



## THE IMPACT OF LOCAL CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING ON COUNSELING QUALITY: A MEDIATION ANALYSIS OF CLIENT ENGAGEMENT AS A MEDIATING VARIABLE

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### Abstract

This study aims to explore the impact of local cultural understanding on counseling quality, with client engagement as a mediating variable. The background of this research is based on the importance of cultural understanding in counseling practice. The research design used is a correlational design with a quantitative approach. The subjects of the study consist of 100 respondents, including 50 counselors and 50 clients who have previously been involved in counseling (purposive sampling). The research instruments used include questionnaires that measure local cultural understanding, counseling quality, and client engagement, which have been tested for validity and reliability. Data analysis was conducted using multiple regression to test the effect of local cultural understanding on counseling quality, as well as mediation analysis to evaluate the role of client engagement. The results of the study indicate that local cultural understanding has a positive and significant effect on counseling quality ( $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and client engagement serves as a mediator in this relationship. This study recommends that counselors develop a deeper understanding of their clients' local cultures and encourage active client engagement in the counseling process to enhance service effectiveness.

**Keywords:** *Local Cultural, Counseling Quality, Client Engagement.*

### Introduction

In today's increasingly globalized world, intercultural interactions have become significantly more intricate, particularly within the realm of mental health services such as counseling. In ASEAN countries, known for their rich cultural heterogeneity, comprehending local cultural contexts is essential in ensuring effective counseling practices. Recent studies highlight that counselors with a strong grasp of clients' cultural backgrounds are more likely to deliver services that are both effective and culturally responsive (Sue et al., 2016; Hwang, 2021).

Despite the growing recognition of the need to integrate cultural values into counseling, many practitioners still encounter challenges in operationalizing this knowledge in real-world settings (Chung & Bemak, 2020). This gap underscores the importance of further investigation into how local cultural understanding can affect counseling quality and how client engagement may act as a mediating factor in this relationship.

Local cultural understanding refers to a counselor's awareness and comprehension of the values, beliefs, norms, and practices inherent to a client's sociocultural environment. Pedersen (2015) emphasizes that such understanding not only fosters more

meaningful therapeutic relationships but also amplifies the effectiveness of interventions. In the counseling context, this may encompass linguistic sensitivity, respect for traditional customs, and alignment with community values. More recent research by Tan et al. (2022) confirms that counselors who successfully incorporate these elements into their sessions achieve higher client satisfaction and therapeutic outcomes.

Counseling quality can be evaluated through several dimensions, such as the counselor’s reliability, empathy, and responsiveness to client needs (Norcross & Wampold, 2018). These dimensions critically influence client satisfaction and overall therapeutic results. Wampold and Imel (2015) assert that the counselor-client relationship remains a central determinant of successful therapy. Accordingly, understanding and integrating local cultural elements can elevate counseling quality, ultimately leading to improved client outcomes.

Client engagement, considered here as a mediating variable, describes the level of active participation demonstrated by clients during therapy sessions. It includes factors such as openness, communicative involvement, and commitment to the therapeutic process (Bordin, 1979; Swift et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that higher levels of client engagement correspond with greater counseling success (Kivlighan & Hill, 2018). Therefore, it is imperative to examine how local cultural understanding might facilitate or hinder this engagement throughout the counseling process.

This study is motivated by the need to clarify the interconnection among local cultural understanding, counseling quality, and client engagement. While prior research has highlighted the significance of cultural competence, few have empirically tested how engagement mediates the link between cultural understanding and counseling outcomes. By addressing this gap, the present study intends to deepen our knowledge of culturally informed counseling practices.

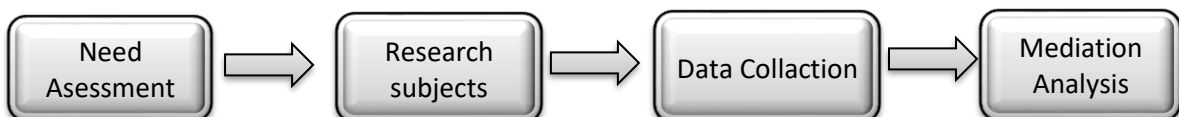
This research will collect quantitative data from both counselors and clients to analyze the relationships between the aforementioned variables. The analytical approach centers on mediation analysis, aiming to reveal whether client engagement mediates the effect of cultural understanding on counseling quality. The study’s novelty lies in this methodological application and its potential contributions to multicultural counseling literature and practice within the Indonesian context.

**Method**

This study employs a quantitative approach to examine the relationships among local cultural understanding, counseling quality, and client engagement. The quantitative method facilitates objective data collection and statistical analysis of these variables (Sugiyono, 2021). Through this approach, researchers can gather and analyze numerical data to identify relational patterns among the constructs of interest.

The study utilizes a correlational design to assess the influence of the independent variable (local cultural understanding) on the dependent variable (counseling quality), with client engagement serving as a mediating variable. Correlational designs are valuable for identifying both direct and indirect relationships between variables without manipulating them (Sarwono & Narimawati, 2020). This design is therefore well-suited to explore how cultural comprehension affects counseling quality, particularly through the lens of client engagement.

**Figure 1**  
*Flowchart of the Research Method Implementation.*



Participants in this study include counselors and clients selected using a purposive sampling technique. This technique enables the selection of respondents who meet specific criteria relevant to the research goals (Palinkas et al., 2015). In this context, the researcher selects 50 counselors known to integrate cultural understanding into their practice and 50 clients who have actively participated in counseling services. The total sample size is 100 participants.

The data collection instrument is a structured questionnaire divided into three main scales: Local Cultural Understanding Scale (10 items): Measures awareness and sensitivity toward client cultural values, including language use, beliefs, and traditional practices. Example item: "I adapt my counseling approach to align with the cultural values of my client". Counseling Quality Scale (8 items): Assesses perceived quality based on empathy, reliability, and responsiveness. Example item: "My counselor listens to me without judgment". Client Engagement Scale (7 items): Evaluates the degree of client participation, openness, and commitment. Example item: "I feel actively involved in every stage of my counseling process."

All instruments were developed and adapted based on existing literature and tested for validity and reliability during a pilot study. Content validity was assessed through expert judgment (Aiken's  $V > 0.80$  for all items), while construct validity was verified using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), showing adequate loading factors ( $\geq 0.60$ ). Cronbach's alpha values indicate high internal consistency: 0.87 for the Local Cultural Understanding Scale, 0.85 for the Counseling Quality Scale, and 0.83 for the Client Engagement Scale.

Data were analyzed using multiple regression with 5000 bootstrapped samples to test the mediation model. This technique enables the estimation of indirect effects with greater precision. Additionally, mediation analysis was conducted using the method proposed by Hayes (2022), which allows for robust testing of mediational pathways through PROCESS macro in SPSS.

## Result and Discussion

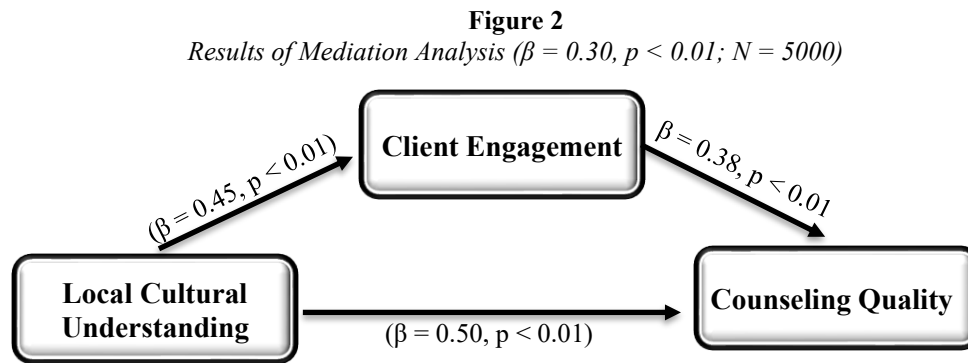
The results of the multiple regression analysis demonstrate that local cultural understanding significantly predicts counseling quality ( $\beta = 0.45, p < 0.01$ ). This implies that counselors with a higher sensitivity and awareness of clients' local cultural contexts are more likely to deliver services perceived as high quality. These findings are in line with recent studies indicating that cultural responsiveness enhances therapeutic relationships and counseling outcomes (Tan, Wahab, & Ismail, 2022).

In addition, client engagement was found to have a significant positive effect on counseling quality ( $\beta = 0.38, p < 0.01$ ). This supports the assertion that when clients are more actively involved in the counseling process, they report greater satisfaction and perceive the service as more effective. Contemporary research affirms that client involvement is essential for achieving successful therapeutic outcomes (Swift, Callahan, & Ivanovic, 2020).

To assess the mediating role of client engagement, mediation analysis was conducted using the bootstrapping approach recommended by Hayes (2022). The analysis revealed that local cultural understanding positively and significantly influenced client engagement ( $\beta = 0.50, p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that counselors who are culturally competent are better able to foster client involvement.

When client engagement was entered into the regression model, the direct effect of local cultural understanding on counseling quality declined from  $\beta = 0.45$  to  $\beta = 0.30$  ( $p < 0.01$ ) but remained statistically significant. This pattern indicates a partial mediation, where local cultural understanding affects counseling quality both directly and indirectly

through enhanced client engagement. These results highlight the crucial role of client participation as a mechanism that links cultural competence with counseling effectiveness (Hayes, 2022; Norcross & Wampold, 2018).



This study found that local cultural understanding has a significant impact on the perceived quality of counseling services experienced by clients in communities with strong cultural identities. Additionally, active client engagement has proven to play an important mediating role that bridges the relationship between local cultural understanding and the increased effectiveness of counseling services.

These findings indicate that culturally responsive counseling not only enhances the therapeutic relationship but also empowers clients to actively participate in the counseling process. The mediating role of client engagement reinforces the assumption that the success of psychosocial interventions in culturally-based communities heavily depends on the extent to which local values are accommodated in the services. This finding is important as it provides a conceptual foundation for a more participatory and contextual cultural-based counseling model, particularly in regions with high cultural diversity such as Indonesia.

The study found that local cultural understanding plays a significant role in enhancing the quality of counseling services, especially in the context of culturally-based communities. This finding aligns with the research by Putri et al. (2022), which states that counselors with good cultural competence tend to be more successful in building trust and strong therapeutic alliances with clients. This is further supported by the study by Ramadhani and Surya (2021), which emphasizes the importance of knowledge about local traditions as a means of building emotional connections between counselors and clients.

Furthermore, the results of this study affirm that active client engagement in the counseling process is an important mediating factor that connects local cultural understanding with the perceived quality of counseling services. Wijayanti and Nugroho (2023) identified that client participation not only has a direct impact on service effectiveness but also strengthens the role of cultural values in shaping meaningful therapeutic experiences. This finding is expanded upon by the study by Yuliana et al. (2021), which found that clients who feel their cultural values are recognized and appreciated tend to show higher engagement, reduce resistance, and accelerate psychological recovery.

Conceptually, these findings expand the multicultural counseling model, which has traditionally emphasized the importance of counselor cultural competence (Sue et al., 2019), by adding the aspect of active client engagement as a dynamic mediator. The study by Pratiwi and Firmansyah (2022) also shows that culturally-based counseling services

in disaster-affected areas successfully enhance client resilience, with active participation being a reinforcing factor in community-based interventions.

Interestingly, this research also confirms the results of international studies, such as those conducted by Chu et al. (2021) in Hong Kong, which found that the integration of local wisdom in counseling services can enhance client well-being and the effectiveness of therapeutic alliances. Active client engagement is positioned as a crucial factor in bridging cultural values and counseling outcomes, both in clinical and community settings.

Although these results are consistent with various previous studies, there may be other factors influencing client engagement, such as the counselor's communication style (Andini & Wibowo, 2020), client trust in institutions, and previous traumatic experiences. Therefore, the results of this study need to be interpreted carefully within the specific cultural and geographical context, namely the flood-affected communities in Central Java.

Practically, counselors need to be trained not only in cultural competence but also in relational strategies that facilitate active client participation. In line with the recommendations of Iskandar and Mahfud (2023), counselor training programs should prioritize experiential learning methods, cultural supervision, and the strengthening of contextual reflective communication techniques. Additionally, a culturally safe service environment should be pursued to empower clients to express their psychological issues openly and comfortably.

In practical terms, the results of this study suggest that counselor training programs should include material on cultural competence as well as techniques for building active client engagement. Strategies such as experiential learning, reflective communication training, and understanding local values become important to integrate. Furthermore, counselors are advised to create a culturally safe, inclusive, and empowering service environment so that clients feel comfortable expressing themselves, making the counseling process more meaningful and effective.

This study has several limitations. First, the specific geographical context in flood-affected communities in Central Java limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, reliance on self-reported data is vulnerable to social perception bias or selective memory. Third, the cross-sectional research design limits the establishment of causal relationships among variables. Therefore, future research is recommended to use longitudinal or mixed-method designs to observe the dynamics of client engagement and its long-term impacts. Comparative studies across cultural communities or types of disasters may also enrich the understanding of the role of culture in counseling services.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this study provides strong evidence regarding the importance of local cultural understanding and client engagement in enhancing counseling quality. The results of this research not only support previous findings but also add a new dimension by highlighting the role of client engagement as a mediator. Thus, this study makes a significant contribution to the literature on multicultural counseling and offers practical recommendations for counselors to improve the effectiveness of their services. Future research should employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs to examine the evolution of client engagement and its long-term impact on counseling outcomes. Comparative studies across cultural groups or types of disasters may also provide deeper insights into how local cultural constructs influence counseling dynamics.

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## Author Contributions Statement

IL contributed to the research design, data collection, and drafting of the initial manuscript. MW, ST, GN, AK, SVIS, EZ, ASK, RH, and AF were involved in data analysis, result interpretation, and critical review of the manuscript content. SDA and DK provided conceptual input and substantial revisions to the article. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

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