



Empathy as a culturally embedded therapeutic practice: A qualitative case study in Sundanese counseling contexts

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ABSTRACT

Empathy in counseling serves not only an interpersonal skill but also as a therapeutic practice shaped by cultural values. In Sundanese society, empathy is manifested through the values of *silih asih* (compassion), *silih asah* (grooming), and *silih asuh* (nurturing), which emphasize harmony, caring, and collective responsibility in social relationships. However, the understanding of empathy in counseling practice is still dominated by a Western perspective that underrepresents the dynamics of empathy in collectivist cultures. This study aims to examine empathy as a therapeutic practice rooted in Sundanese cultural values in the context of counseling in Indonesia. The study employed a qualitative case study design, collecting data through interviews, observations, and document analysis with therapists and clients in community counseling services, schools, and private practice. Thematic analysis identified four main themes: empathy as a basis for building trust; the expression of empathy through Sundanese cultural values; challenges in maintaining empathy, such as over-identification and emotional exhaustion; and strategies for sustaining empathy through supervision and peer support. The findings indicate that empathy is both a universal therapeutic mechanism and a culturally constructed practice. This study emphasizes the importance of integrating local cultural values into counseling practices that are responsive to the Indonesian context.



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INTRODUCTION

Empathy is widely recognized as the heart of counseling because it builds trust, strengthens the counselor–client relationship, and supports positive therapeutic outcomes (Butovskaya et al., 2021; Cipta et al., 2024). Empathic engagement has also been linked to resilience, motivation, and psychological well-being, while neuroscientific studies confirm its grounding in social cognition and emotional regulation (Della et al., 2021). Despite this strong theoretical and empirical foundation, dominant models of empathy in counseling are largely derived from Western traditions that emphasize individual autonomy, direct communication, and personal self-expression (Liem, 2020). Such assumptions do not always capture how empathy is enacted in collectivist societies, where harmony, relational sensitivity, and shared responsibility play a central role (Fadilah et al., 2025).

Despite progress in global empathy research, many theories remain grounded in these Western assumptions, creating a gap between dominant conceptual models and counseling practices observed in collectivist cultures. In contexts such as Indonesia, empathy is often expressed indirectly through relational attunement, respect, and communal obligation rather than explicit verbal affirmation. This gap indicates the need to re-examine empathy not only as a universal therapeutic construct but also as a culturally embedded practice shaped by local values and social norms (Heriyani et al., 2024).

Indonesia, particularly West Java, provides a meaningful context for such an examination. Sundanese culture emphasizes harmony, respect, and community care, which are reflected in the principles of *silih asih* (mutual affection), *silih asah* (mutual learning), and *silih asuh* (mutual care). These values frame empathy as a collective ethic that governs interpersonal relationships and moral responsibility, rather than merely an individual counseling skill (Daningrum et al., 2025; Nugroho & Afriwilda, 2024). Indonesian studies further show that counselors frequently integrate local language,

religious expressions, and culturally familiar metaphors to foster trust and strengthen therapeutic relationships (Cipta et al., 2024; Rosyidi et al., 2024).

However, empirical research that specifically examines empathy within Sundanese counseling practices remains limited. Existing studies have explored cultural approaches in other Indonesian contexts, such as Javanese traditional play therapy Asrowi et al. (2025) and indigenous counseling in pesantren communities (Umriana et al., 2023), yet Sundanese perspectives have received far less scholarly attention. As a result, culturally grounded expressions of empathy rooted in *silih asih*, *silih asah*, and *silih asuh* are still underrepresented in mainstream counseling theories.

This study seeks to bridge this gap by positioning empathy at the intersection of global counseling frameworks and Sundanese cultural traditions. By exploring empathy as both a universal therapeutic mechanism and a culturally embedded practice, this research contributes theoretically to cross-cultural understandings of empathy and practically to the development of culturally responsive counseling, counselor education, and supervision in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research design using a case study approach to explore empathy as a culturally embedded therapeutic practice within the Sundanese context of West Java, Indonesia. The data sources consisted of 12 counselors and 10 clients drawn from community health centers, schools, and private counseling settings. Counselors included clinical psychologists, school counselors, and community-based practitioners with a minimum of three years of professional experience, while clients were selected based on their current or recent involvement in counseling and willingness to participate. Informants were determined using purposive sampling to ensure cultural relevance and professional competence. Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms to protect participants' identities (Asrowi et al., 2025).

Data collection employed semi-structured interviews, observations, and document reviews as the primary research instruments. Interviews explored participants' experiences and perceptions of empathy, incorporating culturally grounded concepts such as *silih asih*, *silih asah*, and *silih asuh*. Observations focused on verbal and non-verbal expressions of empathy, language use, and contextual dynamics during counseling sessions, while document reviews examined counseling manuals and training materials related to empathic practice. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework, supported by inductive coding to generate themes reflecting cultural dimensions of empathy. Trustworthiness was ensured through data triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and the maintenance of an audit trail documenting analytic decisions (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of interviews, observations, and document reviews revealed four themes, each with sub-themes. Together, they show how empathy is expressed, challenged, and sustained in counseling practices in West Java. The findings suggest that empathy functions as a universal therapeutic condition, but its expression takes specific forms shaped by Sundanese cultural frameworks.

Empathy as the Foundation of Trust

Safe therapeutic environment. Clients said empathy made them feel safe and open. Careful listening, patient silence, and simple non-verbal gestures (nodding, eye contact) were especially valued:

“I feel safe when my counselor listens without interrupting” (Client 7).

“When the counselor shows concern with small gestures, I trust more easily” (Client 2).

Observations confirmed these practices, showing that attentive posture and patient pauses encouraged deeper sharing. Counseling manuals also highlight “attentive silence and patience” as part of ethical practice.

Bridge for engagement. Counselors stressed empathy was crucial in early sessions, serving as a bridge to reduce hesitation and build openness:

“In the first meeting, empathy is like the door. Without it, the client will not walk in” (Counselor 1).

Cultural Expressions of Empathy

Sundanese values in practice. Counselors embedded empathy in *silih asih* (mutual affection), *silih asah* (mutual learning), and *silih asuh* (mutual care).

“When I use Sundanese words of respect, the client feels more understood” (Counselor 3).

Clients agreed that local words or proverbs made empathy feel more genuine. In one observed session, a proverb about patience eased the client’s tension and invited openness.

Respect and harmony. Documents from counselor training emphasized *hormat* (respect) and *rukun* (harmony) as values guiding empathic behavior, shaping counselors not just as professionals but as community members.

Challenges in Sustaining Empathy

Over-identification. Some counselors struggled to separate their own emotions from clients’:

“Sometimes I carry my clients’ sadness home, and it affects me deeply” (Counselor 5).

One counselor even became tearful during a session, showing how emotional boundaries were tested.

Emotional exhaustion. Heavy caseloads in schools and clinics caused fatigue:

“With so many students to counsel, it is hard to stay emotionally present for all of them” (School Counselor 2).

Field notes described shorter responses and less eye contact toward the day’s end. Documents also confirmed limited supervision and staffing raised burnout risks.

Strategies for Maintaining Empathy

Supervision. Some used formal supervision for balance and reflection:

“Discussing cases with a supervisor helps me regain perspective and balance” (Counselor 8).

Peer support. Others relied on colleagues for informal debriefs:

“Sharing experiences with colleagues helps me to recover and be ready for the next client” (Counselor 9).

Observed peer exchanges after sessions often served as short but effective emotional resets.

Personal coping. Counselors also used prayer, reflection, or recreation to restore energy. Training documents likewise emphasized self-care as part of professional responsibility.

To make these findings clearer, the four themes and their sub-themes are summarized below. The table highlights key insights, illustrative quotes, and the data sources that support each theme. This overview shows how interviews, observations, and document reviews together provide a consistent picture of empathy in West Java counseling.

Table 1. The Four Themes and Their Sub-Themes

| Theme | Sub-theme | Illustrative Quote | Supporting Source |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|---|------------------------|
| Empathy as the Foundation of Trust | Safe environment | “I feel safe when my counselor listens without interrupting” (Client 7) | Interview, Observation |
| | Bridge for engagement | “In the first meeting, empathy is like the door...” (Counselor 1) | Interview |
| Cultural Expressions of Empathy | Sundanese values | “When I use Sundanese words of respect...” (Counselor 3) | Interview, Observation |

| Theme | Sub-theme | Illustrative Quote | Supporting Source |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|---|----------------------------|
| Challenges in Sustaining Empathy | Respect & harmony | Emphasized in counselor training documents | Document Review |
| | Over-identification | “Sometimes I carry my clients’ sadness home” (Counselor 5) | Interview, Observation |
| Strategies for Maintaining Empathy | Fatigue & workload | “With so many students to counsel...” (School Counselor 2) | Interview, Field Notes |
| | Supervision | “Discussing cases with a supervisor helps...” (Counselor 8) | Interview |
| | Peer support | “Sharing experiences with colleagues helps me...” (Counselor 9) | Interview, Observation |
| | Personal coping | Prayer, reflection, recreation | Interview, Document Review |

Overall, the findings show that empathy in West Java is both universal and culturally specific. It builds trust, draws strength from Sundanese traditions, and is tested by challenges such as emotional fatigue and blurred boundaries. Counselors manage these challenges through supervision, peer support, and personal coping strategies. These results point to the need for counseling approaches that combine global theories of empathy with local cultural wisdom, laying the foundation for the discussion that follows.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that empathy is essential in counseling, but its expression and sustainability in West Java are closely tied to cultural traditions. By analyzing how empathy is enacted, challenged, and supported, this research adds both local and global insights into how empathy functions in therapy.

Empathy as the Foundation of Trust

The findings support previous studies that place empathy at the center of therapeutic relationships. However, while Western perspectives often emphasize verbal affirmation and direct communication, Sundanese counselors and clients expressed empathy more through reflective silence, patient listening, and non-verbal gestures. These results are consistent with (Cipta et al., 2024), who argue that culturally sensitive communication is crucial in collectivist societies. Sutanti (2020) also found that empathic accuracy differs between Sundanese and Javanese students, suggesting that empathy adapts to cultural expectations.

Cultural Expressions of Empathy

Sundanese philosophies—*silih asih* (mutual affection), *silih asah* (mutual learning), and *silih asuh* (mutual care)—were found to be central to empathic practice. This reflects Diswantika et al. (2022) who explain that empathy in Indonesia must be understood through both philosophical and cultural perspectives. The intentional use of Sundanese language and proverbs confirms that cultural markers are essential for rapport, echoing Pabbajah et al. (2020). Nowell et al. (2017) similarly showed that adolescents’ empathy is shaped by cultural values and self-compassion. These findings affirm that empathy in Indonesia is never detached from cultural wisdom.

Challenges in Sustaining Empathy

While empathy is indispensable, counselors also reported risks such as over-identification, emotional exhaustion, and compassion fatigue. Ahmad et al. (2024) demonstrated that Indonesian counseling teachers often experience compassion fatigue linked to their empathic work, while Venner (2024) highlighted the global challenge of empathy fatigue and the need for self-care. Rangka et al. (2022) also documented burnout among school counselors after the pandemic, pointing to systemic pressures that limit the sustainability of empathic practice. These findings show that empathy, without structural support, can become emotionally costly for practitioners.

Strategies for Maintaining Empathy

Despite these difficulties, counselors described strategies to sustain empathy, including peer supervision, collegial discussions, and personal coping practices such as prayer and reflection. These align with Asrowi et al. (2025), who proposed a counseling model based on cultural wisdom to address trauma. The reliance on both cultural traditions and professional networks illustrates that empathy in collectivist contexts is sustained not only by individual resilience but also through shared cultural and social practices.

In addition to supervision, peer support, and personal coping, recent literature emphasizes the importance of systematic approaches to empathy development. A review by Mertayasa (2024) demonstrated that empathy-based training programs can effectively reduce bullying behaviors while simultaneously strengthening counselors' emotional resilience, thereby supporting the sustainability of empathic practice.

Beyond cultural and interpersonal strategies, future counseling practices may also benefit from technological innovation. Recent studies highlight the potential of artificial intelligence to enrich emotional learning strategies in counseling, suggesting that digital platforms could play a role in sustaining empathic practice in Indonesia (Juariyah et al., 2025).

Overall, this study contributes to empathy research by showing that while empathy is universal in its purpose, its form is shaped by cultural traditions. By embedding empathy within Sundanese values of respect, harmony, and mutual care, the findings challenge models that universalize Western practices and call for more pluralistic perspectives (Della et al., 2021; Diswantika et al., 2022). Practically, the results point to the need for counselor education in Indonesia to integrate cultural wisdom alongside universal counseling skills, while institutions should provide adequate supervision and manageable workloads to prevent burnout. These insights also have wider relevance beyond Indonesia. They underline the importance of culturally responsive counseling models across the Global South, where collectivist traditions remain strong. Future research could explore how empathy is practiced in other Indonesian regions or how digital counseling platforms can adapt indigenous philosophies like *silih asih*, *silih asah*, *silih asuh*.

In conclusion, empathy in West Java counseling is universal in function but local in form. It builds trust, is shaped by Sundanese traditions, and faces challenges such as emotional fatigue that require both cultural and institutional responses. By bridging global theories with local practices, this study enriches theoretical discussions and offers practical guidance for building counseling models that are effective, sustainable, and culturally grounded.

CONCLUSION

This study examined empathy in counseling practices in West Java and demonstrated how universal therapeutic processes intersect with Sundanese cultural traditions. The findings revealed four interrelated themes: empathy as the foundation of trust, culturally grounded expressions of empathy through *silih asih*, *silih asah*, and *silih asuh*, challenges such as over-identification and compassion fatigue, and strategies for sustaining empathy through supervision, peer support, and personal coping practices. These results indicate that empathy functions not only as a professional counseling competence but also as a culturally embedded practice shaped by collectivist values. By situating empathy within a Sundanese cultural framework, this study extends prevailing models of therapeutic empathy and highlights the role of local wisdom in enriching global counseling theories. Practically, the findings underscore the need for counselor education programs to integrate cultural understanding alongside universal counseling skills and for institutions to provide adequate supervision and manageable workloads to sustain empathic practice. Future research is encouraged to examine empathy across diverse cultural contexts in Indonesia and to further explore how institutional structures influence counselors' emotional well-being, thereby supporting the development of counseling practices that are effective, sustainable, and culturally grounded.

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