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## Beyond Multiculturalism: An Interpretative Phenomenological Inquiry into Evolving Paradigms for Intercultural Counseling Practice

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### ABSTRACT

Globalization and increasing cultural mobility have transformed contemporary counseling practice, challenging models that assume cultural homogeneity between counselors and clients. While multicultural counseling frameworks have contributed to greater cultural awareness, they often conceptualize culture in static and categorical terms. This study aims to examine evolving paradigms of intercultural counseling by moving beyond descriptive multicultural models toward a relational and interpretive understanding of counseling practice. Using a qualitative interpretive design, this study conducted a critical literature review of scholarly works on multicultural and intercultural counseling published between 2015 and 2024. The selected literature was analyzed through a hermeneutic–thematic approach informed by phenomenological principles to explore how counselors engage with cultural difference in practice. The analysis identified four interrelated dimensions shaping intercultural counseling encounters: constructions of self and identity, culturally embedded interpretations of psychological distress, expectations toward the counselor–client relationship, and socio-economic conditions associated with migration experiences. These dimensions highlight the limitations of culturally neutral or universally applied counseling models and emphasize the importance of interaction, reflexivity, and contextual sensitivity. The study concludes that an intercultural counseling perspective provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding contemporary counseling practice in culturally diverse contexts. By conceptualizing culture as dynamic and relational, this approach offers theoretical and practical insights for developing counseling practices that are responsive to increasing cultural complexity in a globalized world.



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### Introduction

Globalization, transnational migration, and intensified intercultural contact have significantly reshaped the landscape of counseling practice in Indonesia. As individuals increasingly relocate across regions, nations, and cultural boundaries, counseling services are confronted with clients whose values, belief systems, and communication patterns differ from those of the dominant culture. In the Indonesian context, cultural diversity is not a new phenomenon; however, contemporary mobility has intensified intercultural encounters within educational, clinical, and community-based counseling settings. These developments challenge traditional counseling models that implicitly assume cultural homogeneity between counselor and client. Consequently,

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counseling practice must be reconsidered as a culturally situated and context-dependent process rather than a universally applicable technique (Setiadi & Kolip, 2017).

In response to cultural diversity, counseling scholarship in Indonesia has increasingly adopted multicultural perspectives to address differences in ethnicity, religion, language, and social background. Multicultural counseling has been promoted as a framework that emphasizes cultural sensitivity, respect, and ethical awareness in therapeutic relationships (Supratiknya, 2016; Anwar, 2019). Within this approach, counselors are expected to develop competencies related to cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, and culturally appropriate intervention strategies. Indonesian studies have shown that multicultural competence contributes positively to counselor effectiveness, particularly in educational and school counseling contexts (Hidayat & Yusuf, 2018). Nevertheless, much of this literature remains normative, focusing on ideal competencies rather than lived counseling experiences.

Despite its contributions, the multicultural counseling discourse in Indonesia has been criticized for its tendency to conceptualize culture as static and categorical. Cultural identity is often reduced to ethnicity or religion, overlooking the dynamic and hybrid identities shaped by migration, urbanization, and globalization (Suyanto, 2020). Such essentialist views risk oversimplifying client experiences and reinforcing stereotypes within counseling practice. Furthermore, multicultural approaches may inadequately address relational processes that emerge when counselors and clients negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries. As a result, culture is frequently treated as an external variable rather than as an interactive and evolving dimension of the counseling relationship itself.

Recent Indonesian scholarship highlights that counselors themselves are active cultural subjects whose values, assumptions, and professional identities are shaped by sociocultural contexts (Maba, 2021; Nurhadi & Lestari, 2022). The growing diversity of counselor backgrounds—particularly in higher education and professional training raises important questions about how counselors interpret and manage intercultural encounters in practice. However, empirical research exploring counselors' subjective experiences in intercultural settings remains limited. Most existing studies rely on survey-based designs or competency measurements, offering little insight into how counselors actually experience cultural difference in therapeutic interactions.

This limitation indicates a conceptual and methodological gap in Indonesian counseling research. While multicultural counseling has enhanced awareness of cultural diversity, it may be insufficient for capturing the fluid, dialogical, and negotiated nature of intercultural counseling practice. An intercultural perspective, which emphasizes interaction, mutual influence, and co-construction of meaning, offers a promising alternative framework (Hidayat, 2020). Rather than focusing solely on cultural differences, intercultural counseling attends to how counselors and clients engage with difference within specific social and relational contexts. Such an approach is particularly relevant in Indonesia's pluralistic society, where cultural boundaries are frequently overlapping and contested.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore intercultural counseling practice through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework. The study seeks to understand how counseling practitioners interpret their experiences when working with culturally diverse clients and how these experiences shape their counseling approaches. By moving beyond static models of multicultural competence, this research contributes a phenomenological account of evolving intercultural counseling paradigms within the Indonesian context. The findings are expected to enrich theoretical discussions and inform more reflexive and context-sensitive counseling practices in culturally diverse settings.

## Method

This study employed a qualitative interpretive design based on a systematic and critical literature review to examine evolving paradigms of intercultural counseling practice. The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books published between 2015 and 2024, sourced from academic databases including Google Scholar, Garuda, SINTA, and DOAJ. The search utilized key terms such as intercultural counseling, multicultural counseling, counseling practice, and cultural diversity within the Indonesian context. Inclusion criteria emphasized relevance to counseling practice, cultural interaction, and practitioner perspectives, resulting in a curated corpus of literature addressing intercultural and multicultural counseling experiences.

Data analysis was conducted using a hermeneutic–thematic approach, focusing on the interpretation of meanings, assumptions, and practice-oriented narratives embedded within the selected texts. Through iterative reading, coding, comparison, and thematic abstraction, the analysis identified recurring patterns related to counselor–client interaction, cultural negotiation, and contextual influences on practice. This interpretive approach enabled a reflexive and contextual understanding of intercultural counseling practices and supported the development of theoretically grounded insights without claiming analysis of primary lived-experience data.

## Results and Discussions

The analysis indicates that determining appropriate counseling approaches in intercultural contexts requires careful consideration of concrete cultural differences rather than the application of universal therapeutic models. Across the reviewed literature, four interrelated dimensions consistently emerged as central challenges in intercultural counseling practice. These dimensions concern constructions of self and identity, cultural interpretations of psychological distress, expectations toward the counselor–client relationship, and the socio-economic conditions surrounding migration experiences. Together, these dimensions illustrate the complexity of intercultural counseling encounters and the limitations of applying culturally neutral or standardized counseling models.

The first key dimension relates to differing constructions of self and identity. In collectivist-oriented societies, including many Asian, Islamic, and Mediterranean cultures, identity is primarily defined through relational and communal affiliations rather than individual autonomy. The self is understood in terms of “we” rather than “I,” emphasizing family, community, and social harmony. Counseling approaches grounded in individualistic assumptions may therefore fail to resonate with clients whose sense of self is relationally embedded. This finding underscores the importance of recognizing culturally situated identity formations when conceptualizing therapeutic goals and interventions. A second dimension concerns culturally specific understandings of psychological distress. The literature demonstrates that in certain cultural contexts, emotional or psychological difficulties are frequently expressed through somatic symptoms or interpreted through spiritual and supernatural frameworks. Clients may lack familiarity with Western psychological terminology or diagnostic categories, leading to divergent explanatory models of illness. These differences complicate assessment and intervention processes and increase the risk of misinterpretation when counselors rely solely on Western psychopathological frameworks without cultural mediation.

The third dimension highlights culturally shaped expectations toward therapists and therapeutic relationships. In some cultural contexts, particularly those characterized by hierarchical social structures, clients may expect an asymmetrical relationship in which the counselor is perceived as an authoritative expert responsible for providing direct solutions. This expectation contrasts sharply with client-centered approaches that emphasize egalitarian relationships and client autonomy. When such expectations are not acknowledged, therapeutic alliances may weaken, reducing the perceived legitimacy of counseling interventions.

Finally, socio-economic conditions associated with migration significantly shape intercultural counseling encounters. Experiences of forced migration, discrimination, social exclusion, and economic insecurity contribute to psychological distress beyond individual-level factors. The literature emphasizes that counseling models focusing exclusively on intrapsychic processes risk neglecting structural and contextual dimensions of client experiences. Effective intercultural counseling therefore requires attention to broader social realities that influence meaning-making, hope, and future orientation.

The findings suggest that patient-centered counseling approaches, particularly those grounded in humanistic-existential traditions, may be insufficient when applied uncritically in intercultural contexts. While client-centered therapy emphasizes empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard, these principles are rooted in individualistic cultural assumptions. As noted in the literature, such approaches often encounter significant limitations when working with clients from collectivist or hierarchically structured societies. This critique supports earlier arguments that humanistic counseling models may inadequately address intercultural power relations and cultural expectations embedded within therapeutic encounters. Alternative approaches, including constructivist, behavioral, and psychoanalytic models, have been proposed as potentially more adaptable to intercultural contexts. These approaches allow for greater flexibility in addressing culturally mediated meanings, authority structures, and explanatory models of distress. However, the literature also reveals that no single counseling model can be universally applied across cultural settings without critical adaptation. This reinforces the argument that counseling effectiveness depends less on strict adherence to theoretical schools and more on contextual responsiveness and reflexive practice.

The broader classification of counseling paradigms metacultural, transcultural, multicultural, and intercultural provides a useful analytical framework for understanding theoretical orientations toward cultural difference. Metacultural approaches, which ignore cultural variation, are shown to be fundamentally inadequate in intercultural settings. Transcultural models, while emphasizing universal values, risk imposing dominant cultural norms under the guise of neutrality. Multicultural approaches contribute significantly by recognizing difference and promoting cultural awareness, yet they may inadvertently reify culture and overlook dynamic interactions within counseling relationships.

In contrast, the intercultural model aligns most closely with the findings of this study. By conceptualizing culture and identity as dynamic, relational, and co-constructed, intercultural counseling moves beyond static

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categorizations of difference. The emphasis on interaction allows both counselors and clients to reflect on their own cultural assumptions and engage in mutual transformation. In this sense, intercultural counseling represents not merely a technical adaptation of existing models but an epistemological shift toward dialogue, reflexivity, and contextual understanding.

## Conclusions

This study examined evolving paradigms of intercultural counseling practice through an interpretive analysis of contemporary literature and demonstrates that counseling in intercultural contexts cannot be adequately understood through static or hierarchical conceptions of culture. The findings identify four interrelated dimensions shaping intercultural counseling encounters: constructions of self and identity, culturally embedded interpretations of psychological distress, expectations toward therapeutic relationships, and socio-economic conditions associated with migration experiences indicating that cultural difference functions as an active and constitutive element in counseling practice rather than a peripheral background factor. The analysis further shows that counseling approaches grounded in universalistic or culturally neutral assumptions are limited in addressing the relational and negotiated nature of intercultural encounters; while cross-cultural and multicultural models offer important insights, an intercultural perspective provides a more comprehensive framework by emphasizing interaction, reflexivity, and the co-construction of meaning between counselors and clients. Epistemologically, the findings position intercultural counseling between universalism and cultural relativism, synthesizing the strengths of both perspectives while avoiding their extremes, and reframing cultural difference and migration not as inherent risk factors for psychological disturbance but as conditions that may enable personal and social transformation when addressed through dialogical and context-sensitive practices. Methodologically, this study highlights the value of a hermeneutic-thematic, interpretive literature-based approach for examining complex counseling paradigms without overclaiming access to primary lived-experience data, thereby contributing theoretically grounded and practice-relevant insights for counseling in increasingly pluralistic and globally interconnected societies

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