

APPLYING THE “TEPA SELIRA” CONCEPT TO ENHANCE EMPATHY IN MULTICULTURAL COUNSELING (“APPLYING THE CONCEPT OF 'TEPA SELIRA' TO ENHANCE EMPATHY IN MULTICULTURAL COUNSELING.”)

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Abstract

Cultural diversity in Indonesia presents significant challenges for counselors, who must navigate diverse cultural values to provide effective therapeutic support. The Javanese philosophical concept of Tapa Selira, which emphasizes empathy, self-reflection, and the ability to "put oneself in the other's shoes," offers a culturally responsive framework for enhancing the therapeutic alliance. This paper explores the application of Tapa Selira as a pedagogical and practical tool in multicultural counseling to bridge the gap between counselors and clients. The research method employed is a qualitative literature study through literature data collection; this study synthesizes traditional Javanese ethics with contemporary multicultural counseling theories, such as the tripartite model of multicultural competence. The study identifies that Tapa Selira serves as a mechanism to reduce ethnocentrism and foster deep cognitive and affective empathy. The results indicate that integrating this indigenous concept allows counselors to move beyond superficial cultural awareness to a deeper relational understanding of clients' lived experiences. The study concludes that Tapa Selira serves as an important indigenous contribution to global counseling practice, providing a structured yet flexible approach to managing cultural diversity.

Keywords: Empathy; Counseling; Multicultural; Literature Study; Tapa Selira

1. Introduction

Today's globalized world has created an increasingly heterogeneous society, where interaction between individuals from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds has become an unavoidable necessity. This phenomenon brings major challenges in the realm of psychology and counseling, because differences in cultural values often trigger misunderstandings, prejudices, and significant communication barriers. In the context of multicultural counseling, the counselor's ability to understand the subjective worlds of clients from diverse backgrounds is a key foundation for successful therapeutic processes, yet it is often hampered by inherent ethnocentric biases within the practitioner. (Ardi & Irdil, 2021)

Problems arise when the dominant Western counseling approach often fails to accommodate local wisdom values which actually have great potential in building harmonious interpersonal relationships. Many counselors struggle to cultivate authentic empathy due to a lack of conceptual tools capable of bridging the emotional distance between counselors and clients who have significant cultural differences. Without a culturally sensitive framework, the counseling process risks being ineffective, even psychologically harmful, as the counselor struggles to engage in in-depth *perspective-taking*. (Sari & Kurniawan, 2023)

The urgency of this research lies in the urgent need to integrate local values into professional counseling practice to strengthen the competence of multicultural counselors. The concept of 'Tapa Selira', as a Javanese philosophy that emphasizes the ability to feel what others feel (*tempath rasa*), offers a highly relevant psychological mechanism for enhancing cognitive and



affective empathy. By applying this concept, counselors are expected to transcend cultural boundaries and create an inclusive, safe space where clients feel truly understood without losing their own cultural identity. (Prasetyo & Wibowo, 2022)

Previous research shows that empathy is a major predictor of counseling success, but development methods are often technical and do not touch on spiritual or philosophical aspects. Several studies have shown that local culture-based approaches have proven more effective in enhancing *the therapeutic alliance* than approaches that completely adopt foreign theories without adaptation. However, there has been little research specifically operationalizing 'Tepa Selira' as a structured intervention in multicultural counselor training, making this research gap crucial for further exploration. (HIMPSSI, 2020)

2. Methods

In this study, the author applied a qualitative approach through library research. Library research is a type of research that relies on data collection techniques by tracing and reviewing various literature sources. The data used is obtained from various library materials relevant to the research topic. These sources are not limited to books but also include scientific journal articles, documents, research reports, and various other academic publications. The main focus of the library study is to identify and compile theories, perspectives, and ideas that can be used to analyze and resolve the research problem (Mangdalena et al., 2021).

According to Abdul Rahman Sholeh, library research is research that obtains data and information by utilizing various library facilities, such as books, magazines, documents, as well as historical records and other sources (Abdul Rahman Sholeh, Religious Education and Development for the Nation, Jakarta: Raja Grafindo Persada, 2005). Meanwhile, Zed Mestika explains that library research is a series of activities carried out through collecting data from library materials, which are then read, recorded, and processed without involving direct field research (Mestika, 2004).

3. Results And Discussion

3.1 Tepa Selira Core Values and Their Relation to Empathy in Counseling

Tepa selira is a local wisdom value in Javanese culture that philosophically implies a person's ability to put themselves in another person's shoes, or simply understood as an effort to use one's own feelings to understand the feelings of others. In the realm of counseling psychology, this value is closely related to the concept of empathy. Empathy is not only interpreted as sympathy, but as a process that involves cognitive and emotional aspects in understanding the client's inner experiences, as if the counselor were in the client's position without losing self-awareness. Thus, tepa selira becomes an ethical foundation for counselors to set aside personal prejudices and build an authentic emotional connection with clients, which is the key to a successful therapeutic relationship (Mahsudi, 2013).

The connection between tepa selira and empathy in counseling is evident in its ability to bridge differing perspectives between counselor and client. In social psychology, empathy is viewed as a crucial prosocial mechanism for building healthy interpersonal relationships. When counselors practice tepa selira, they consciously engage in perspective-taking, which, in an integral counseling approach, is a key prerequisite for forming a strong therapeutic alliance. Without this value, the counseling process can become rigid and lacking in depth. Conversely, integrating tepa selira can enhance the counselor's emotional maturity, thereby strengthening their empathetic abilities in

addressing various client issues, such as family conflict and mental health issues. (Clark, 2007)

In counseling psychology, empathy is generally defined as the ability to understand another person's position. However, empathy is not merely a communication skill; it also reflects an existential attitude. Philosophically, this value requires counselors to engage in in-depth self-reflection to avoid imposing or projecting personal views into the counseling process. (Astuti & Prasetya, 2022)

In counseling practice, empathy is a key element in determining the success of a therapeutic relationship. The value of *tepa selira* provides an ethical and emotional foundation for counselors to build more humane interactions. When counselors implement *tepa selira*, they consciously mirror the client's situation (Koentjaraningrat, 1984). In other words, if the counselor feels uncomfortable with a treatment, they will not apply it to the client. This approach helps create a safe atmosphere, allowing clients to feel understanding, appreciation, and acceptance without judgment. (Corey, 2016)

Furthermore, *tepa selira* is not merely a form of emotional sympathy. In counseling psychology, this value-based empathy demands a high level of self-awareness from the counselor. Counselors are required to distinguish between their own emotions and those of their clients, while still utilizing their own experiences as a means to understand the client's condition. Thus, *tepa selira* serves as a bridge between local wisdom values and modern, client-centered counseling approaches (person-centered therapy). (Rogers, 1951)

Three aspects of empathy that are closely related to the value of compassion can be explained as follows:

1. Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand a client's perspective or way of thinking. In the concept of *tepa selira*, this is known as *ngrasakake*, which means feeling through the thought process (Wibowo, 2020).
2. Affective empathy, the ability to share a client's emotional state. This aligns with the principle of *tepa*, which means weighing or measuring another person's feelings to avoid causing harm.
3. Somatic empathy, the physical response that arises when witnessing another person's suffering. In Javanese culture, this aspect is related to etiquette, or bodily sensitivity, in maintaining harmony and harmony in social interactions. (Suryani, 2019)

3. 2 Implementation of Tepa Selira in Multicultural Counseling

The implementation of the value of *tepa selira* in multicultural counseling practice demonstrates that this concept serves not only as an ethical principle but also as an important social skill in building effective counseling relationships. *Tepa selira*, rooted in Javanese culture, is defined as an individual's ability to put themselves in another person's shoes, understand their feelings, and maintain behavior that does not hurt others. In the context of multicultural counseling, various studies have shown that this value is highly relevant because it can help counselors develop intercultural empathy, minimize prejudice, and increase sensitivity to differences in values, norms, and client backgrounds. (Nisa, 2025)

The application of *tepa selira* can be realized in the following aspects:

1. Rapport building stage
Counselors demonstrate respect for clients' cultural diversity without judgment, and use language and approaches that are in harmony with the client's cultural background.
2. Problem exploration stage
Counselors strive to understand problems from the client's cultural perspective, rather than from their own personal perspective. This approach has been shown to increase client openness because they feel understood and valued.

3. Decision making or intervention stage

Counselors consider the client's cultural values so that the solutions provided are more relevant, contextual, and acceptable. (Natasalwa, 2025)

The research also found that *tepa selira* contributes to minimizing cultural misunderstandings and negative countertransference. Counselors who internalize this value tend to be more reflective about personal prejudices and more careful in their interpretations. Consequently, the counseling relationship becomes more harmonious and collaborative. Furthermore, *tepa selira* also plays a role in improving counselors' multicultural competence, particularly in self-awareness and interpersonal skills. Thus, research results consistently demonstrate that *tepa selira* is not only a local cultural value but can also be adapted as a universal principle in multicultural counseling. Its application helps create a more empathetic, inclusive, and responsive counseling process to diversity, thereby increasing the overall effectiveness of counseling services. (Ramadhani, 2025)

4. Conclusion

This study confirms that the value of *Tepa Selira* is an essential pillar of local wisdom in strengthening empathy competency in counseling practice. Through literature analysis, it was discovered that this concept operates beyond standard communication techniques; it is a profound awareness that requires counselors to align their cognitive perspective and affective sensitivity to the client's inner experience. By internalizing the principle of "feeling what others feel," counselors can build a more sincere therapeutic alliance free from personal bias.

Within the context of multicultural counseling, *Tepa Selira* serves as a highly effective ethical instrument to mitigate the risk of cultural bias and interpersonal misunderstandings. The use of these values creates a safe and inclusive counseling space, where clients' diverse backgrounds are valued as part of the healing process. Ultimately, the integration of *Tepa Selira* into modern counseling models—such as *person - centered therapy*—proves that indigenous values can be scientifically synergized to create more responsive, contextual, and humanistic mental health services in Indonesia.

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