of color and non-native English-speaking international students have been found to experience more frequent negative social interactions compared to White and native English-speaking international students (GeMwangi et al. 2019; Hanassab 2006; Poyrazli and Lopez 2007). Scholars have interpreted these disparities as manifestations of intersecting systems of oppression, such as racism, nativism, and linguisticism, which shape different within-group experiences among international students (Lee and Rice 2007; Yao 2018).

While critical analysis of structural barriers and systemic oppression has not been the primary focus of scholarly investigation on ICSs, marginalization and discrimination have been recurring themes in prior research studies (Interiano and Lim 2018; Jang et al. 2014; Kuo et al. 2023; Lau and Ng 2012). ICSs often perceive the counselor education curriculum as Eurocentric or American-centric, with limited global perspectives (Interiano and Lim 2018; Kuo et al. 2023). Previous research findings suggest that the perspectives of ICSs may be undervalued and overlooked in counselor education classroom discussions because their positions can differ from dominant cultural norms in U.S. contexts (Kuo et al. 2023). This insensitivity to ICSs' unique experiences can also show up as a lack of tailored institutional support (Jang et al. 2014; Lau and Ng 2012). Doctoral ICSs, for example, face compounded challenges as they navigate supervision training without adequate support for bridging knowledge gaps related to U.S. counseling and supervision systems (Jang et al. 2014).

In addition, ICSs who return to their home countries after graduation report limited systemic sensitivity in preparing them to translate their U.S. education into culturally responsive practices back home (Lau and Ng 2012). Many who return encounter professional expectations they were not adequately prepared for, such as advocating for the counseling profession in contexts with limited established counseling systems, taking leadership roles without sufficient training, and readjusting both practically and psychologically to their native cultural and linguistic environments (Lau and Ng 2012). As a result, these alienating experiences may lead to a sense of loss in their core identities as they struggle to relearn and internalize American values (Interiano and Lim 2018; Kuo et al. 2023). Given the emphasis on nuanced understanding of language and culture in the counseling profession, the White, Eurocentric, and English-centric hegemony in counselor education can further marginalize ICSs and diminish their access to resources and power (Joshi et al. 2021).

3 | Purpose of the Study

Although previous studies have reported incidents of marginalization and discrimination among ICSs (Interiano and Lim 2018; Jang et al. 2014; Kuo et al. 2023; Lau and Ng 2012), a direct examination of oppression and power dynamics experienced by ICSs has not yet been the focus of research and thoroughly explored (Joshi et al. 2021). This gap underscores the clear need for a focused investigation into the interpersonal, systemic, and institutional barriers encountered by ICSs. Accordingly, the present study aimed to explore the experiences of marginalization

and discrimination among both master's and doctoral ICSs within CACREP-accredited counseling programs in the United States, utilizing the IPA. The use of IPA provided not only the common patterns of participants' experiences but also the individual ICSs' meaning-making of these experiences. This exploration was expected to provide a more nuanced understanding of how systemic inequity and relational dynamics create unique experiences among ICSs. Thus, the research question of this study was: "What are the lived experiences of marginalization and discrimination among ICSs in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs in the United States?"

4 | Theoretical Framework

This study adopted a theoretical framework grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) to understand the lived experiences of marginalization and discrimination encountered by ICSs. CRT provides key conceptual tools, such as race as a social construct, systemic racism, and intersectionality, to help understand racism and other systemic oppressions that are deeply ingrained in the United States (Bell 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2017). At the same time, CRT scholars highlight counterstorytelling as a strategy to disrupt dominant narratives and provide alternative interpretations about racial injustice and other systems of oppression (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Traditionally, the theory has been employed as a valuable framework for understanding racialized experiences among students of color in higher education (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Solórzano et al. 2000). In addition, CRT has recently been extended to interpret the experiences of international students within U.S. academic settings (Anandavalli et al. 2021; Rodriguez et al. 2023; Yao 2018). These studies show how international students encounter everyday expressions of racism and, at the same time, how these racialized interactions intersect with nativism, xenophobia, linguisticism, and other forms of cultural discrimination (Anandavalli et al. 2021; Rodriguez et al. 2023; Yao 2018). In these intersecting systems of oppression, international students of color and those with other intersecting marginalized identities deal with distinct and often complex forms of microaggression and discrimination (Anandavalli et al. 2021; Rodriguez et al. 2023; Yao 2018). Thus, we selected CRT as the interpretive framework because it enables a critical examination of the lived experiences of ICSs, who often navigate marginal positions within dominant cultural and institutional systems in the United States.

5 | Method

This study employed an IPA (Smith et al. 2022) to explore experiences of marginalization and discrimination among ICSs. IPA's epistemological commitments to hermeneutics and idiography enabled an in-depth exploration of how individuals make sense of their experiences within their unique, contextual world (Smith et al. 2022). Thus, IPA's methodological foundation allowed us to capture both universal and idiographic experiences of participants, thereby highlighting a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of their lived experiences. In addition, IPA involves a double hermeneutic process, where the researchers co-construct meaning while interpreting participants' perceptions and meaning-making of the phenomenon (Prosek and Gibson

2021; Smith et al. 2022). We integrated CRT to shape the research questions and analyze participants' narratives to inform a critical analysis of systemic and institutional barriers while maintaining attention to participants' personal processes of meaning-making.

5.1 | Researcher Reflexivity

In IPA, researchers should be aware of their own perceptions and experiences related to the topic, as these may influence how meanings are constructed from the participants' stories throughout the research process (Prosek and Gibson 2021; Smith et al. 2022). The research team consisted of two members, each with some personal and professional experience related to this topic. The first author is a cisgender Asian woman from South Korea, who was a doctoral ICS in a counselor education program at a university in the Southeastern United States at the time of this research. The second author is a cisgender Black man raised and living in the Southeastern United States; a counselor educator who has taught, advised, supervised, chaired, and conducted research with ICSs; and a licensed psychologist who has led counseling groups and provided individual counseling to ICSs. Collectively, these experiences deepened his understanding of the profound contributions ICSs make to counselor education learning communities, as well as the complexities of their lived experiences in the United States. The first author conducted the entire research process, including recruitment, interviews, and data analysis. The second author, who served as the first author's dissertation chair, provided guidance on the overall research process and audited the research findings.

I, the first author, engaged in continuous reflexivity throughout the research process, recognizing the influence of the researcher's positionality and prior experiences on the co-construction of meaning with participants. As an ICS, my own experiences with racialization and alienation shaped my interests in the topic and my interpretations of participants' narratives. This insider position helped me build rapport with participants and deepen my understanding of the challenges unique to ICSs, including visa-related issues and complexities in clinical training. At the same time, I was aware that my specific positionalities, including my nationality, gender, the location of my school, and other categories, could limit my understanding of the nuanced experiences of participants. Before beginning data collection, I documented my initial assumptions, including my expectation that language barriers and racialization would be significant challenges in the participants' educational journeys. To make sure that these assumptions did not overshadow participants' perspectives, I engaged in reflexive journaling before and after interviews and sought feedback from participants and auditors.

5.2 | Participants

We used purposive homogeneous sampling to recruit international students who were currently enrolled in or had recently graduated from CACREP-accredited master's and doctoral counselor education programs. This sampling strategy is appropriate for IPA because it allows for the exploration of shared experiences of a small, relatively similar group while delving into idiographic details (Larkin and Thompson 2012; Smith et al.

2022). Accordingly, the following inclusion criteria ensured that all participants shared similar characteristics relevant to the study: (a) currently enrolled in or graduated within a year from CACREP-accredited counseling master's or doctoral programs across the United States, and (b) currently held or previously held a student visa (F-1 or J-1) while enrolled in the program. Based on the literature indicating that the degree level does not significantly affect the nature of challenges faced by ICSs, we decided to include both master's and doctoral students, as their international student status appeared to be a more meaningful factor than their degree levels (Ng and Smith 2009). As a result, a total of 10 ICSs participated in the study, aligning with 5–16 individuals recommended by Spiers and Smith (2019). To protect confidentiality, we assigned pseudonyms after the data collection and removed any identifiable information, such as the countries of origin and the geographical regions of their school. Participant demographic information is presented in Table 1.

5.3 | Data Collection

After Institutional Review Board approval, recruitment announcements were distributed via professional listservs, counseling student social media networks, and the directory of CACREP-accredited program directors. The announcement included a link to an informed consent form and a demographic questionnaire, which asked participants about their student visa status, level of study, year in the program, and other relevant background information. Among the individuals who completed the forms, participants were screened based on inclusion criteria. Eligible participants were contacted via email to schedule a Zoom interview.

Open-ended questions in semi-structured individual interviews offer participants the opportunity to reflect on their personal narratives and meanings, which creates a necessary environment for IPA to exchange authentic meaning-making processes of participants (Smith et al. 2022). The interview protocol consisted of six questions informed by the research question, the principles of CRT, and previous research on international students' experiences with marginalization. Interviews began with the overarching question, "Can you tell me about the marginalization and discrimination you have encountered in your graduate program?" Then, follow-up questions included, "When you encountered those incidents, how have those experiences affected you?" and "What factors helped you to navigate those adverse experiences?" Each interview was conducted and video-recorded via Zoom, lasting 45–70 min. The interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

5.4 | Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using the IPA six-step process proposed by Smith et al. (2022). I (H.J.) began the analysis by reading and re-reading the first interview transcript to gain a richer understanding of the participant's lived experiences of marginalization. Second, initial exploratory notes were written to capture language, discourse, and content that stood out during the initial interpretation. For instance, in Emily's transcript, I marked repeated emotional experiences, including feeling

TABLE 1 | Participants demographics.

Pseud.	Race/eth.	Gender	Country	Age	Region	Level	Year	Stay	English
Emily	Asian	Female	Southeast Asia	25–34	NARACES	Doctoral	Fourth	6–7 y	Very Good
Jude	Turkish	Female	Europe	25–34	SACES	Doctoral	Second	1–2 y	Good
Michelle	Asian	Female	East Asia	25–34	NARACES	Master	First	0–1 y	Good
Brian	Asian	Male	Southeast Asia	35–44	NCACES	Doctoral	Fifth	4–5 y	Good
Lia	Black	Female	Africa	35–44	NARACES	Doctoral	Second	1–2 y	Very Good
Eric	Asian	Male	East Asia	25–34	SACES	Master	Grad	2–3 y	Good
Stacy	White	Female	Europe	25–34	SACES	Doctoral	Second	7+ y	Very Good
Jay	Asian	Male	East Asia	25–34	NCACES	Doctoral	Second	7+ y	Good
Jasmine	Asian	Female	South Asia	25–34	NCACES	Doctoral	Second	1–2 y	Very Good
Sarah	Asian	Female	North America	25–34	NARACES	Master	Second	1–2 y	Very Good

Abbreviations: Age, age range; Country, geographic region of their home country; English, perceived level of English proficiency; Level, level of study; Pseud., pseudonym; Race/eth., race/ethnicity; Region, region of their program; Stay, length of stay in the United States by years; Year, year in the program.

dismissed and invalidated in her program. In the third step, I extracted more salient components from those initial exploratory notes to identify and highlight experiential statements. For example, Emily's narratives included experiential statements such as "Becoming more eloquent and outspoken in doctoral program" and "Being Americanized as a means to avoid discrimination." Fourth, I made an initial effort to find connections between the experiential statements and cluster them. The fifth step is to consolidate the grouping process and create the overarching themes for the first transcript. In Emily's case, I recognized a pattern of responding to marginalization through acculturation and self-advocacy, illustrating counternarratives of survival in which ICSs navigate and endure the process of adjusting to U.S. academia. I repeated the above process to conduct individual case-level analyses for the other nine interview transcripts.

Finally, the analysis culminated in constructing master themes that were applicable across all 10 participants. This cross-case analysis produced five master themes and seven subthemes that reflected the convergence and divergence of the participants' experiences of marginalization in counselor education programs. Throughout the analysis, CRT provided an interpretive lens that illuminated systemic barriers as the underlying structure of the phenomenon participants encountered (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). For example, we identified *Interlocking Systems of Oppression* as a master theme, which captured how institutional and sociocultural structures contributed to insensitivity and implicit microaggressions. Additionally, the resistant and transformative tenets of CRT informed the refinement of our thematic structures and the inclusion of *Responding to Marginalization* (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). This theme was not identified in our preliminary findings; however, after reviewing the alignment between the themes and the theoretical framework, it was added to highlight the active agency of participants as they adjusted, coped with, and resisted oppressive systems.

5.5 | Trustworthiness

We employed multiple strategies to establish the trustworthiness of the study (Hays and McKibben 2021; Lincoln and Guba 1986; Morrow 2005). The first author engaged in reflexivity journaling after each interview and during the analysis process (Morrow 2005). This process helped recognize the researcher's assumptions about discrimination faced by ICSs, prevent those assumptions from overshadowing participants' meaning-making, and stay open to unexpected findings from participants. Second, participants were invited for member checking on two occasions via email to ensure our research product accurately reflected participants' accounts (Hays and McKibben 2021; Lincoln and Guba 1986). During the first round, participants received verbatim interview transcripts and confirmed the clarity of their responses without any revisions. In the second round, preliminary findings were shared to check whether the identified themes accurately represented their experiences. A few participants responded with agreement on their transcripts and the preliminary findings; one participant requested modifications to a quote to ensure anonymity. Finally, the second author and an external auditor confirmed the rigor of the analytic process and findings (Hays and McKibben 2021; Lincoln and Guba 1986; Morrow 2005). The external auditor, who was not involved in the research

process, provided an independent and untainted perspective on the research process and findings. Their feedback included more detailed descriptions of the researcher's positionality and research process, as well as modifying participant profiles to reduce the risk of reidentification. They also provided feedback about the findings, confirming the appropriateness of the categorization and the representativeness of the quotes used to describe each theme.

6 | Findings

We identified five master themes and seven related subthemes from the lived experiences of 10 ICSs regarding marginalization and discrimination in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs in the United States. The themes and subthemes are presented in Figure 1.

6.1 | Subtle and Covert Forms of Marginalization

Participants recalled subtle, hidden, and easily overlooked forms of marginalization, rather than overt, blatant forms of discrimination. These subtle marginalizations commonly manifested through stereotyping and tokenism, invisibility and minimization of international identities, subtle exclusion and alienation, and microaggressions that were "smaller in scale," as described by Jay.

6.1.1 | Stereotyping and Tokenism

A recurring form of marginalization was stereotyping, often rooted in limited knowledge, bias, or overgeneralization of participants' backgrounds. Lia recalled, "Some clients asked me if I had fast food. One asked me how I got here and I said I took a plane. It's a lack of knowledge and what they see on television about Africa." Similarly, Jude shared,

One of my professors asked where I was from. When I said Country A, she said, "Oh, I've been there. You look more prettier than the other Country A people I met." This is not a compliment, but an assault. I cannot take it.

Furthermore, participants shared experiences of being tokenized and recognized solely for a specific identity, based on their racial and ethnic identity or being an international student. When Stacy was introduced as an ICS from Country B, she recalled how others became indifferent about her different identities, such as being a counselor or a researcher, reflecting, "All of a sudden, being a person from Country B is the only thing that matters."

6.1.2 | Invisibility and Minimization

Invisibility in class discussions was another form of discrimination reported by participants. Emily, for instance, described a group discussion about the least comfortable client population. When a peer said they felt uncomfortable with non-native English speakers, she thought, "I know you're talking about client. But

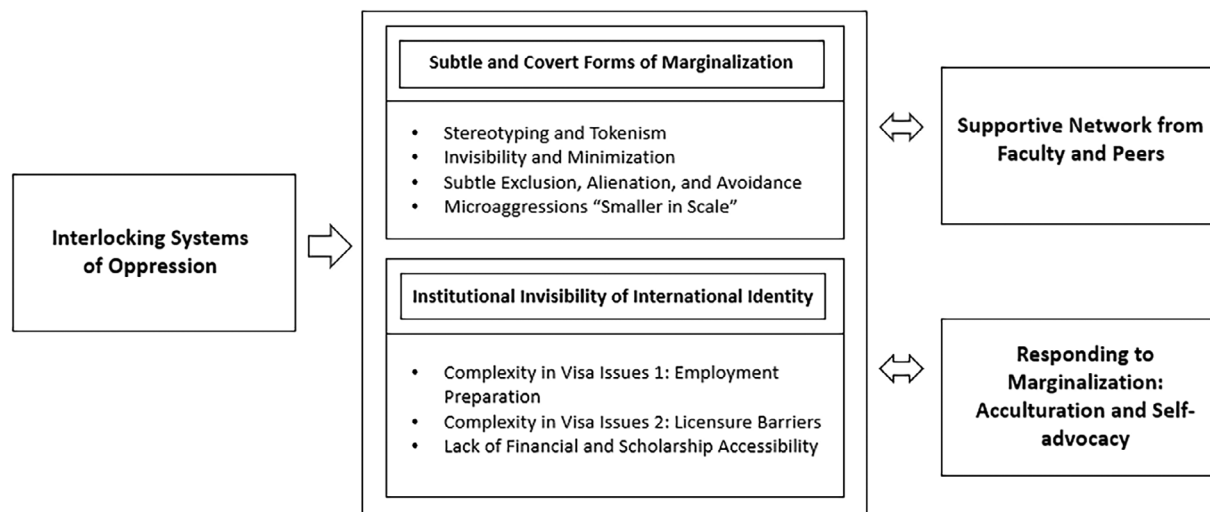


FIGURE 1 | Themes and subthemes of ICs' experiences of marginalization and discrimination.

also English is not my first language. What does that mean?" When other members agreed with this comment, she reflected, "I felt invisible, and nobody cared about my feelings." In terms of course content and structure, participants shared feelings of being overlooked and unsure how to engage in multicultural counseling courses, particularly when courses centered around the specific sociohistorical knowledge about the U.S. Michelle reflected, "I'm pretty confused. It just feels very far away from me. I don't know as an international student how can I interpret White privilege. What can I gain from history and apply to my practice?" Jasmine further described how the course disconnected from her as an international student: "I'm taking multiculturalism right now. I learned nothing about my identity. There was nothing about other identities who are international. Why is that missing?"

Sometimes, this invisibility or insensitivity towards participants' experiences led to the minimization and erasure of their lived realities. Emily, for example, described how her costly and complex journey home was being minimized and equated with more casual, domestic experiences of missing home. She explained,

I said homesick, and it's very easy to be generalized. People would just say, "I miss my hometown as well." But their hometown is 3 hours away driving. We're 1,000 miles away. You have to pay for tickets, do extra work to advocate [for] yourself to go back home.

Similarly, Brian recalled that his struggles with engaging in unfamiliar classroom content and structure were dismissed when he sought advice from a professor:

The professor talked, "In the discussion, you just have to be the one to talk from your perspective and contribute. Just keep on going. Keep on talking!" I felt pretty ill-advised... [It] came more from their perspective or from their answer but not in terms of the struggle I had. That one didn't sit for me too well.

6.1.3 | Subtle Exclusion, Alienation, and Avoidance

Alongside the invisibility, participants shared being deliberately excluded and left out of academic and social settings. Participants often reported that their contributions were disregarded and unrecognized when they shared perspectives as international students or from their heritage cultures. Emily, for example, said,

Whenever I talk about something in my home country, it feels like nobody wants to respond to that. They were just like, "Oh, okay." and then nothing else. But when they talk about New York, California, Louisiana, different states, they will respond to them.

Brian echoed a similar experience, sharing how professors labeled his perspectives as too specific to engage with: "The professor says 'Oh, [it's] your very specific context,' or 'Oh, this is from your local country, or from your specific culture.' Then, there's nothing much that's built on."

Exclusion went beyond classroom discourses. Participants reported being excluded from social relationships within their programs. Lia elucidated how cultural differences could result in subtle exclusion from the friend circle among peers: "You don't share the same joke, so you're going to make them uncomfortable, so they won't include you. There isn't, 'Oh, Lia, you can't come.' But you find out that everyone is somewhere, and you are not." Brian also recalled his experiences of being misunderstood and isolated due to his unfamiliarity with U.S. cultural norms. He explained, "I was confronted with saying something I didn't think would be interpreted as a racist. I had to explain I'm international, I'm new. I had to be the one to explain when I figured that they misunderstood me."

6.1.4 | Microaggressions "Smaller in Scale"

While a few participants reported overt or blatant discrimination, the recurring experiences were more indirect, nuanced, and

often unintentional forms of marginalization. Stacy said, “People just forget that I have different needs.” Brian also noted, “It didn’t come from bad intention.” Although these experiences felt “smaller in scale,” as Jay shared, Emily reflected on their impact: “While I still think it’s a lack of knowledge and multiculturalism, they’re all good intention. But the impact sometimes is a bit different.” Participants particularly emphasized that limited proactive support from faculty exacerbated their marginalization, even if it might be unintentional. Jay recalled a support group for Asian students provided by the faculty during COVID-19 and questioned:

Why didn’t they have this before the pandemic, before everything happened? It seemed like they’re checking something off their list, like, “We’re now gonna do this thing. Then, we can prove to others that we’re doing things to address this problem.”

Due to its subtle nature, participants questioned the existence of discrimination and the legitimacy of their adverse experiences. For example, Lia shared her concerns about not contributing enough to this study, adding, “I feel like I don’t have real examples of marginalization.” She also expressed the feeling that she was not entitled to express her struggles: “You are not invited here. You applied for a visa. You applied to the program. So get on with it.” Michelle shared similar feelings when talking about her experiences with class discussions: “It’s a United States program. Maybe it’s a destiny that we as international students will always be aliens.”

6.2 | Institutional Invisibility of International Identity

Participants reported encountering systemic neglect and insensitivity toward the unique challenges and needs of ICSs, such as visa requirements, employment sponsorship, licensure difficulties, and limited access to financial aid. These challenges stemmed not only from inadequate support from faculty and programs but also from broader structural gaps within the entire system of counselor education.

6.2.1 | Complexity in Visa Issues 1: Employment Preparation

The pervasive systemic challenge reported by participants was the lack of institutional support for navigating the complexity of visa issues. All participants held F-1 student visas, which imposed restrictions, including regulations on course enrollment and employment. Participants felt frustrated and unheard when there was an absence of guidance from the faculty and the program regarding this process. Particularly, this sense of systemic neglect was intensified since the visa issues were closely tied to participants’ future employment prospects. Jay illustrated, “If you want to be a counselor in the United States, as an international student, it is extremely discouraging. I’ve heard of people submitting 50–70 places, and got a handful of responses simply because they need sponsorship.” Due to the uncertainty of visa sponsorship for counselor positions, certain participants turned

to academic positions as a more viable option. Jude explained, “I wasn’t planning to be full-time faculty. ... But universities give that sponsorship.” Additionally, this difficulty of securing future employment increased the pressure to outperform. Jay explained, “I have to prove myself twice as hard, work twice as hard, so that the employer feels their sponsorship is justified.”

When programs failed to provide tailored support for these specific needs, participants experienced disappointment and frustration. Jasmine described a lack of professional support from her advisor: “It made me upset and a little mad. Why wasn’t I given this [professional support] when I’m a second-year doc student? I’m an international student, which means I have to work 10 times more to secure a job. She [advisor] should understand.” In addition, Eric highlighted the lack of transparency in job-placement information tailored to ICSs, which may affect prospective ICSs’ informed decision-making about degree programs. He elaborated,

Most programs have 99% or 100% job placement rate. But does that apply to international students? I know international students who cannot find a job and have to go back to their country. That job placement rate is false. They should lay out on website like, “The job placement for international graduates from our program is actually 50%, not 100% for American students.”

6.2.2 | Complexity in Visa Issues 2: Licensure Barriers

At the same time, visa regulations were closely related to difficulties in getting a license. Eric highlighted that most faculty are unaware of the near impossibility of obtaining licensure for ICSs in the current system, where students are typically given a year of Optional Practical Training (OPT) after graduation. He explained, “If you have 1 year of OPT, it’s impossible to get a license in Mental Health Counseling in the United States. Most states will require at least 2–3 years to get the clinical hours.” While pursuing a doctoral program may allow ICSs to gain more time for clinical hours, this process can still be challenging without adequate support from the program and clinical sites. Stacy, for example, chose to work as a volunteer to accumulate her hours; however, she had to persuade her supervisor to collect hours in this alternative way:

When I tried to find a supervisor for my LPC Associate. I tried to do like, ‘I work for this many hours and then I get free supervision deal,’ because that’s legal. And that came with a lot of uncertainty, sort of distrust. “That’s weird. Why would you do that?”

6.2.3 | Lack of Financial and Scholarship Accessibility

Financial challenges were also commonly experienced, particularly due to higher out-of-state tuition and the employment restrictions under an F-1 visa, such as a 20-h weekly work limit

and a prohibition on off-campus jobs. Lia explained, “I can only work as a graduate assistant. During the summer, the university is closed. I can’t work. I have to wait till the end of summer. What happens during that time?” These challenges were further compounded by the limited financial resources and scholarship opportunities for ICSs. Emily said, “I looked up NBCC stipends, it only allow people who have citizenship to apply.” Stacy added, “It’s a systemic, discriminatory thing. The amount of grants I can apply to is ridiculously low.” In addition, when faculty failed to acknowledge and support this matter, it further exacerbated feelings of marginalization among participants. Emily described,

When I’m asking for financial resources, my advisor threw website of NBCC and ACES [at me]. I looked up NBCC stipends, it’s only allow people who have citizenship to apply. She knew that I’m not citizen. I feel very dismissive. So, it’s like, “Hey, there you go, and then you figure it out all by yourself.”

6.3 | Interlocking Systems of Oppression

Participants recognized how intersecting sociocultural factors, such as racism, linguisticism, sexism, and academic hierarchies, contributed to their experiences of discrimination and marginalization. First, participants recognized that racism and White normativity play a role in devaluing and alienating participants of color. Brian shared the feeling marginalized in multicultural courses, thinking “Asian are more of like an extra.” Additionally, Jasime highlighted implicit colorism in her advisor’s treatment, noting she and other female students of color were neglected while a White first-year student was receiving preferential treatment:

First year is getting everything, and me and my other cohort members were neglected by her [advisor]. There is very implicit racial discrimination. Even though they are people of color, they still end up discriminating other people of color who are darker skin tone.

Moreover, in Sarah’s case, sexism intersected with racism to create further compounded forms of oppression. After speaking out about racist incidents that happened in the program, she was labeled “unprofessional” by her professor. She elaborated:

Implicitly there is some kind of grouping going on like, “She is not as quiet as the other Asian women in the class.” White structures use the word “professionalism” to keep people of color within this box, keep them complacent in the racist structures. And someone, a person of color goes outside of that, it’s like, “Oh, that’s unprofessional. Go back into your box.” Professionalism is a cultural expectation to act more White.

Linguicism and accent bias were also common sources of marginalization. Eric described how language-related obstacles

he encountered, such as pinpointing emotional nuances, learning medical jargon, and documenting in a second language, was met with a lack of empathy and support from his internship supervisor. He explained, “I got a performance review that my contract would be terminated if I don’t turn my notes on time, which is very scary. It takes us much more time compared to a native speaker to finish my notes.” Additionally, Lia encountered how accent bias put her in a difficult position when searching for a practicum site: “I emailed over 50 places. They hear my accent and think I can’t speak English, and so I don’t get a spot.”

Lastly, power dynamics and hierarchies in academia reinforced their marginalization. Michelle shared her perceptions about how her voices were dismissed: “We’re just started, we’re not expert yet. So nobody values our voice.” Jasmine noted that the power imbalance between her advisor and herself made it difficult for her to speak up or advocate for herself:

I will create a ripple in that water. I don’t feel strong enough to have that dialogue with her because she is in a powerful position and I am just an international student. I don’t know who will back me up. I don’t know if I’ll create unnecessary politics and drama in the department.

Sarah echoed similar concerns related to participating in this study: “I’m scared that if this gets published before I graduate. I’m questioning how the system works. I’m worried of being penalized for that in some way.”

6.4 | Responding to Marginalization: Acculturation and Self-Advocacy

A common outcome of marginalization and discrimination was loneliness and the absence of a sense of belonging. Jude shared, “Each time you interact with people, you realize you are not belonging here. You are an outlier.” Sarah shared a similar sentiment: “I felt so othered. It made me want to go home. It made me homesick where I never experienced these experiences before.” Furthermore, participants became reserved and withdrawn from peer relationships at times. Michelle resigned from a leadership role after experiencing discrimination from peers: “I just quit. I don’t want to take that. Don’t include me.” Similarly, Jude reported changes in her attitude toward her peers after experiencing subtle avoidance: “I feel less motivated to build relationship. If you want me, I’m okay. But I’m not trying.”

At times, participants described assimilation as a strategy for coping with experiences of marginalization. Brian stated, “Over the years, I could see more of how I could cater or share the aspect that seems more relevant to them.” Jude added, “I’m turning to more individualistic culture because I don’t want to be outlier. I don’t want to be marginalized.” Yet assimilation sometimes did not eliminate alienated feelings entirely. Jay explained, “I feel like the emotional distant is still there. I have to say something fun just to feel like I’m assimilating into your culture, just to feel like I’m more in this group.” Along the same line, Emily shared feelings

of “losing a piece” of herself while assimilating into American culture: “I feel like I’m losing a piece of myself. Once I’m more Americanized, people accept me. But you never know who I truly am when I’m speaking my native language. That’s who I truly am.”

In addition to assimilation, participants discussed self-advocacy as a form of coping and resistance. Sarah confronted the discriminatory incidents and stood up against the racist stereotypes and misinformation: “I wrote an email to faculty [about] two incidents of racism in the class. It was from a colonialist perspective. It’s just inaccurate and terrible. So I responded.” Similarly, Stacy endeavored to speak up despite discomfort and anxiety to raise consciousness within the program. She said, “I’m forcing myself to talk about it because nobody else is gonna do it for me. I want to advocate for those who might come after me.” Eric described how he had successfully advocated to convert his program from regular OPT to STEM OPT. Unlike regular OPT, STEM OPT offers 3-year practical training periods following graduation. He explained, “I advocated to change our program into a STEM program, so I know there’s only six programs that have successfully done that.”

6.5 | Supportive Network From Faculty and Peers

Despite the different forms of discrimination, participants recognized meaningful support from faculty and peers. Although not all faculty interactions were positive, participants described that their interactions with faculty played a positive role in navigating adversities. Participants specifically noted positive support from faculty with marginalized backgrounds. Emily shared, “They understand how international students being marginalized in the program. So they wanted to support.” Jasmine added, “My research supervisor is international faculty. She shares her experiences with me. She’s able to advocate for me.” While the support from faculty took many forms, participants particularly appreciated tailored resources and accommodation for their specific needs. Lia recalled how a professor helped her by switching the classroom to a more accessible location: “We have to teach a night class. Because I don’t have a car, I can’t go an hour. My professors were very thoughtful and considerate.”

Peers were another source of support that all participants emphasized. Support from other international students was particularly crucial in addressing issues of marginalization. Emily, for example, reflected on the positive bonding in her master’s program: “Our cohort has three international students. Three of us has bound together, and we share resources together.” Similarly, Jay emphasized building community with other ICSs: “I have to rely on more informal support [from] the international community within the Counselor Ed circle. We’re gonna need each other to navigate concerns we have.” Of course, participants mentioned emotional, academic, and practical support from peers in the program in general. For example, when Sarah had racist incidents in the program, she recalled the support she received: “It was mostly my classmates and peers. Because we were all collectively going through it together.”

Cultural humility, including being open and aware of participants’ experiences and actively including them in conversations,

was reported as a helpful attitude. Participants found it beneficial when faculty and peers expressed openness and awareness about their home culture. For instance, when a natural disaster occurred in her home country, Jude remembered emotional support from her supervisor: “I was in a very bad psychological condition. It was so nice seeing support of my supervisors.” Lia also expressed her gratitude when a professor invited her to share her perspectives in classroom discussions:

She told me. “Lia, I want to hear what you think.” I would recoil and she just keep saying, “Lia, what do you think?” Slowly I started to express myself. I spoke with her about my fears. And she told me, “Just go and be yourself, and they’ll love you.”

7 | Discussion

This study explored the marginalization and discrimination experienced by 10 ICSs enrolled in CACREP-accredited programs in the United States, using IPA. While dominant narratives on international students, including ICSs, largely emphasize individual efforts to acculturate or assimilate into hegemonic cultures, they often overlook relational and systemic barriers that disproportionately impact ICSs (George Mwangi et al. 2019; Joshi et al. 2021). By centering the voices of ICSs and interpreting them using CRT as a guiding framework, this study illuminated the systemic barriers and marginalizations that hinder their educational and professional development. Participants most frequently reported the subtle and implicit nature of marginalization they encountered. Those encounters included being stereotyped, neglected, and excluded in their interactions with faculty and peers, largely due to cultural differences. Overt discrimination was reported as relatively uncommon, which may reflect on increasing awareness of anti-oppressive and culturally inclusive practices in counselor education (Baker and Moore III 2015; CACREP 2024). However, the frequent report of covert and often unintended forms of marginalization indicates how deeply racism and other forms of oppression are embedded in academic and societal structures. These findings also reveal how difficult it is to fully unlearn and eradicate such systems, even with conscious efforts toward inclusion.

These incidents of marginalization were closely connected to racism, linguisticism, and America-centric perspectives, which align with literature on racist nativism as the primary source of marginalization among international students (Anandavalli et al. 2021; George Mwangi et al. 2019; Lee and Rice 2007; Yao 2018). CRT offers key interpretive tools to understand these mechanisms by showing how White supremacy normalizes Whiteness as standard, valuable, and normal (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Thus, ICSs who are people of color, non-native English speakers, and not familiar with White American cultural norms are considered deviant or deficient, justifying discrimination and alienation against them. In addition, the linkage between participants’ experiences and sexism and hierarchy in academia clearly demonstrates how intersecting marginalized identities create added vulnerability for certain individuals to systemic inequities and unfair treatment (Crenshaw 1991).

The marginalization experienced by ICSs was not limited to classroom dynamics but extended to broader systemic challenges, particularly related to complex visa regulations. For example, structural barriers to clinical licensure, especially with 1-year OPT after graduation, have not received enough attention in previous research. Despite the professional nature of the counseling degree, many programs fail to provide adequate support for ICSs to navigate these limitations. Additionally, the need to secure visa sponsorship after graduation placed an added burden on ICSs, as they felt pressure to prove their eligibility and worth to their future employers. Although this pressure to outperform is in line with the experiences of other marginalized students in counselor education (Baker and Moore III 2015; Henfield et al. 2013), this may be more pronounced for ICSs due to the critical link between employment and their continued residency in the United States. Finally, financial insecurity, driven by high tuition and legal restrictions for employment opportunity was another recurring concern similar to prior research (George Mwangi et al. 2019; Lau and Ng 2012; Lee and Rice 2007), which further exacerbated when faculty overlooked these structural disparities and failed to provide tailored support.

ICSs often assimilated into U.S. cultural norms to reduce marginalization and discrimination. From the CRT framework, this reflects structural forces that normalize White American culture as an ideal and superior. Thus, ICSs' assimilation can be understood not as a purely personal choice, but as an involuntary conformity to dominant cultural expectations, making them distance themselves from their cultural heritage. In line with this, participants developed self-advocacy as a coping strategy. While self-advocacy may reflect adaptability and resilience (Gloria and Steinhardt 2016), it also points to the lack of institutional support, similar to what CRT scholars highlighted in previous literature across other fields (Anandavalli et al. 2021; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Solórzano et al. 2000). Even in counselor education, where diversity and social justice are emphasized, this systemic absence of culturally responsive support remains prevalent, leaving ICSs isolated and forced to navigate the system on their own.

At the same time, these responses to marginalization and discrimination can also be interpreted as transformative and resistant actions, rather than limiting themselves to passive and victimized roles (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Transformation and resistance also come from faculty and peer support, which were identified as a vital source of personal and professional support. This finding aligns with previous research on ICS (Interiano and Lim 2018; Jang et al. 2014); however, it extends the literature by demonstrating the importance of faculty representation who share similar backgrounds. Participants felt most supported by faculty and peers who shared similar marginalized identities, including international backgrounds. These relationships provided emotional connection, shared empathy, practical resources, and professional support that were tailored to their unique needs. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of cultural humility in relationships with faculty and peers. While there is limited empirical research on the role of cultural humility in counselor education (Zhu et al. 2021), the participants' narratives suggested the significance of the faculty and peers' openness and curiosity towards their cultural backgrounds as significant contributors to their feelings of connectedness and being welcomed.

8 | Limitations and Future Research

Although the present study offered valuable insights into the marginalization and discrimination encountered by ICSs through the CRT framework, several limitations should be noted. Although participants represented various subgroups of ICSs, such as different racial identities, home countries, and levels of study, the transferability of the qualitative findings may be limited due to the diverse cultural backgrounds within ICSs. Future research may focus on specific subgroups of ICSs to capture the unique experiences within these groups. This approach would be particularly beneficial if it amplifies the lived experiences of ICSs of color (Joshi et al. 2021), from South Asia (Daniel 2021), and who plan to return to their home country (Lau and Ng 2012). In addition, the demographic questionnaire did not capture some significant contextual details of participants' experiences, such as the cultural climate in their program and institution, or more detailed information about their English language backgrounds beyond broad categories of "good" and "very good." These contextual elements may have influenced participants' experiences of marginalization and should be taken into consideration in future research. Finally, a one-time 60-min online interview may not be enough to build rapport and elicit in-depth, genuine responses from participants. Future researchers could consider improving data collection by engaging participants more extensively through multiple interviews, a longitudinal design, or journaling and other supplemental data sources to establish trust and facilitate a deeper exploration of their lived experience. Furthermore, based on the current research findings, which highlight the importance of institutional culture and systemic support, future studies may explore the effects of structured support, such as inclusive classroom design, tailored mentoring models, and support groups, on ICSs' well-being and professional development.

9 | Implications

9.1 | Implications for Counselor Educators

The marginalization and discrimination explored in this study provide several important pathways for counselor educators to foster culturally inclusive environments for ICSs. Given the linguistic and cultural differences that may leave ICS less familiar with U.S. sociocultural contexts, faculty can provide supplemental readings, videos for added context, flexible deadlines upon request, and individual guidance and mentoring. Incorporating multicultural and global perspectives into the introduction of theories, readings, and discussion topics can also promote inclusive learning environments and culturally diverse classroom dialogues (McDowell et al. 2012). Such instructional considerations are particularly crucial in multicultural counseling courses, given the participants' reports on alienation and exclusion in these courses. Regular check-ins with ICSs, providing supplemental materials to fill cultural and contextual knowledge gaps, and incorporating global theories and case examples can all support more inclusive learning environments for ICSs.

One-on-one relationships with faculty are crucial to navigate the unique challenges and needs of ICSs. Providing tailored mentoring and personalized support is an established strategy for supporting counseling students from diverse backgrounds

(Ju et al. 2020; Mittal and Wieling 2006). Given the heightened career-related stress among ICSs, this personalized support can be provided through collaborative communication between faculty and ICSs to understand their career goals, provide adequate resources, and develop professional development plans. Such tailored career support is particularly important amid recent volatility in U.S. work visa regulations (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS] 2025), as faculty can support ICSs in preparing for current labor market restrictions and alleviate their career-related stress. Moreover, embracing cultural humility, such as openness and curiosity in learning about ICS's cultural heritage and lived experiences, can help foster supportive and trusting relationships in this process. Examples of culturally humble practices include engaging in ongoing self-reflection about their attitude and assumptions, checking in regularly with ICSs, and inviting ICSs to share their cultural backgrounds and experiences (Hook et al. 2016).

9.2 | Implications for Counseling Programs

Cultivating a culture of connection is important for supporting ICSs (Peters and Luke 2022). Intentional efforts to encourage peer networking, such as cohort meetings, study groups, and student leadership organizations, can promote ICSs' connections with other students. Expanding the representation of diverse perspectives can also enhance a sense of connection and belonging (Mittal and Wieling 2006). Counseling programs may consider proactive efforts to increase representation by recruiting faculty with international and culturally diverse backgrounds, inviting guest speakers from global backgrounds, and hosting program activities to highlight international perspectives.

Close collaboration with institutional offices can lead to more collaborative and coordinated support. Particularly, working with the office of international students can provide a deeper understanding of ICSs' unique challenges and needs, helping counselor education programs design support structures that are appropriate and relevant for ICSs (Andrade 2006). Such collaboration can help programs stay informed about visa regulations and licensure barriers, allowing faculty to provide accurate information and guidance on processes, such as CPT authorization during internship and navigating OPT and licensure after graduation.

9.3 | Implications for the CACREP and Field of Counselor Education

Broader systemic efforts from CACREP, ACA, and other professional organizations can help address systemic barriers faced by ICSs by prioritizing discussions on how to support ICSs in obtaining licensures under existing visa restrictions. Systemic advocacy efforts may include advocating for the inclusion of counseling in STEM-designated degrees to extend OPT eligibility from 1 to 3 years, as well as discussing strategies to help ICSs accumulate clinical hours while complying with visa restrictions on off-campus employment. Furthermore, career support for ICSs can be tackled collaboratively across programs and professional organizations. Creating an information database of

H1B-sponsored employment, for example, can be a valuable resource for ICSs seeking clinical positions. This concerted effort is particularly important in the current labor market, where the constant changes in H-1B policies, including a \$100,000 additional payment and a weighted selection system, create unpredictability and confusion among international students (USCIS 2025). Systemic efforts to improve the recruitment and retention of ICSs are also encouraged. While CACREP vital statistics provide some information about the ratio of ICSs, more detailed information, such as their nationality or retention rates, would help develop effective strategies for recruiting and retaining students globally. Additionally, developing strategies to enhance ICSs' accessibility to scholarships and financial assistance can promote more equitable experiences for ICSs. Finally, the recent suspension of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) enforcement within CACREP standards may hinder these systemic transformations and other proactive efforts for supportive learning environments (CACREP 2025b). Thus, CACREP and professional organizations should carefully monitor these policy shifts so that they do not lead to an exacerbation of the barriers faced by ICSs.

10 | Conclusion

This study offers a nuanced understanding of ICSs' experiences of marginalization and discrimination during their study in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs in the United States. The findings highlighted the recurring experiences of subtle and covert marginalization and insensitivity towards their international identity within the underlying structure of systemic oppression, such as racism, nativism, linguisticism, and sexism. Consistent with Peters and Luke's (2022) observation, our findings clearly demonstrate that despite the increasing representation of ICSs, the efforts to provide inclusive and supportive learning environments have made little progress. Thus, the findings provide the need for more concerted efforts to address systemic barriers, expand culturally inclusive educational practices, and meaningfully support ICSs for meeting their unique needs.

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Ethics Statement

This study involved human participants and was conducted after IRB approval, in accordance with the IRB's relevant ethical standards.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data is available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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