

Ethnographic Perspectives in Cross-Cultural Counseling: An Integrative Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural counseling requires more than knowledge of cultural categories; it requires disciplined attention to how clients construct meaning within social, historical, and relational contexts. This integrative literature review examines how ethnography can contribute to cross-cultural counseling while separating formal ethnographic research procedures from ethnographically informed counseling sensibilities. A structured search and citation audit covered English- and Indonesian-language scholarship published from 2004 to 7 August 2026 across Google Scholar, PubMed, ERIC, DOAJ, journal platforms, and citation chaining. From 72 candidate records, 40 sources were retained after duplicate, bibliographic, relevance, and evidence-boundary screening. Thematic synthesis produced five findings: ethnography is most defensible as a formal research methodology, whereas emic listening, reflexivity, contextual inquiry, and iterative meaning-checking can inform practice without converting counseling sessions into fieldwork; cultural humility and collaboratively adapted interventions have stronger direct counseling evidence than ethnography itself; local and Indigenous knowledge should be treated as dynamic and client-negotiated rather than culturally prescriptive; decolonial use of cultural knowledge requires positionality, ongoing consent, confidentiality, reciprocity, community validation, and attention to knowledge ownership; and counselor education can operationalize these principles through observable competencies. The review is limited by heterogeneous evidence and an integrative rather than exhaustive systematic design. Ethnographic perspectives therefore offer a valuable but ethically bounded complement to culturally responsive counseling.

Keywords: cross-cultural counseling; cultural humility; decolonial ethics; ethnography; integrative review

INTRODUCTION

Counseling increasingly occurs across differences in ethnicity, language, religion, social class, gender, disability, migration history, place, and other identity positions. In this article, cross-cultural counseling refers to counseling encounters in which culturally salient differences or similarities shape communication, problem definition, help-seeking, and the therapeutic relationship. Multicultural counseling is used more broadly for professional frameworks that attend to multiple and intersecting identities, social locations, power, and systemic conditions. Culturally responsive counseling refers to the collaborative adaptation of assessment, formulation, relationship processes, and intervention to a client's cultural meanings and context. Cultural competence denotes the development of relevant awareness, knowledge, skills, and action, whereas cultural humility emphasizes an ongoing, other-oriented stance of self-reflection, openness, and willingness to recognize limits in one's understanding (American Psychological Association, 2017; Hook et al., 2013; Ratts et al., 2016; Sue & Sue, 2022). These terms overlap, but they are not interchangeable; their distinctions are important because the present review focuses on what ethnography can legitimately add to counseling research and practice.

Ethnography is a qualitative research tradition designed to understand patterns of meaning, practice, language, relationships, and everyday life within cultural or culture-sharing settings. It typically relies on sustained engagement, observation, interviewing, field notes, artifacts, and iterative interpretation of emic and etic perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Reeves et al., 2008). Counseling psychology has long recognized that ethnographic inquiry can counter overly decontextualized accounts of psychological experience by locating persons within communities, institutions, histories, and systems of meaning. Suzuki et al. (2005) specifically

argued that ethnography offers counseling psychology methodological possibilities for studying culture in context while also requiring careful attention to the researcher's role and ethics. This potential is especially relevant in culturally plural settings where a standardized psychological explanation may not adequately represent the client's own account of distress, identity, relationships, or desired change.

The counseling literature nevertheless provides a caution against assuming that contextual sensitivity automatically produces effective practice. Empirical work on cultural humility suggests that clients' perceptions of therapist humility are associated with stronger working alliances and, in several studies, better psychotherapy outcomes (Hook et al., 2013; Owen et al., 2016). A later research review identified a growing but methodologically uneven evidence base for cultural humility in psychotherapy and supervision (Zhang et al., 2022), while a meta-analysis reported positive associations between therapist cultural humility, alliance, and psychotherapy outcomes (Orlowski et al., 2025). Similarly, meta-analyses of culturally adapted mental health interventions indicate that adaptation can be beneficial when it is responsive to the population and treatment context (Benish et al., 2011; Griner & Smith, 2006; Hall et al., 2016). These studies support culturally responsive practice, but they do not demonstrate that ethnography itself causes improved counseling outcomes. Maintaining that distinction is essential for calibrating claims.

A second problem concerns evidence boundaries. Indonesian scholarship contains valuable studies of multicultural counseling, culturally grounded guidance, local traditions, and community ethnography. For example, ethnographic work in a multicultural school illustrates how religious and ethnic plurality is institutionally negotiated (As'ad et al., 2021), while research on Pasaji Ponan documents community educational values through ethnographic fieldwork (Haris & Nasri, 2023). These studies can illuminate cultural contexts that may matter to counselors, but neither is direct observation of a counseling process. By contrast, Ramdhani et al. (2025) explicitly used ethnography to examine career guidance and career development meanings in the Indigenous Baduy community, making it more directly relevant to ethnographic guidance research. Other Indonesian counseling studies, including culturally grounded counseling media and cross-cultural counseling in schools or pesantren, are relevant to practice even when their designs are not ethnographic (Akbar et al., 2023; Putri et al., 2024; Rifki Khadafi & Abdurrahman, 2023). Treating all culturally oriented studies as ethnography would therefore weaken methodological precision.

A third problem is ethical and epistemic. Cultural knowledge is not a neutral resource that researchers or counselors may simply extract and insert into an intervention. Indigenous and community-based methodologies emphasize relational accountability, reciprocity, community authority, and respect for the conditions under which knowledge is shared (Drawson et al., 2017; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Community-based participatory research similarly stresses shared power and collaborative knowledge production rather than one-directional extraction (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). Contemporary work on critical relationality in school psychology further argues for research alongside Indigenous communities, not merely research about them (Aguilar et al., 2025). These concerns are directly relevant when local knowledge is translated into counseling curricula or techniques, particularly because small communities can be identifiable even when names are removed and because some knowledge may be restricted, collective, sacred, or inappropriate for publication.

The literature therefore contains a specific gap. Prior counseling research has developed strong frameworks for multicultural competence, social justice, cultural humility, cultural formulation, and cultural adaptation, while qualitative methodology literature describes ethnographic procedures and ethics. What remains less clearly synthesized is the boundary between ethnography as formal research and ethnographic principles as a professional

sensibility in counseling; the distinction between direct counseling evidence and contextual or analogical evidence; and the safeguards needed to prevent essentialist or extractive use of local and Indigenous knowledge. This review addresses that gap by asking three questions: What does the literature support about the contribution of formal ethnographic research to cross-cultural counseling? Which ethnographic principles can responsibly inform counseling practice and counselor education without turning routine counseling into fieldwork? What ethical, decolonial, and anti-essentialist safeguards are necessary when culturally situated knowledge is incorporated into counseling? The objective is to develop an evidence-calibrated conceptual synthesis and an assessable framework for culturally responsive counselor education and practice.

METHOD

This study used an integrative literature review with a structured search and transparent evidence-classification process. An integrative design was selected because the research questions require the synthesis of heterogeneous materials, including ethnographic studies, counseling and psychotherapy research, systematic reviews and meta-analyses, methodological papers, Indigenous research frameworks, and selected scholarly books. Integrative reviews can combine empirical and theoretical literature when the review question is broader than an intervention-effectiveness question, provided that the review type, search logic, selection decisions, and synthesis procedures are reported explicitly (Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019; Whitemore & Knafl, 2005). Accordingly, this article does not claim to be a systematic review of treatment effectiveness and does not pool effect sizes for ethnography.

The search covered scholarship published from January 2004 through 7 August 2026 in English or Indonesian. Sources were identified through Google Scholar, PubMed, ERIC, DOAJ, journal and publisher platforms, and backward and forward citation chaining. Search strings were adapted to platform syntax and combined terms such as ethnograph* AND (counseling psychology OR cross-cultural counseling OR multicultural counseling); cultural humility AND (counseling OR psychotherapy); Indigenous AND (counseling OR guidance OR research); decolon* AND (counseling OR psychology); community-based participatory research AND culture; and the Indonesian equivalents etnografi, konseling lintas budaya, konseling multikultural, bimbingan karier, and kearifan lokal. Searches also targeted named concepts that emerged during screening, including cultural formulation, cultural adaptation, reflexivity, confidentiality in qualitative research, and Two-Eyed Seeing.

Eligibility was determined by relevance and evidence role rather than by one study design. Included sources met at least one of the following conditions: they directly examined ethnography in counseling, guidance, psychotherapy, or counseling psychology; they provided empirical or review evidence concerning multicultural counseling, cultural humility, cultural formulation, or cultural adaptation that could test or qualify practice implications attributed to ethnographic principles; they addressed Indigenous, decolonial, community-based, reflexive, or confidentiality issues necessary for ethical interpretation of cultural knowledge; or they were Indonesian ethnographic or culturally grounded studies with a clear and explicitly stated contextual relationship to counseling. Sources were excluded when they were unrelated to counseling or cultural inquiry, bibliographically incomplete and not verifiable, non-scholarly promotional material, duplicates, or conceptually redundant sources that added no distinct evidence. Culturally grounded studies were not automatically classified as ethnographies; design labels were checked against the methods described by the source whenever possible.

The initial search and seed bibliography produced 54 candidate records, and targeted supplementary searching and citation chaining added 18 records, yielding 72 candidates. Eight records were removed during the citation audit because they were duplicates, merged

bibliographic entries, or could not be reliably verified. Sixty-four records were assessed for eligibility; 24 were excluded because of weak topical relevance, insufficient scholarly support, or redundant conceptual coverage. The final synthesis therefore comprised 40 sources. Citation details were audited against journal or publisher records when available, and inaccurate or incomplete entries in the earlier bibliography were corrected rather than carried forward. Figure 1 summarizes the selection pathway.

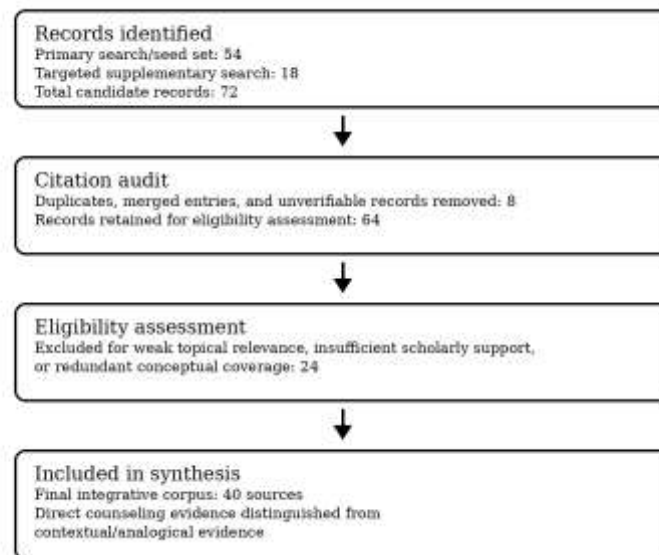


Figure 1. Integrative review source-selection flow

Data extraction used a structured matrix containing author and year, country or cultural group, setting and population, research design, counseling context, evidence role, principal findings, and limitations relevant to the review questions. Evidence role was coded as direct counseling evidence when a source studied counseling, psychotherapy, guidance, or counselor-client processes; methodological evidence when a source primarily addressed ethnography, reflexivity, review methods, or research ethics; and contextual or analogical evidence when a source illuminated cultural meanings relevant to counseling but did not observe counseling itself. This classification was designed to prevent inferential slippage from contextual cultural evidence to causal claims about counseling effectiveness.

Because the corpus included heterogeneous designs, a single numerical quality score was not considered defensible. Instead, source-type-sensitive appraisal considered peer-review or academic-publisher status, methodological transparency, congruence between design and claims, directness to the counseling question, and attention to ethics and limitations. Stronger claims were weighted toward direct counseling studies and reviews; ethnographic and community studies were used to explain mechanisms, context, and ethical implications; and conceptual works were used to organize constructs rather than to claim treatment effects. The analytic phase followed thematic synthesis logic: findings and arguments were coded line by line, descriptive categories were compared for convergence and divergence, and higher-order themes were developed around the review questions (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Throughout synthesis, causal wording was avoided unless supported by a design capable of causal inference.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 40-source corpus showed a marked asymmetry in the evidence base. Direct studies of formal ethnography within counseling or guidance were comparatively scarce, whereas adjacent counseling evidence was stronger for cultural humility, cultural formulation, and culturally adapted interventions. Indonesian studies contributed important culturally situated

examples, but several were contextual ethnographies or culturally grounded counseling studies rather than ethnographies of counseling sessions. Methodological and Indigenous scholarship added a further layer concerning positionality, reciprocity, consent, confidentiality, and ownership of knowledge. Table 1 displays the core sources that most directly shaped the analytical synthesis; the remaining sources supported review methodology, construct definition, ethical safeguards, and triangulation of interpretations.

Table 1. Core evidence matrix and evidence-role classification

Source	Country/group, setting, and design	Counseling context / evidence role	Principal contribution to this review
Suzuki et al. (2005)	United States; counseling psychology; methodological synthesis	Direct methodological relevance	Ethnography can deepen contextual understanding in counseling psychology, but requires explicit role and ethics boundaries.
Hook et al. (2013)	United States; culturally diverse therapy clients; psychometric/relational studies	Direct counseling evidence	Client-rated therapist cultural humility was associated with stronger alliance and improvement.
Owen et al. (2016)	United States; 247 clients, 50 therapists; university counseling center	Direct counseling evidence	Cultural humility and fewer missed cultural opportunities were associated with better therapy processes/outcomes.
Orlowski et al. (2025)	Psychotherapy literature; systematic review and meta-analysis	Direct counseling evidence	Cultural humility showed positive associations with alliance and psychotherapy outcomes; findings are correlational.
Benish et al. (2011)	Psychotherapy; direct-comparison meta-analysis	Direct counseling evidence	Culturally adapted psychotherapy showed benefits, especially when culturally credible treatment explanations were incorporated.
Hall et al. (2016)	Psychological interventions; meta-analysis	Direct/adjacent intervention evidence	Cultural adaptations can improve intervention effectiveness; adaptation should be specific rather than assumed from group labels.
Aggarwal et al. (2020)	Clinical cultural assessment; review of DSM-5 Cultural Formulation Interview	Direct clinical practice evidence	Cultural formulation operationalizes contextual inquiry for training and practice without requiring ethnographic fieldwork.
Ramdhani et al. (2025)	Indigenous Baduy, Indonesia; ethnographic career-guidance study	Direct ethnographic guidance evidence	Career meanings integrate spirituality, customary work, intergenerational learning, community responsibility, and modernization tensions.
Akbar et al. (2023)	Meratus Dayak expressions, Indonesia; school/cross-cultural counseling guidance	Direct counseling application; non-ethnographic boundary	Local expressions can serve as culturally familiar counseling media; they should be collaboratively validated for individual clients.

Source	Country/group, setting, and design	Counseling context / evidence role	Principal contribution to this review
Rifki Khadafi & Abdurrahman (2023)	Multicultural pesantren, Indonesia; qualitative study	Direct counseling context; non-ethnographic	Cross-cultural counseling principles were described in a culturally diverse educational setting.
As'ad et al. (2021)	Multicultural school, Medan, Indonesia; ethnography	Contextual/analogical evidence	Documents institutional negotiation of religious and ethnic diversity; not evidence of counseling-process effects.
Haris & Nasri (2023)	Sumbawa community, Indonesia; ethnography of Pasaji Ponan	Contextual/analogical evidence	Identifies educational and communal meanings in tradition; informs contextual understanding, not counseling effectiveness.
Hasnah & Alang (2019)	Makassar, Indonesia; marginalized community; ethnography	Contextual psychosocial evidence	Illustrates how stigma, exclusion, and health context shape lived experience; not a counseling intervention study.
Drawson et al. (2017)	Indigenous research literature; systematic review of 64 articles	Methodological/decolonial evidence	Indigenous methods emphasize Indigenous frameworks, participation, storytelling, and culture-specific approaches.
Roher et al. (2021)	Indigenous health research; scoping review	Methodological/decolonial evidence	Two-Eyed Seeing is characterized variably, requiring epistemic fidelity and caution against superficial appropriation.
Aguilar et al. (2025)	Indigenous communities; school psychology framework	Methodological/decolonial evidence	Critical relationality centers research alongside communities, shared responsibility, and power-aware relationships.

Ethnography as Formal Research and Ethnographic Sensibility

The first theme is the need to distinguish formal ethnography from an ethnographic sensibility. Formal ethnography is research. It ordinarily involves a defined research question, a culture-sharing or socially situated field, sustained engagement, observational and interview data, field notes or artifacts, iterative analysis, and explicit research governance. Its credibility depends on the transparency of the researcher's role and on procedures for consent, confidentiality, data management, interpretation, and representation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Reeves et al., 2008; Suzuki et al., 2005). Reflexivity is not a decorative statement added at the end of such work; it is a continuing examination of how the researcher's social position, assumptions, relationships, and decisions shape the knowledge produced (Berger, 2015). Ethically important moments can also emerge unpredictably during qualitative fieldwork, requiring judgment beyond one-time procedural consent (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Routine counseling, by contrast, is a professional helping relationship governed by clinical, educational, or counseling purposes. A counselor may use emic listening, contextual curiosity, reflexive self-monitoring, attention to language and cultural narratives, and repeated checking of meaning. These are compatible with an ethnographic sensibility, but they do not make the counseling session an ethnographic study. Participant observation for research, systematic field-note collection about clients for publication, prolonged community immersion as data collection, or secondary use of client material require appropriate research authorization,

consent, and governance. The practical implication is therefore narrower and safer than claiming that counselors should 'do ethnography' in ordinary sessions: counselors can borrow epistemic habits of humility, contextualization, and interpretive checking while keeping research procedures and therapeutic procedures institutionally and ethically distinct.

This distinction also clarifies what ethnography contributes most directly. Its strongest contribution is to counseling research when the aim is to understand how problems, identities, help-seeking, relationships, and interventions are embedded in everyday cultural worlds. Suzuki et al. (2005) framed ethnography as a methodological possibility for counseling psychology precisely because it can illuminate context that standardized approaches may miss. Ramdhani et al. (2025), for example, used ethnographic inquiry to identify how Baduy career meanings are organized around customary work, spirituality, intergenerational transmission, community responsibility, and tensions with modernization. Such findings can challenge imported assumptions about career development. However, the study provides culturally situated knowledge about guidance and career meaning; it should not be transformed into a universal Baduy counseling protocol without further collaborative validation.

Emic Understanding, Reflexivity, and Cultural Humility

The second theme links emic understanding and reflexivity to cultural humility, while preserving the boundary between ethnographic and clinical evidence. An emic orientation asks how participants or clients define experiences in their own terms. In counseling, this orientation discourages premature translation of a client's concern into the counselor's diagnostic, developmental, or cultural categories. Cultural humility provides a clinically relevant bridge because it emphasizes an other-oriented stance, recognition of one's limits, and openness to correction. Hook et al. (2013) found that client-perceived therapist cultural humility was associated with the working alliance and improvement. Owen et al. (2016) similarly showed that clients' perceptions of therapist cultural humility and missed opportunities to address cultural identity were related to therapy processes and outcomes. These studies are not ethnographic, but they provide direct evidence for a relational stance that is conceptually consistent with emic and reflexive inquiry.

The strength and limits of this adjacent evidence are important. Zhang et al. (2022) concluded that cultural humility has a growing empirical base in psychotherapy and supervision but also identified limitations in the research literature. Orłowski et al. (2025) subsequently synthesized studies and reported substantial positive associations between cultural humility and therapeutic alliance and a smaller positive association with psychotherapy outcomes. These are associations, not proof that humility alone produces change, and they do not establish an effect of ethnographic methods. The appropriate synthesis is therefore that reflexive, non-superior, client-correctable ways of knowing have direct counseling support through cultural humility research, while ethnography offers a methodological vocabulary and training discipline for strengthening those habits. Mosher et al. (2017) likewise frame cultural humility as a therapeutic process of sustained self-examination, collaborative engagement, and openness to cultural difference rather than mastery of a fixed set of cultural facts.

Cultural formulation provides another operational bridge. The DSM-5 Cultural Formulation Interview was developed to elicit clients' explanations of problems, cultural identity, stressors and supports, coping, help-seeking, and expectations for care. Reviews have highlighted its value for training and clinical formulation while also noting implementation and research questions (Aggarwal et al., 2020). A more recent state-of-the-science review emphasized the CFI's role in case formulation and its potential to improve contextual understanding when used thoughtfully rather than as a checklist (Aggarwal, 2024). For counselor education, the significance is practical: emic inquiry can be taught through structured

cultural formulation, reflective supervision, and client feedback without presenting the counselor as an ethnographer of the client.

Local and Indigenous Knowledge as Negotiated Resources

The third theme concerns the use of local and Indigenous knowledge. Culturally grounded material can provide meaningful metaphors, narratives, values, or relational practices, but the evidence does not justify treating 'local wisdom' as internally uniform or automatically therapeutic. Akbar et al. (2023) reported the use of traditional Meratus Dayak expressions in cross-cultural counseling guidance, illustrating how familiar language and values can become resources in educational counseling. Putri et al. (2024) likewise emphasized cultural awareness and sensitivity in school counseling, and Rifki Khadafi and Abdurrahman (2023) described the implementation of cross-cultural counseling principles in a culturally diverse pesantren. These studies support the relevance of cultural responsiveness; they do not establish that a cultural practice will benefit every client who shares the corresponding ethnic, religious, or geographic label.

Contextual ethnographies reinforce why such caution is necessary. As'ad et al. (2021) documented multicultural educational practices in a school setting, Haris and Nasri (2023) described educational values embedded in the Pasaji Ponan tradition, and Hasnah and Alang (2019) used ethnography to examine health-related experiences within a marginalized community. Niko (2023), reflecting on ethnography with Indigenous Dayak Benawan women, showed how gender, poverty, researcher position, and community membership complicate claims about a single cultural perspective. These studies illuminate cultural worlds that counselors may need to understand, but they are analogical or contextual evidence rather than demonstrations that a counseling technique works. The review therefore treats them as resources for contextual reasoning, not as clinical outcome evidence.

An anti-essentialist approach requires attention to intersectionality and change within communities. Cultural identity is not a fixed package of traits; it is shaped by multiple social positions and by historical, institutional, and relational conditions. Cole (2009) showed why psychological research should examine how categories such as gender, race, and class mutually constitute experience rather than treating them as isolated variables. The American Psychological Association's multicultural guidelines similarly use an ecological approach to context, identity, and intersectionality (American Psychological Association, 2017). In practice, a counselor should therefore ask which traditions, identities, languages, family expectations, spiritual commitments, migration experiences, or community ties matter to this client now, rather than assuming relevance from group membership alone.

Evidence on cultural adaptation points in the same direction. Meta-analytic work suggests that culturally adapted interventions can improve outcomes, especially when adaptation addresses meaningful features of the target population and treatment context (Griner & Smith, 2006; Hall et al., 2016). Benish et al. (2011) found benefits in direct comparisons of culturally adapted psychotherapy, particularly when the adaptation provided a culturally credible explanation or treatment rationale. The defensible implication is collaborative adaptation, not cultural prescription. Clients retain the right to accept, reinterpret, combine, or decline a cultural practice. Cultural matching between counselor and client may sometimes facilitate rapport, but shared group membership cannot guarantee shared worldview, language use, political position, spirituality, class experience, gendered experience, or understanding.

Decolonial Ethics and Relational Accountability

The fourth theme is decolonial ethics and relational accountability. If ethnographic or Indigenous knowledge is used to inform counseling, ethical responsibility extends beyond

accurate citation. Decolonizing methodologies challenge research traditions that have treated Indigenous communities as sources of data while external institutions retain interpretive authority and benefits (Smith, 2021). Wilson (2008) conceptualizes Indigenous research as relational, meaning that accountability is owed to relationships among people, community, land, knowledge, and the research process. Dawson et al. (2017), in a systematic review of Indigenous research methods, identified recurring emphases on Indigenous frameworks, community-based participation, storytelling, and culture-specific methods. Roher et al. (2021) similarly showed that Two-Eyed Seeing is used in varied ways across Indigenous health research, underscoring the need to avoid superficial borrowing of Indigenous epistemic concepts.

Relational accountability has concrete procedural implications. Researchers and counselor educators should disclose positionality and the limits of their authority to interpret cultural knowledge; negotiate consent as an ongoing process during prolonged engagement; and consider whether descriptive detail could identify individuals in small communities even when names are removed. Kaiser (2009) demonstrates why confidentiality in qualitative research can be difficult when rich contextual accounts make participants recognizable. Community validation, negotiated dissemination, reciprocity, and attention to ownership or stewardship of cultural knowledge are therefore not optional additions when communities have collective interests in representation. Wallerstein and Duran (2010) provide a related participatory logic in which knowledge production and intervention development are conducted with communities through shared power rather than simply delivered to them.

Aguilar et al. (2025) advance this argument within school psychology through a framework of critical relationality for research alongside Indigenous communities. Applied to counseling research, this means that community consultation should not function merely as an endorsement step after the intervention has already been designed. Knowledge holders and community partners may need authority over what can be documented, which terms are appropriate, how findings are interpreted, what benefits return to the community, and what should remain undisclosed. In counseling practice, the same principle appears at the client level: cultural material should enter the helping process through invitation and collaboration, not because the counselor has learned a supposedly representative tradition in training. Decolonial accountability is thus a governance issue and a power issue, not simply the insertion of Indigenous symbols into an otherwise unchanged counseling model.

From Ethnographic Principles to Assessable Counselor Competencies

The fifth theme translates the synthesis into assessable competencies for counselor education and professional development. Competency frameworks in counseling already emphasize self-awareness, knowledge of clients' worldviews, responsive skills, and social-justice action (Ratts et al., 2016; Sue & Sue, 2022). Ethnographic perspectives can deepen these domains by making context and reflexivity observable in training. For example, students can complete structured reflexive journals that identify how their assumptions, institutional position, and emotional responses influence case formulation. They can practice cultural formulation interviews and then compare their initial interpretations with the client's corrections. They can participate in supervised community engagement designed for learning rather than data extraction, with explicit boundaries about what may be recorded or reused. These activities assess conduct rather than merely asking students to endorse multicultural values. Indonesian counseling scholarship similarly identifies multicultural competence as a foundational requirement for culturally responsive guidance and counseling practice (Rifani, 2022).

Consultation with community knowledge holders can also be taught as a competency, but it requires safeguards. Students should learn how to seek permission, compensate expertise where appropriate, distinguish public knowledge from restricted knowledge, and avoid treating one consultant as the voice of an entire community. Collaborative adaptation of interventions can be assessed by asking trainees to document which elements were changed, what evidence or client preference justified the change, and how the client evaluated cultural fit. Cultural safety can be monitored through session feedback that asks whether the client felt respected, stereotyped, pressured to represent a group, or able to disagree with the counselor's cultural interpretation. These practices operationalize humility as an iterative feedback process rather than a claim that the counselor is culturally competent once and for all.

The framework also supports better case formulation. Rather than locating the problem solely inside the individual, trainees can be required to identify family and community relationships, institutional conditions, language, spirituality, migration or displacement, discrimination, socioeconomic constraints, disability access, and other intersecting contexts when they are relevant to the client's account. Ran et al. (2021), for example, showed through a systematic review of the Pacific Rim region that cultural factors such as collectivism, face concerns, familism, religion, and supernatural beliefs can shape mental-health stigma and help-seeking. Such evidence is useful for generating questions, not for predicting an individual client's beliefs. The counselor's task is to ask, test, and revise the formulation collaboratively.

Table 2 summarizes the practical framework. The central principle is that each ethnographic concept must be paired with both an observable counseling competency and a safeguard. Emic perspective without a safeguard can become romanticization of 'insider' accounts; reflexivity without supervision can become private self-reflection with no behavioral consequence; prolonged engagement can be confused with unapproved fieldwork; cultural analysis can become stereotyping; relational accountability can become tokenistic consultation; and iterative validation can become superficial agreement-seeking. The table therefore treats cultural responsiveness as a disciplined sequence of inquiry, correction, and accountability rather than as the accumulation of facts about cultural groups.

Table 2. Ethnographic principles translated into counseling competencies, safeguards, and applications

Ethnographic principle	Observable counseling competency	Boundary / safeguard	Practical application or assessment
Emic perspective	Elicit the client-defined meaning of problems, goals, identity, and help-seeking.	Do not infer worldview from group membership; permit correction or refusal.	Cultural formulation questions; summarize and ask the client to confirm or revise.
Reflexivity and positionality	Identify how counselor assumptions, status, and institutional role shape formulation and interaction.	Reflection must lead to supervision and behavior change, not self-focused disclosure.	Reflexive journal; supervision note documenting assumption, feedback, and adjustment.
Prolonged/contextual engagement	Build contextual understanding over time and across relevant systems.	Routine counseling is not ethnographic fieldwork; research data collection requires separate governance.	Longitudinal case formulation; supervised community learning without research recording.
Cultural analysis	Connect individual experience with family, community, language, history, institutions, and power when relevant.	Avoid cultural essentialism and overgeneralization; attend to intersectionality.	Case formulation includes contextual hypotheses and disconfirming evidence.

Ethnographic principle	Observable counseling competency	Boundary / safeguard	Practical application or assessment
Relational accountability	Use community and cultural knowledge through respectful, reciprocal consultation.	Ongoing consent, confidentiality, knowledge ownership, compensation, and community authority matter.	Consultation protocol specifying permission, role, use, and benefit.
Iterative validation	Repeatedly check whether the counselor's interpretation and adaptation fit the client.	The client may accept, reinterpret, combine, or decline cultural practices.	Session feedback on cultural safety; documented collaborative adaptation and rupture repair.

Evidence Limitations and Interpretive Boundaries

Several limitations qualify the synthesis. First, the review is integrative rather than an exhaustive systematic review of all ethnographic counseling studies, and the inclusion of English- and Indonesian-language scholarship may produce language and publication bias. Second, the corpus is heterogeneous: psychotherapy outcome studies, counseling frameworks, qualitative ethnographies, community-based research, methodological articles, and books answer different kinds of questions. Their findings cannot be combined as if they carried identical evidentiary weight. Third, direct ethnographic observation of counseling processes remains limited in the included literature, so many practice implications are conceptual bridges supported by adjacent evidence on cultural humility, cultural formulation, and adaptation rather than direct tests of ethnography. Fourth, source selection and thematic interpretation are unavoidably shaped by reviewer judgment, despite explicit evidence-role coding and citation auditing. These limitations mean that the synthesis should guide research design, training, and cautious practice development rather than support causal claims that ethnography improves trust, well-being, engagement, or counseling effectiveness. Future research should conduct ethically governed primary ethnographies of counseling processes, report community accountability procedures, distinguish counselor behavior from researcher activity, and examine client-defined cultural safety and counseling outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Ethnography makes its strongest contribution to cross-cultural counseling as a formal research methodology for understanding how counseling, identity, distress, help-seeking, and change are culturally situated; selected ethnographic principles can also inform practice, but only when they are translated into ethically bounded professional behaviors rather than treated as permission to conduct fieldwork in routine sessions. The reviewed evidence supports emic listening, reflexivity, cultural humility, contextual formulation, and collaborative adaptation, while direct evidence that ethnography itself improves counseling outcomes remains limited. Indonesian and Indigenous knowledge can enrich counseling when it is treated as dynamic, internally diverse, client-negotiated, and subject to relational accountability rather than as a fixed therapeutic resource. Positionality, ongoing consent, confidentiality, reciprocity, community validation, knowledge governance, and attention to power are therefore central safeguards. Counselor education can operationalize the synthesis through reflexive journals, supervised community learning, cultural formulation, accountable consultation with knowledge holders, documented collaborative adaptation, and client feedback on cultural safety. This evidence-calibrated approach preserves the contextual strengths of ethnographic thinking while reducing methodological confusion, cultural essentialism, and extractive use of cultural knowledge.

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