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**Multicultural Counseling to Restore Social Harmony in a Multiethnic
Acehnese Community**

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MULTICULTURAL COUNSELING TO RESTORE SOCIAL HARMONY IN A MULTIETHNIC ACEHNESE COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of group-based multicultural counseling integrated with Participatory Action Research (PAR) in restoring social cohesion within a post-conflict multiethnic community in Gampong Wonosari, Aceh. The research aimed to design, implement, and evaluate a counseling model that addresses persistent polarization between Javanese and Gayo communities. A PAR design with two intervention cycles was employed, each consisting of planning, counseling sessions, observation, and collaborative reflection. Fourteen purposively selected participants (8 Javanese and 6 Gayo) were involved, screened using the Multicultural Social Relation Vulnerability Questionnaire (MSRVQ). Data collection combined the Multicultural Social Relation Observation Sheet (MSROS), reflection notes, and thematic analysis using NVivo, while quantitative changes were tested with the Wilcoxon signed-rank test and effect size calculation. Results demonstrated a significant improvement in interethnic relations: the overall empowerment score increased from 54.54% in Cycle I to 72.07% in Cycle II, with individual scores rising from 62.50% to 73.89% ($Z = -2.94, p < 0.01, r = 0.65$). Qualitative findings supported these outcomes, showing enhanced empathy, greater openness, and increased confidence in intercultural interactions. This study contributes theoretically by contextualizing Social Learning Theory and the Contact Hypothesis in rural post-conflict communities. Practically, it provides a replicable model for policymakers, educators, and civil society organizations to strengthen social cohesion in plural societies beyond Aceh.

Keywords: Multicultural Counseling; Participatory Action Research; Social Cohesion; Multiethnic Community; Post-Conflict.

A. Introduction

Social interaction in multiethnic societies is often shaped by cultural identity tensions, historical prejudice, and the lack of safe and reflective spaces for intergroup encounters (Majid et al., 2024; Casmini & Hasanah, 2024; Mohd Yusoff et al., 2022). In Indonesia, a country with high ethnic diversity, challenges to social cohesion are not only found in urban environments but also in rural transmigrant communities that remain overlooked in national integration policies (Tabrani ZA et al., 2023; Muhammad et al., 2023). One of the most illustrative cases is found in *Gampong Wonosari*, Bener Meriah Regency, Aceh, where *Javanese* and *Gayo* communities coexist in a post-conflict transmigrant setting. Although direct violence has not occurred in recent years, preliminary observations and interviews reveal that social polarization persists: *ethnocentric prejudice*, weak intercultural communication, and limited empathy between ethnic groups continue to obstruct inclusive social harmony.

Previous studies have explored various strategies for social empowerment in multicultural communities, but they have largely focused on economic interventions (Mulyani, 2018; Rasyidah, 2020) or formal education (Laksana, 2018; Musyafa'ah, 2014). While these approaches are important, they often do not adequately address the psychosocial dimensions of intergroup relations, which are crucial for building trust and empathy. Psychosocial approaches such as multicultural counseling have received relatively little attention, particularly in rural communities with histories of conflict and complex social structures. Yet, multicultural counseling has been internationally recognized as a strategic approach to fostering cross-cultural understanding and promoting social reconciliation (Gerstein et al., 2012; Sue & Sue, 2016).

In Indonesia, counseling approaches are increasingly adapted to local cultural and religious contexts. The model of *prophetic counseling*, for instance, emphasizes the integration of professional competence and spiritual sensitivity, enabling counselors to respond holistically to students' needs (Casmini & Hasanah, 2024; Zzulfa et al., 2022). Other works highlight the role of Islamic parenting in strengthening family literacy and moral education (Purwandari et al., 2022) as well as case management of counseling for inmates to reduce

stress in correctional settings (Equatora et al., 2024). Such studies reveal that counseling is not limited to individual psychological support but can be developed as a broader strategy for family empowerment, education, and community resilience.

In multicultural and post-conflict contexts, the urgency of counseling becomes even more evident. Widaningtyas & Sutanti (2022) emphasize that in post-conflict multicultural settings, counseling and narrative practices are effective in addressing intergroup trauma in culturally sensitive ways. Nurmawati et al., (2024), focusing on the *Bugis* community in Jambi, found that cultural adaptation and critical reflection by counselors are essential in building empathy across ethnic groups (Crenshaw, 2017). Similarly, Tanjung (2019) demonstrated through experimental research that culture-centered counseling can significantly increase cultural empathy among participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

At the same time, other studies have drawn attention to the role of counseling in education, such as in developing religious moderation through group counseling in Islamic higher education (Syahbudin et al., 2023) and in reducing dishonest behavior among students through religiosity (Oktaviyani et al., 2022). These findings indicate that counseling strategies, when culturally grounded, can produce significant social and educational transformations.

Other recent works enrich this picture by showing that counseling can also be a medium for strengthening altruism through spiritual practices such as *muhasabah Qur'an* (Khoiriyah et al., 2024), fostering honesty and moral integrity among students through the role of guidance teachers (Liza & Wahyuni, 2023), and developing emotional intelligence via *pesantren*-based curricula (Wicaksono et al., 2024; Marisa et al., 2024). Studies in *pesantren* contexts further emphasize that counseling and moral education are not only psychological interventions but also part of sociological and cultural transformation (Rusmana et al., 2024; Lathifah et al., 2025; Baharuddin et al., 2023). These diverse findings highlight the expanding role of counseling in Indonesian society, particularly in addressing challenges of moral education, social integrity, and intergroup empathy.



Despite this growing body of research, the absence of studies that systematically integrate community-based counseling with Participatory Action Research (PAR) in post-conflict rural settings reveals a significant gap. No empirical study in Indonesia has examined multicultural counseling models using PAR in the context of transmigration and post-conflict social reconstruction. Moreover, there is also a lack of intervention models that explicitly combine social learning processes, group reflection, and interethnic contact as mechanisms for behavioral change and reconciliation. Theories such as Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) and the Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954) provide important conceptual tools but remain underexplored in rural Southeast Asian contexts, where local cultures, religious identities, and power relations are decisive in shaping social interaction.

This gap underscores the importance of innovative approaches that bring counseling closer to the realities of communities like *Wonosari*. The village reflects broader patterns in Indonesia's multicultural landscape: the long-standing presence of *Javanese* transmigrants, the indigenous identity of the *Gayo* people, and the shadow of past conflict in Aceh. Addressing these dynamics requires interventions that are dialogical, participatory, and rooted in local cultural values.

Insights from other contexts also strengthen this argument. Research on indigenous Islamic multiculturalism in rural East Java demonstrates how interreligious relations can be sustained through culturally embedded practices (Umam & Barmawi, 2023). Similarly, Sahfutra et al., (2025) show how negotiations between majority and minority groups in North Sumatra generate new forms of multiculturalism. Beyond Indonesia, studies on tolerance among students in Jordan (Alazeez et al., 2024) and on the articulation of Islamic identity among Muslim millennials through social media (Ginting et al., 2023; Al-Fairusy et al., 2024) illustrate the diverse ways in which multicultural and religious dynamics shape social life.

This study therefore seeks to design and implement a group-based multicultural counseling model embedded in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework in *Gampong Wonosari*. Through two intervention cycles that

involve joint planning, counseling sessions, observation, and collaborative reflection, this research examines the extent to which behavioral change, increased tolerance, and cross-cultural understanding can be achieved and sustained. Theoretically, it strengthens the concept of multicultural counseling by adapting it to the context of plural rural communities in post-conflict settings and by testing the relevance of two major intergroup relation theories. Practically, the findings provide a replicable intervention model for policymakers, schools, and non-governmental organizations to rebuild inclusive social networks, both in Indonesia and in other regions experiencing social disintegration due to migration or identity-based conflict.

B. Method

This study employed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design, chosen because it positions the community not only as the subject of change but also as an active partner in generating knowledge. Through iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection, PAR ensures that the multicultural counseling intervention is rooted in local needs and produces measurable changes in interethnic social relations. This design is consistent with contemporary literature emphasizing equitable partnerships, co-learning, and member-checking as mechanisms to maintain the validity and social relevance of research findings (Brand, 2018).

The research was conducted in *Gampong Wonosari*, Bandar Subdistrict, Bener Meriah Regency, Aceh, from March to May 2024. The participants consisted of 14 individuals – eight *Javanese* and six *Gayo* – selected purposively based on several criteria: (1) aged 18–45 years, (2) having relatively high intensity of interethnic interaction, (3) considered influential within their social networks, and (4) identified as vulnerable in interethnic relations through the initial screening using the Multicultural Social Relation Vulnerability Questionnaire (MSRVQ). The recruitment process included community socialization in the village hall, recommendations from community leaders, MSRVQ screening, confirmation of willingness to participate, and the signing of informed consent. All procedures were documented in an audit trail to ensure transparency and accountability.



The intervention was implemented across two PAR cycles. Each cycle consisted of four group counseling sessions lasting 90 minutes, held weekly. The first cycle focused on problem identification and initiating dialogue, while the second emphasized strengthening collective norms and critical reflection. Each cycle included four stages: (1) joint planning with participants, (2) implementation of multicultural counseling sessions using facilitation techniques based on the principle of equity of voice (Caldairou-Bessette, 2015; Gerstein et al., 2012; Ratts & Pedersen, 2015), (3) systematic observation and documentation of behaviors using the Multicultural Social Relation Observation Sheet (MSROS) and field notes, and (4) collaborative reflection for member-checking and adjusting strategies. To facilitate interaction, the sessions were held in a community classroom arranged in a semicircle, supported by audiovisual media and a whiteboard.

The study combined qualitative and quantitative instruments (Stroud et al., 2020). First, the MSRVQ was used prior to the intervention to assess participants' vulnerability in interethnic relations. A sample item included the statement: "I often avoid interacting with members of other ethnic groups for fear of being misunderstood" (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Second, the MSROS was used before and after each cycle to observe behaviors, such as greeting members of other ethnic groups or showing willingness to listen attentively. Third, reflections from participants were documented in transcripts and field notes. Fourth, NVivo software was employed to assist thematic coding of qualitative data, while quantitative data from the MSROS were analyzed descriptively to measure pre-post cycle changes.

Data were analyzed using a convergent mixed-methods approach. Qualitative data were examined through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), following six stages: familiarization, initial coding, theme construction, review, naming of themes, and writing. NVivo was used to organize and code qualitative data systematically. Quantitative data from the MSROS were analyzed as percentages to capture changes across cycles, and comparisons were tested using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, complemented

by effect size calculations to measure the magnitude of change (Fetters, 2023; Collins, 2020).

To ensure the validity and reliability of findings, triangulation was conducted across observations, reflections, and discussions. Member-checking was carried out after each cycle, and peer debriefing was undertaken among researchers. Two independent observers were trained to use the MSROS guidelines until they reached interrater reliability above 0.80 (Cohen's kappa) (Hong et al., 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). These measures enhanced the robustness of both quantitative and qualitative findings. Ethical considerations were maintained through written approval from the village head, clearance from the university ethics committee, and strict management of participant confidentiality.

C. Result and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings of the study alongside their interpretation within the chosen theoretical framework. The results are organized to show both collective and individual progress achieved through the two cycles of Participatory Action Research (PAR). The subsequent discussion elaborates on how these findings relate to existing theories, previous studies, and broader issues of multicultural counseling and social reconstruction. By combining quantitative outcomes with qualitative insights, this section provides a comprehensive understanding of how the intervention contributed to strengthening interethnic relations in the studied community.

1. Result

The results of this study present empirical findings from the implementation of group-based multicultural counseling conducted across two cycles. The presentation focuses on two main aspects: the overall enhancement of social relations within the multiethnic community and the individual development of participants. Quantitative data were collected through the MSROS instrument and summarized as percentage scores for each



element, while qualitative data were derived from field observations and reflection notes capturing changes in everyday behaviors. By integrating both sources of data, the findings provide a comprehensive picture of the dynamics of cultural understanding, tolerance, and interethnic solidarity as they progressed from the first cycle to the second.

a. Improvement in overall social relations

To evaluate the collective changes in interethnic social dynamics, the study measured participants' progress across three core dimensions of social relations empowerment: behaviors toward understanding interethnic cultures, the atmosphere of interethnic tolerance, and the desire for interethnic togetherness. These dimensions were assessed at the end of each PAR cycle using the Multicultural Social Relation Observation Sheet (MSROS). The results, summarized in Table 1, present a comparative picture of the percentage of achievement in each element between Cycle I and Cycle II.

Table 1. Percentage of achievement in social relations empowerment by elements and cycles

Elements of Social Relations Empowerment in a Multiethnic Community	Cycle I Total Score	% Mean	Cycle II Total Score	% Mean
Element 1: Behaviors toward understanding interethnic cultures				
E.1.1. Showing willingness to understand other ethnic cultures	33	2.35	41	2.93
E.1.2. Demonstrating the attitude that one's own culture is not everything	30	2.14	39	2.78
E.1.3. Feeling fortunate to know other cultures	31	2.21	40	2.85
E.1.4. Accepting the existence of other ethnic cultures	32	2.28	43	3.07
Element 2: Atmosphere of interethnic tolerance				
E.2.1. Showing sympathy toward fellow villagers	30	2.14	39	2.78
E.2.2. Demonstrating empathy regardless of ethnicity	29	2.07	39	2.78



Elements of Social Relations Empowerment in a Multiethnic Community	Cycle I Total Score	% Mean	Cycle II Total Score	% Mean
E.2.3. Prioritizing community interests over one's own ethnicity	31	2.21	43	3.07
E.2.4. Building mutual trust across ethnic groups	28	2.00	42	3.00
Element 3: Desire for interethnic togetherness				
E.3.1. Socializing and engaging in dialogue with other ethnic groups	32	2.28	40	2.85
E.3.2. Considering members of other ethnic groups as productive partners	31	2.21	39	2.78
E.3.3. Recognizing equality of perspectives across ethnic groups	29	2.07	39	2.78
Total	-	54.54%	-	72.07%

The findings indicate a marked improvement in interethnic social relations following the implementation of group-based multicultural counseling across two cycles. Quantitative data presented in Table 1 show that the average achievement score for elements of social relations empowerment increased from 54.54% in Cycle I to 72.07% in Cycle II. This improvement was consistent across nearly all indicators, suggesting that the intervention was effective not only in raising awareness but also in fostering behavioral change.

A closer look at the elements shows that the dimension of *behaviors toward understanding interethnic cultures* experienced significant progress. For instance, the indicator “showing willingness to understand other ethnic cultures” rose from 58.92% in Cycle I to 73.21% in Cycle II. This shift illustrates that participants became increasingly open to learning about cultural practices beyond their own, a crucial step in reducing prejudice and developing cultural empathy. Similarly, “accepting the existence of other ethnic cultures” increased from 57.14% to 76.78%, demonstrating that participants had moved beyond mere tolerance to genuine recognition of diversity as an integral part of community life.

In the dimension of *atmosphere of interethnic tolerance*, notable gains were also observed. The indicator “building mutual trust across ethnic groups” improved dramatically, from 50.00% in Cycle I to 75.00% in Cycle II. This result



is particularly important because mutual trust forms the foundation of sustainable interethnic cooperation. The steady rise in “showing sympathy toward fellow villagers” (from 53.57% to 69.64%) and “demonstrating empathy regardless of ethnicity” (from 51.79% to 69.64%) further indicates that participants began to shift from ethnocentric attitudes to a more community-oriented perspective. These findings confirm that the group sessions helped to break down stereotypes and nurtured a more supportive environment among participants.

The third dimension, *desire for interethnic togetherness*, also showed improvement, with indicators such as “recognizing equality of perspectives across ethnic groups” rising from 51.79% to 69.64%. This reflects an emerging awareness among participants that every ethnic group has valuable contributions and perspectives to offer. The rise in “socializing and engaging in dialogue with other ethnic groups” (from 57.14% to 71.43%) highlights that the intervention not only encouraged dialogue during structured sessions but also fostered spontaneous interactions outside the sessions.

Overall, these results demonstrate that the second cycle was not merely a repetition of the first. Rather, it was a consolidating stage that reinforced and deepened the changes initiated in Cycle I. While the first cycle functioned as an introductory phase where participants began to confront their anxieties and stereotypes, the second cycle provided opportunities to practice and internalize new patterns of interaction. The steady rise across almost all indicators underscores that the counseling intervention facilitated both attitudinal and behavioral changes, creating a more cohesive and empathetic interethnic community.

b. Individual participant development

In addition to examining collective patterns of change, the study also measured the progress of each participant to capture variations in individual experiences and outcomes. This analysis was important to identify whether improvements in social relations were consistent across all participants or concentrated only among certain individuals. The detailed scores for each participant in both cycles are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Percentage scores of individual empowerment in each cycle

No.	Participant	Cycle I Total	Mean	%	Cycle II Total	Mean	%
01	J-JK P	26	2.36	59.10	31	2.82	70.00
02	J-SS B	27	2.45	61.36	32	2.91	72.73
03	J-SP J	27	2.45	61.36	31	2.82	70.00
04	J-YN K	29	2.64	65.91	33	3.00	75.00
05	J-TT H	27	2.45	61.36	31	2.82	70.00
06	J-SL T	28	2.54	63.64	32	2.91	72.73
07	J-SS W	28	2.54	63.64	33	3.00	75.00
08	G-QD	27	2.45	61.36	33	3.00	75.00
09	G-AH	28	2.54	63.64	33	3.00	75.00
10	G-RJ	27	2.45	61.36	31	2.82	70.00
11	G-BD	28	2.54	63.64	34	3.09	77.27
12	G-MR	29	2.64	65.91	35	3.18	79.55
13	G-MY	28	2.54	63.64	35	3.18	79.55
14	G-NL	26	2.36	59.10	32	2.91	72.73
Σ/ Mean	-	-	-	62.50%	-	-	73.89%

The data in Table 2 demonstrates that nearly all participants showed measurable progress across the two cycles. In Cycle I, the average individual empowerment score stood at 62.50%, while in Cycle II it increased to 73.89%. This consistent rise indicates that the intervention was able to generate positive outcomes not only at the group level but also at the personal level. For example, participant G-MR recorded the most substantial progress, improving from 65.91% to 79.55%, while participant G-BD also demonstrated a notable increase from 63.64% to 77.27%. These improvements illustrate how individuals gradually internalized the values of empathy, tolerance, and collaboration fostered during the counseling sessions.

Although the extent of improvement varied, almost all participants surpassed the threshold of 70% by the end of Cycle II, signifying that the changes were not isolated but broadly experienced across the group. Several participants who initially scored at the lower end in Cycle I, such as J-JK P and G-NL (59.10%), managed to achieve more than 70% in Cycle II, suggesting that even those who were more hesitant at the beginning were eventually able to benefit from the structured counseling process. The individual-level data



therefore reinforces the quantitative trends observed at the collective level, showing that the PAR-based multicultural counseling model was effective in building confidence, reducing prejudice, and strengthening interethnic solidarity across different personal backgrounds.

When compared with the collective findings in Table 1, the individual-level results in Table 2 reinforce the overall trend of improvement. The group data showed that the dimensions of cultural understanding, tolerance, and togetherness improved steadily from Cycle I to Cycle II, with the total average rising from 54.54% to 72.07%. At the same time, the individual scores revealed that these gains were not unevenly distributed but rather consistently shared across participants. In other words, the rise in collective indicators was not driven only by a few highly motivated individuals but represented a broad-based transformation in which nearly all participants experienced meaningful progress.

This alignment between collective and individual improvements highlights the effectiveness of the PAR-based multicultural counseling model. At the group level, the intervention successfully created an atmosphere of empathy, trust, and willingness to cooperate, while at the individual level, it enabled participants to build confidence, overcome hesitation, and engage more openly across ethnic boundaries. The fact that even participants with lower initial scores achieved significant gains suggests that the counseling model was inclusive and responsive to varying levels of readiness. Thus, the combination of quantitative evidence from both tables provides strong confirmation that the intervention produced sustainable change in multiethnic social relations, both collectively and personally.

Qualitative observations and reflections

The qualitative data obtained from reflection sessions and observation notes provide a rich account of the participants' experiences and behavioral changes throughout the two PAR cycles. In the initial stage of Cycle I, the atmosphere during counseling sessions was marked by hesitation and cautious interactions. Many participants tended to avoid eye contact, kept

their contributions brief, and sometimes fell into long silences. This hesitation reflected the persistence of stereotypes and the lack of trust that had characterized their relationships before the intervention. The facilitators noted that although participants attended the sessions regularly, their engagement was still superficial, as they seemed reluctant to openly express their opinions or personal experiences.

As Cycle I progressed, subtle improvements became visible. In guided discussions, some *Javanese* participants began to cautiously acknowledge the difficulties they felt in initiating interactions with their *Gayo* neighbors. One reflection note captured this sentiment:

I often thought that my Gayo neighbors did not want to interact with me, so I preferred to remain silent. But through these meetings, I started to realize that maybe they were also thinking the same about us. This awareness makes me want to try more, even if I am still nervous (Reflection note, Cycle I).

Similarly, a *Gayo* participant admitted:

For a long time, I believed that Javanese people did not trust us, so I usually avoided them. But in these sessions, I could hear directly how they actually also felt uncomfortable. That surprised me, and I started to think that we were both holding back for no reason (Reflection note, Cycle I).

These reflections show that the first cycle functioned as a diagnostic and awareness-building phase, where participants began to confront their own assumptions. The counseling activities created a structured space that enabled participants to voice unspoken anxieties, leading to the gradual dismantling of mutual misconceptions.

By the time Cycle II commenced, the group dynamic had clearly shifted. Participants displayed more openness in discussions, initiated greetings without prompting, and engaged in collaborative tasks with greater enthusiasm. Observers noted a marked increase in laughter, eye contact, and the use of inclusive language such as “we” rather than “us” and “them.” The reflective sessions became more dialogical, with participants actively responding to each other’s comments instead of relying solely on the facilitator to guide the conversation. One *Javanese* participant described this transformation as follows:



At the beginning I felt it was safer to stay quiet, because I didn't want to say the wrong thing. But now I feel that I can express my thoughts without being judged. I realize that my Gayo friends also want to build good relations, and this makes me feel braver to interact and even to share my personal experiences (Reflection note, Cycle II).

From the *Gayo* side, another participant reflected:

Before joining this program, I sometimes felt that Javanese people preferred to stay among themselves, so I did not want to approach them. But after spending time together in these meetings, I began to see their openness. They asked questions about our culture, and I also learned about theirs. Now when we meet outside the sessions, I feel more comfortable greeting them, and the response is warm (Reflection note, Cycle II).

Another testimony highlighted the emergence of collective responsibility that transcended ethnic boundaries:

In the past, whenever there was a decision in the village, each group only thought about their own interest. Now I feel we are beginning to think together about what benefits the whole community. This makes me believe that cooperation is possible if we continue this process (Reflection note, Cycle II).

These narratives are supported by observational data from outside the counseling sessions. In everyday life, researchers documented an increase in cross-ethnic greetings in public spaces such as markets and mosques, spontaneous conversations during communal work, and joint participation in local activities. While such gestures might appear simple, they represented meaningful shifts compared to the avoidance and suspicion observed prior to the intervention. Importantly, these changes were initiated by participants themselves rather than being externally prompted, which indicates the internalization of new norms of interaction.

The progression between Cycle I and Cycle II demonstrates that transformation did not occur instantly but evolved through repeated opportunities for dialogue and reflection. Cycle I served as an entry point to surface latent anxieties, while Cycle II consolidated positive experiences into more sustainable behavioral patterns. The reflections revealed that participants not only changed their external behaviors but also their internal

perspectives—moving from avoidance and distrust to empathy and openness.

One of the most striking outcomes recorded in the final reflection session came from a *Gayo* participant who articulated a profound shift in perception:

I used to believe that our communities could never really trust each other. But after these sessions, I saw with my own eyes how much the Javanese participants wanted to cooperate. This changed my heart. I now feel that reconciliation is not only possible but also already beginning among us (Reflection note, Cycle II).

This statement captures the essence of the intervention: creating a dialogical space where long-standing prejudices could be deconstructed and replaced with mutual recognition.

In summary, the qualitative evidence demonstrates that group-based multicultural counseling within a PAR framework fostered meaningful changes in both attitudes and behaviors. The intervention helped participants to recognize their shared fears, break down mutual stereotypes, and build trust through collaborative reflection. The reflections further indicate that participants internalized these new patterns, translating them into their daily lives outside the structured sessions. These findings complement the quantitative improvements and highlight that the success of the intervention lay not only in statistical significance but also in the lived experiences and personal transformations of the participants.

2. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that multicultural counseling implemented through a participatory action research framework has the capacity to transform interethnic social relations in a rural post-conflict community. The significant increase in empowerment scores from Cycle I to Cycle II indicates that the intervention did not simply create temporary awareness but facilitated a deeper process of attitudinal and behavioral change. This outcome strongly supports the premise of Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) and the Contact Hypothesis (Allport,



1954), which argue that repeated, structured, and meaningful interactions can reduce prejudice and build more sustainable forms of trust. The qualitative reflections further confirm that participants moved gradually from silence and avoidance to more confident engagement, signaling the deconstruction of stereotypes through dialogical encounters.

Such progress underscores the importance of dialogical spaces in breaking down entrenched ethnocentrism. Participants' testimonies revealed that long-standing assumptions had hindered their willingness to interact, and once those assumptions were surfaced and critically examined, new pathways toward empathy and mutual acceptance emerged. These results resonate with intercultural communication theory, which stresses that competence is achieved through awareness, sensitivity, and practical engagement (Chen & Starosta, 2005). At the same time, they echo findings from counseling research in different domains, where professional and personality competencies are critical for fostering transformative counseling outcomes (Casmini & Hasanah, 2024), and where case management strategies play a decisive role in stress reduction and empowerment (Equatora et al., 2024).

When situated within broader scholarly debates, this study extends the scope of multicultural counseling beyond its traditional urban or school-based contexts. Previous studies in Indonesia emphasized educational strategies to foster empathy and reduce prejudice (Widaningtyas & Sutanti, 2022; Tanjung, 2019; Nurmawati et al., 2024), but they did not systematically integrate group counseling into a PAR framework with explicit theoretical grounding. This research fills that gap by adapting counseling to the socio-cultural realities of a transmigrant community in Aceh. At the same time, parallels can be found with value-based interventions in other Islamic education settings, such as the integration of family literacy in Islamic parenting (Purwandari et al., 2022), the cultivation of altruism through *muhasabah Qur'an* (Khoiriyah et al., 2024), and the moral reinforcement role of counseling teachers in fostering honesty among students (Liza & Wahyuni, 2023). These parallels indicate that counseling functions not merely as an individual therapeutic practice but as a broader mechanism of social and cultural reconstruction.

The results also have resonance with studies conducted in *pesantren* contexts, where curricula and counseling strategies have been designed to develop emotional intelligence (Wicaksono et al., 2024; Prameswari & Suryani, 2023), reinforce moral education (Rusmana et al., 2024), and modernize educational governance (Lathifah et al., 2025). Similar patterns can be seen in discussions of religious identity in digital spaces (Ginting et al., 2023) and the relationship between religiosity and academic integrity (Oktaviyani et al., 2022). This confirms that the outcomes in Aceh are part of a wider movement in which counseling and education intersect with issues of cultural identity, social cohesion, and moral development. The ability of counseling to navigate complex intersections of religion, education, and multiculturalism has also been highlighted in studies of interreligious relations in rural East Java (Umam & Barmawi, 2023) and negotiations of multiculturalism in North Sumatra (Sahfutra et al., 2025).

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to expanding the application of multicultural counseling in at least two ways. First, it demonstrates that the theories of Bandura and Allport, typically applied in controlled educational or organizational settings, retain explanatory power in rural, post-conflict environments where social polarization is deeply rooted. Second, it positions counseling as a bridge between the micro-level development of empathy and the macro-level strengthening of social cohesion. This resonates with broader scholarship on Islamic identity formation (Majid et al., 2024), the shaping of moral judgment through spiritual norms (Mohd Yusoff et al., 2022), and the strategic role of *pesantren* in shaping educational trajectories (Tabrani ZA et al., 2023). By bringing together these insights, this study reaffirms that counseling must be understood not only as psychological intervention but also as sociocultural practice.

The international relevance of this research lies in its demonstration of how local interventions can generate insights applicable to other plural societies grappling with issues of migration, conflict, and cultural negotiation. Similar to the role of counseling in supporting multicultural adaptation among minority or displaced communities globally (Şimşek, 2025; Sudheer &



Banerjee, 2021), the Aceh experience suggests that structured group-based counseling can provide replicable frameworks beyond Indonesia. The findings therefore contribute to the global discourse on reconciliation, intercultural dialogue, and peacebuilding, particularly by showing how grassroots-level interventions can complement broader structural policies. This aligns with the recognition of teachers' role in promoting tolerance (Alazeez et al., 2024), the evolving role of counseling in Islamic schools (Elihami & Melbourne, 2023), and the increasing importance of integrative approaches that merge education, spirituality, and social psychology.

Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. The relatively short duration of the intervention restricts the ability to measure long-term sustainability. Variation in participants' readiness also influenced the pace of change, confirming that individual dispositions and cultural sensitivities shape the effectiveness of counseling (Sun et al., 2016; Attia, 2021). Moreover, the supportive leadership of the local community contributed to the success of the program, and similar interventions may face greater challenges in less cohesive contexts. Recognizing these limitations, future research should extend the time frame, involve more diverse participants, and integrate dimensions such as gender, power, and historical trauma for deeper analysis.

This study confirms that multicultural counseling within a PAR framework provides both theoretical enrichment and practical solutions. Theoretically, it extends the applicability of established frameworks to contexts often excluded from mainstream studies, and practically, it offers a replicable model that policymakers, educators, and civil society organizations can adapt to rebuild social trust in multiethnic communities. By situating local findings within international debates, this study contributes to advancing knowledge at the intersection of counseling, multiculturalism, and social reconstruction, strengthening both academic discourse and global practice.

D. Conclusion

This study has shown that multicultural counseling implemented within a participatory action research framework can substantially improve



interethnic social relations in a rural post-conflict community. The two cycles of intervention fostered a shift from hesitation and prejudice to trust, empathy, and collaboration, confirming that structured group counseling can serve as a catalyst for social reconstruction. The findings reveal that the transformation was not limited to temporary awareness but reflected a deeper process of behavioral change, aligning with and extending the explanatory power of Social Learning Theory and the Contact Hypothesis in contexts that are rarely examined.

The main contribution of this research lies in its dual impact. Theoretically, it expands the scope of multicultural counseling by demonstrating its applicability in rural, post-conflict environments, thus reinforcing and refining existing theories of intergroup relations. It also contributes to the development of a participatory and dialogical model that integrates reflection, cultural adaptation, and sustained interethnic contact. Practically, the study offers a replicable framework for policymakers, educators, and civil society actors to address polarization, strengthen tolerance, and build inclusive communities. The novelty of this research rests in its integration of participatory action with multicultural counseling in a transmigrant community, filling a gap left by previous studies that often focused on urban or school-based settings.

Building on the limitations identified, future research should extend the duration of the intervention to assess long-term sustainability, explore the role of gender, power, and historical trauma in shaping counseling effectiveness, and apply comparative designs across different regions or countries. Such directions are crucial to further refine the model and to test its adaptability in more diverse cultural and political contexts, thereby contributing to global discourses on peacebuilding, reconciliation, and multicultural education.

This study confirms that reconciliation and social cohesion in divided communities cannot be achieved solely through structural or policy measures; they require dialogical, participatory, and culturally sensitive interventions that touch the lived experiences of individuals. By demonstrating how



multicultural counseling can foster sustainable interethnic solidarity, this research underscores its significance not only for Indonesia but also for other plural societies facing the challenges of diversity, migration, and conflict.

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