

Self-Determination and Eco-Cultural Competence among Tribal Naga Students in Migration: Pathways to Sustainable Homecoming

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Abstract

This study examined how Indigenous practices of community care and mentoring informed culturally grounded counseling and psychological well-being among Naga tribal students from Nagaland in Northeast India. Guided by Indigenous Psychology and Self-Determination Theory, the research explored how the students navigated their educational migration through community-based counseling systems. These systems provided culturally grounded spaces of care and mentoring, enabling students to sustain their socio-cultural adaptation, strengthen their eco-cultural competence, and prepare them for a sustainable homecoming while maintaining their ancestral identity and ecological belonging. Using qualitative methods rooted in Indigenous methodologies, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and talking circles that foreground collective knowledge. Participants included students, community elders, and Naga mental health practitioners. Findings revealed that student unions and Church fellowships functioned as Indigenous mentoring and counseling systems that integrated ethics of reciprocity, intergenerational narrative practices, and contemporary psychosocial support, thereby fostering empowerment and ecological consciousness. Migration offered a perspective that deepened awareness of cultural and ecological heritage, reinforcing commitment to stewardship and community advocacy. The study demonstrated how Indigenous counseling frameworks could enhance culturally responsive mental health practices by providing contextually relevant approaches that support equity, community well-being, and environmental justice in higher education contexts.

Keywords: Indigenous psychology, eco-cultural competence, self-determination, community counseling, Naga students, migration, social justice

In an increasingly mobile and interconnected world, questions of identity, belonging, and well-being have become central to the work of counselors, psychologists, and educators (Arthur & Collins, 2010; Sue & Sue, 2016). Migration, whether driven by opportunity or circumstance, often brings both expansion and disruption, inviting individuals to reimagine who they are in relation to place, people, and purpose (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). For those who cross cultural or linguistic boundaries, the experience of relocation can reshape not only their sense of self but also their sources of meaning and support. Understanding how people sustain their psychological well-being amid such transitions remains an important concern for contemporary counseling psychology (Gerstein et al., 2009; Moodley, 2011).

This concern becomes especially significant for Indigenous and tribal communities, whose sense of identity and health is deeply rooted in collective, spiritual, and ecological relationships (Gone, 2013; Smith, 2012). When members of these communities move for education or work, they carry with them traditions of care and mutual responsibility that often differ from the individual-centered approaches emphasized in mainstream psychology (Duran, 2006). Exploring these cultural forms of resilience and connection can expand current understandings of counseling practice by highlighting the ways well-being is nurtured within communities rather than apart from them (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

This article focused on the experiences of Naga tribal students from the state of Nagaland in Northeast India who pursued higher education in other parts of the country. Their journeys reflect both the promise of academic advancement and the challenge of negotiating cultural continuity in unfamiliar settings (Ao, 2020; Longchar, 2016). Drawing from Indigenous Psychology (IP) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the study examined how these students sustained their eco-cultural competence, identity, and well-being through Indigenous frameworks of care and mentoring (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kim et al., 2006). The study highlights how traditional community networks such as student unions, Church fellowships, and peer groups functioned as living systems of counseling and support that bridged cultural heritage and contemporary psychosocial needs (Ozukum & Golmei, 2025). In doing so, the study contributes to counseling psychology's ongoing effort to understand and respond to human adaptation in a way that honors cultural knowledge, collective healing, and social inclusion and justice (Gerstein & Ægisdóttir, 2012; Moodley & Palmer, 2006).

Educational migration among Naga tribal students from Nagaland reflects both historical necessity and evolving social aspiration. Since the formation of Nagaland as a state in 1963, the region has witnessed prolonged political negotiations and intermittent insurgency. The ongoing enforcement of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958, has profoundly influenced civic life and public confidence in state institutions (Kikon, 2019; McDuie-Ra, 2012). These political and structural challenges, combined with limited infrastructure and higher education opportunities, have led many young Nagas to seek educational and professional advancement in Indian cities such as Delhi, Bangalore, Pune, and Hyderabad (Ao, 2020; Ozukum & Golmei, 2025).

The decision to migrate, however, extends beyond economic motivation. For many Naga youth, it represents an act of aspiration, responsibility, and self-determination as they pursue education as a means to uplift both themselves and their community (Longchar, 2016). This movement is shaped by collective memories of social and political uncertainty as well as the desire to contribute to communal renewal through education and social participation (Kikon, 2019). Migration, therefore, is a personal, collective, and social action project, reflecting the Naga ethos of interconnectedness and responsibility to one's people.

For students navigating new academic and social environments, adaptation often requires negotiating between institutional norms and Indigenous values of interdependence, humility, and reciprocity. Many encounter subtle forms of stereotyping or exclusion, which can affect their self-concept and belonging (Hazarika, 2017; McDuie-Ra, 2012). Yet these experiences also highlight the enduring strength of Naga social organizations and cultural capital. Away from home, Naga student unions, Church fellowships, and peer networks have become vital spaces of belonging, functioning as community-led systems of mentoring, counseling, and mutual support (Kikon, 2019; Ozukum & Golmei, 2025).

These networks mirror traditional structures such as the *morung* which is the traditional men's dormitory that historically served as a community school of moral instruction, skill learning, and storytelling (Ao, 2020). In contemporary settings, they continue this function by providing guidance, advocacy, and emotional care for young people navigating institutions and intercultural relationships. The persistence of such Indigenous systems of care demonstrates how community-oriented approaches can sustain mental and emotional well-being even in migration contexts.

Understanding these Indigenous forms of counseling and mentorship is especially relevant to counseling psychology, which increasingly seeks to integrate culture-specific frameworks into theory and practice (Arthur & Collins, 2010; Gerstein & Ægisdóttir, 2012). The Naga experience reveals that community-based care and mentoring can operate as a culturally responsive counseling model that strengthens both psychological resilience and collective empowerment. Exploring these frameworks offers valuable insights into how counseling psychology can evolve beyond its conventional individual-centered paradigms toward approaches that honor relational, ecological, and communal dimensions of human well-being (Gone, 2013; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). This perspective aligned the study with counseling psychology's ongoing attention to culturally grounded understandings of adaptation, collective healing, and social inclusion (Gerstein & Ægisdóttir, 2012; Moodley & Palmer, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of the study was situated at the intersection of IP and SDT. The integration offered a culturally grounded understanding of motivation, adaptation, and well-being among Tribal Naga students as they navigate educational migration and community belonging.

IP provides a framework that recognizes the contextual, relational, and collective dimensions of human behavior. It challenges the universalizing assumptions of Western psychological models by situating meaning within the cultural and ecological realities of specific communities (Kim et al., 2006; Smith, 2012). Within this framework, knowledge is relational rather than individual, emphasizing the interconnectedness of people, land, spirituality, and community life (Duran, 2006; Gone, 2013). For Naga students, well-being and selfhood are not merely personal achievements but extensions of kinship, ancestral continuity, and communal responsibility. An Indigenous approach to counseling and care, therefore, aligns with community participation, storytelling, and collective mentoring, rather than individual-centered interventions.

SDT complements this framework by offering a motivational lens through which to understand agency, growth, and psychological resilience. SDT posits that human flourishing depends on the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When interpreted through an Indigenous worldview, these needs are not isolated experiences but are sustained within social and ecological systems. For instance, autonomy among Naga students often reflects the ability to make educational and moral choices while honoring communal values; competence involves not only academic achievement but also the ability to represent one's community with integrity; and relatedness is nurtured through ongoing engagement with peer networks, family, and cultural traditions (Ao, 2020; Longchar, 2016).

This study therefore employed IP not as a critique but as a complement to mainstream counseling frameworks. It foregrounded the epistemological stance that knowledge arises from within the lived experience of a people and that healing, resilience, and adaptation are deeply relational acts (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Integrating SDT within this Indigenous paradigm allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how self-determination manifested in collective societies where autonomy was exercised through interdependence rather than isolation.

By connecting these two frameworks, the study sought to expand counseling psychology's capacity to engage with cultural contexts that valued community and ecology as integral to human development. It invited practitioners, educators, and social justice professionals to consider how Indigenous systems of mentoring,

faith-based community support, and peer networks could inform culturally responsive counseling practices that affirmed both individual and collective well-being.

Purpose and Rationale

This study addressed a critical gap in counseling psychology research by exploring how Indigenous counseling and mentoring models operated among migrant Naga students. The study bridged theory and practice in pursuit of social and ecological justice (Case & Hoxsey, 2023). By documenting community-based support systems, it demonstrated how Indigenous knowledge could inform counseling practice within higher education and community settings. The primary objectives of the study were to: (1) examine how Naga students developed and sustained their eco-cultural competence during their educational migration; (2) identify community-based counseling and mentoring frameworks that supported their psychological well-being; and (3) explore implications for culturally responsive counseling psychology practice that advanced social justice and community empowerment.

Literature Review

Contemporary counseling psychology increasingly recognizes the need for culturally responsive approaches that move beyond Western-centric frameworks (Rogers-Sirin, 2017). Rogers-Sirin's critical analysis of mainstream psychotherapy highlighted how the dominance of empirically validated treatments, particularly cognitive-behavioral therapy, often marginalized culturally diverse and socially just approaches essential for serving Indigenous and marginalized populations effectively. This critique is particularly relevant for understanding the counseling needs of Naga students, whose experiences of migration, identity negotiation, and collective trauma require frameworks that acknowledge the systemic, collective, and ecological dimensions of their mental health.

Research on Indigenous counseling models emphasizes the importance of community-based approaches that integrate cultural values, traditional knowledge, and collective healing practices (Gone, 2013; Duran, 2006). These models challenge the individual-focused orientation of mainstream psychology by recognizing that well-being is fundamentally relational and embedded within cultural and ecological contexts (Smith, 2012). For Indigenous communities, healing and support occur through storytelling, ceremonial practices, and intergenerational knowledge transmission rather than through formal clinical interventions alone (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

The concept of eco-cultural competence extends ecological psychology's understanding of human-environment relationships by incorporating Indigenous perspectives on the inseparability of cultural identity and connections to the environment (Longchar, 2016). For Naga communities, this connection is not metaphorical but lived through agricultural practices, land-based rituals, and the collective stewardship of natural resources (Ao, 2020). When students migrate for education, maintaining this ecological consciousness becomes both a challenge for them and a source of resilience.

SDT provides a useful framework for understanding motivation and well-being in migration contexts, but its application to Indigenous populations requires cultural adaptation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In collective societies, autonomy is expressed through interdependence rather than independence. Competence involves both academic achievement and culturally grounded knowledge, while relatedness extends beyond interpersonal relationships to include land, ancestors, and future generations (Kim et al., 2006).

These culturally situated understandings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness have important implications for how counseling and support practices are conceptualized in Indigenous and collective contexts. Recent work on community engagement in counseling psychology underscores the importance of participatory approaches that position communities as partners rather than recipients of services (Baranowski et al., 2016; Case & Hoxsey, 2023). These approaches align with Indigenous methodologies that prioritize the community's voice, reciprocity, and collective benefit over individual outcomes. The development of advocacy competencies among

counselors working with marginalized populations requires understanding how systemic oppression, historical trauma, and ongoing marginalization shape their mental health and well-being (Edwards et al., 2017; Kozan & Blustein, 2018).

Method

Research Design

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews and Indigenous talking circles to explore how community support systems facilitated eco-cultural competence and self-determination among Naga students. The research design was informed by decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 2012), emphasizing community partnership, Indigenous knowledge validation, and reciprocity. The primary researcher, himself a member of the Naga community, worked collaboratively with student union leaders and community elders throughout all phases of the research design, data collection, and analysis.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The primary researcher's dual positioning as both community insider and academic researcher created unique opportunities and challenges. As a Naga individual who had experienced a similar migration for education, the researcher possessed cultural knowledge, linguistic fluency, and established community relationships that facilitated trust and deeper conversations. Participants in the study frequently expressed relief at speaking with someone who understood their experiences without extensive explanation, and who used culturally specific references and code-switching between English and tribal languages. However, this insider positioning also carried the risk of overlooking assumptions or taking certain experiences for granted. To address these challenges, reflexivity was approached through multiple layers of scholarly and ethical engagement. The study was conducted by an Indigenous Naga primary researcher, with analytic and methodological oversight provided by a non-Indigenous co-author and supervisor with formal training in qualitative research and counseling psychology.

In addition to these safeguards, the research process was supported through the oversight of a doctoral-level Research Advisory Committee (RAC), which included one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous faculty member. While RAC members were not directly involved in data collection or coding, their role was to provide ethical guidance, methodological review, and critical feedback at key stages of the research process. Professional consultations with mental health practitioners and ongoing scholarly dialogue with Naga researchers further contributed to the reflexive awareness and interpretive rigor of the study. Regular reflexive journaling was undertaken by the primary researcher to document their emotional responses, assumptions, and evolving interpretations throughout data collection and analysis. Periodic analytic discussions with the co-author and supervisory feedback created structured opportunities to examine how positionality, disciplinary training, and lived experience shaped the data interpretation.

Prior to the study, the primary researcher held assumptions that community support systems would be universally experienced as positive and beneficial. However, engagement with participant narratives and supervisory dialogue revealed more nuanced realities, including tensions between individual aspirations and community expectations, generational differences in cultural practices, and varying levels of engagement with traditional support systems. These insights strengthened the analysis process by moving beyond idealized representations toward more contextually grounded accounts of lived experience.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Conduct and Ethics Committee, CHRIST (Deemed to be) University, Bengaluru, India. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary, that their confidentiality would be maintained, and that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences.

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants who could provide in-depth, experience-based insights relevant to the study's focus on migration, community support, and eco-cultural competence among Tribal Naga students. A total of 30 Naga students (18 female, 12 male), aged 19–28 years ($M = 23.40$, $SD = 2.60$), participated in the study. This age range reflects a developmental period characterized by higher education attendance, identity negotiation, and increasing independence, making it particularly salient for examining self-determination and psychological well-being in migration contexts.

Participants were pursuing undergraduate ($n = 17$) and postgraduate ($n = 13$) degrees in two major urban destinations for Naga students: Delhi National Capital Region ($n = 16$) and Bangalore ($n = 14$). Academic disciplines were diverse and included the social sciences and humanities ($n = 10$), commerce and management-related fields ($n = 8$), science and technology disciplines ($n = 7$), and professional programs such as education and allied health fields ($n = 5$). Participants also varied in their duration of residence outside Nagaland, ranging from 6 months to 5 years, allowing for reflection across different stages of migration and adjustment.

Recruitment occurred through Naga student union networks, Church fellowships, and snowball sampling. When the study was promoted, potential participants were informed that the research aimed to understand Naga students' experiences of migration for higher education, including sources of support, cultural identity negotiation, Indigenous practices of community care, and psychological well-being in urban contexts. It was emphasized that participation was voluntary and that the study sought to contribute knowledge that could inform culturally responsive counseling and mental health practices relevant to Naga and other Indigenous students.

During the informed consent process, the purpose of the study was explained in greater detail, including its focus on Indigenous practices of community care and the broader goal of contributing research that could benefit future Naga students navigating higher education migration. Many participants reported being motivated by the opportunity to share their experiences, contribute to community-relevant research, and engage in collective reflection on migration, identity, and belonging. Several participants also noted that the research process itself functioned as a space for mutual support and community connection.

In addition to student participants, talking circles included eight community elders and four mental health practitioners from Naga backgrounds. The practitioners were professionals engaged in counseling and psychological services within hospital, educational, and community mental health settings. Among them, two were licensed counseling psychologists and two were licensed clinical psychologists. These individuals were included because of their professional experience supporting student well-being, their familiarity with the cultural and relational contexts of Naga communities, and their involvement in community leadership or mental health practice. Their participation enabled the inclusion of intergenerational perspectives and professional insights into Indigenous practices of community care within the context of student migration and urban adaptation.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred in two phases over a six-month period. Phase one involved individual semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by participants, including university campuses, Churches, and community centers, to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Interview topics included migration experiences and adaptation challenges, sources of support and coping strategies, cultural identity negotiation, connections to homeland and community, experiences of discrimination or exclusion, academic and career aspirations, and perceptions of mental health and well-being. Sample questions included, "How has moving away from Nagaland shaped your understanding of your cultural identity?" and "What role do student unions and Church fellowships play in your life here?"

Phase two consisted of four talking circles, each lasting approximately 90–120 minutes. Talking circles were employed as a culturally resonant method that facilitated collective knowledge construction and community dialogue. A total of 12 participants (8 community elders and 4 mental health practitioners) took part across the

four circles, with some individuals participating in more than one circle. Each circle included between 6 and 8 people, reflecting overlapping participation rather than distinct groups. Talking circles were facilitated by the primary Indigenous researcher, with the support of a community elder when appropriate, following Indigenous protocols such as opening prayers, the sharing of traditional food, and consensus-based discussion. These circles explored themes emerging from the individual interviews and allowed for collective sense-making and validation of experiences. Topics included traditional and contemporary support systems, intergenerational perspectives on migration and identity, community responses to student mental health needs, and visions for culturally responsive counseling approaches.

All interviews and talking circles were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher. Transcripts were checked against audio recordings to ensure their accuracy and completeness. Field notes were maintained by the primary researcher to document non-verbal observations, contextual factors, and reflexive insights throughout the data collection process.

Prior to data collection, the primary researcher had received formal training in qualitative research methods through doctoral coursework and supervision. In addition, a two-day orientation was conducted in consultation with the research supervisor and Indigenous community advisors, focusing on Indigenous research ethics, culturally responsive interviewing, reflexive practice, and protocols for facilitating talking circles. Guidance on talking circle facilitation was informed by Indigenous community practices and mentorship from elders familiar with this method. Ongoing supervisory support and periodic consultation ensured consistency in data collection while allowing flexibility and responsiveness to cultural and contextual considerations.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed and it followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, though it was intentionally adapted to align with Indigenous analytical principles emphasizing relational accountability, reflexivity, and community validation. Data from individual interviews and talking circles were analyzed in relation to one another rather than treated as separate datasets, as both methods explored overlapping experiential domains of migration, community support, cultural continuity, and well-being. While the formats differed, the analytic focus across methods was consistent, allowing for triangulation and deeper contextual interpretation rather than analytic distortion. Method-specific nuances were retained during coding through memoing and attention to the interactional context in which data were generated.

Initial familiarization involved repeated reading of all interviews and talking circle transcripts while listening to corresponding audio recordings to preserve tone, emotion, and narrative emphasis. This phase was conducted by the primary researcher, who maintained detailed analytic memos documenting early observations, contextual reflections, and emerging questions.

Inductive coding was then undertaken, attending to both semantic content and latent meanings. Coding was led by the primary researcher, with a subset of transcripts independently reviewed by the co-author as part of an analytic accountability and reflexivity process. The research team consisted of two Indigenous and two non-Indigenous members with training in qualitative research and counseling psychology. Not all team members coded every transcript. Instead, transcripts were strategically distributed to allow for comparative review across positionalities while maintaining analytic coherence. When overlapping transcripts were coded by more than one researcher, discrepancies were discussed in team meetings and resolved through dialogue grounded in the data, Indigenous ethical principles, and alignment with participants' intended meanings rather than through consensus scoring.

Theme development involved identifying patterned meanings across the full dataset while remaining attentive to divergent accounts and minority perspectives. This stage was carried out through iterative team discussions that examined coherence, conceptual boundaries, and cultural relevance of emerging themes. Defining and naming themes was led by the primary researcher, with input from the research team to ensure

that analytic categories reflected participants' worldviews and Indigenous conceptual frameworks rather than externally imposed constructs.

Preliminary themes were shared with a subset of participants ($n = 8$) for member checking, resulting in refinement of theme labels and deeper contextualization of the cultural concepts. This collaborative validation process strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings while honoring Indigenous principles of knowledge co-creation.

Results

The analysis revealed five interconnected themes that illuminated how Naga students navigate migration while sustaining their cultural identity and well-being through community support systems.

Migration as Self-Determined Cultural Resilience

The first theme, migration, emerged as more than an academic pursuit; it represented an assertion of self-determination intertwined with cultural preservation. Students described leaving home as simultaneously challenging and transformative, offering new perspectives on their heritage. One participant reflected: "It was only when I left home that I truly began to appreciate what I had taken for granted like our land, the forests, our customs, and way of life. Being away made me long for it, and that longing made me want to preserve it."

This geographic distance paradoxically strengthened students' cultural connections. They reported heightened awareness of their tribal identity when encountering difference, transforming potential experiences of marginalization into opportunities for cultural pride. As one student explained: "People assume things about us. They call us 'chinky,' ask if we eat dogs, or think we are foreigners. It gets tiring, but over time, I have learned to assert myself. I now tell them exactly who I am and where I come from."

The migration journey involved extensive preparation through community networks. Senior Naga students already enrolled in universities and alumni who had previously completed their studies in these cities provided practical guidance on accommodation, academic navigation, and cultural adjustment. This mentorship system, rooted in Indigenous values of intergenerational knowledge transfer, continued post-migration through orientation programs and ongoing peer support. A student recounted: "Before I came here, my seniors told me everything. They told me what to expect, how to find a place to stay, and how to handle the initial culture shock. Without that, I would have been completely lost." These preparatory interactions functioned as informal counseling relationships, where emotional reassurance was offered through shared lived experience rather than clinical framing.

Cultural resilience manifested through active engagement with heritage practices. Many students reported discovering deeper appreciation for traditional attire, food, and customs while away from home. Participation in cultural festivals and student union events became ways to maintain and share their cultural identity. One person noted: "At home, I never cared about wearing traditional attire. But here, at our student union events, when I wore my traditional shawl for the first time, I finally understood what it meant. The colors, patterns, and symbols all told a story." These practices acted as grounding resources supporting students' emotional well-being and continuity of identity.

Student Unions as Contemporary Morungs

The Naga student unions functioned as contemporary expressions of the traditional *morung* system, offering structured spaces for learning, leadership development, and the transmission of cultural knowledge. In adapting these communal practices to urban educational contexts, the unions established institutional frameworks for collective care that remained grounded in Indigenous values while responding to the demands of migration and higher education. A student leader explained: "Our union feels like a family. Those who are able to help take on responsibilities. Seniors look out for juniors, we organize study groups, celebrate festivals, and support one

another when someone is going through a difficult time.” This structure reflected Indigenous ethics of communal responsibility rather than individual obligation.

The unions facilitated multiple forms of support including counseling and guidance, academic mentoring through peer tutoring and resource sharing, emotional support during homesickness and adjustment challenges; practical assistance with accommodation and financial management; cultural programming that maintained connections to heritage; and advocacy when students faced discrimination or institutional barriers. These activities reflected traditional morung functions while addressing contemporary needs. However, here they occurred in culturally fluent, peer-led environments where students did not need to explain their background or identity before receiving care.

Beyond immediate support, these collective spaces also served as sites for leadership formation and skill development. Leadership development occurred through graduated responsibilities, with newer students observing and learning before taking on organizational roles. This apprenticeship model mirrored traditional knowledge transmission while developing professional skills. As one participant observed: “In our union, you start by helping with small tasks, then gradually take on more responsibility. By the time you’re a senior, you know how to organize events, manage budgets, and support younger students. It’s training for life, not just university.”

Church fellowships complemented student unions by providing spiritual grounding and moral guidance. Services conducted in native languages created spaces of cultural familiarity, while prayer groups offered intimate settings for sharing struggles and receiving support. One student expressed: “Going to Church on Sundays and hearing the sermon in my language makes me feel at home, even when I am far away. It’s not just about religion; it’s about community and belonging.” These settings also hosted informal counseling dialogues with pastors, elders, and peers, illustrating how psychological support is embedded in spiritual and relational life.

Eco-Cultural Competence Through Community Engagement

Eco-cultural competence through community engagement emerged as a central process through which students sustained connections to land-based knowledge while adapting to new environments. This involved translating traditional ecological wisdom into contemporary contexts through activities like organizing Indigenous food festivals that showcased traditional cuisine and agricultural products; creating rooftop gardens using traditional farming techniques; and facilitating knowledge exchanges about medicinal plants and sustainable practices.

Through these forms of collective participation, students moved beyond cultural maintenance toward deeper reflection on the social and environmental significance of their knowledge systems. Community engagement fostered critical consciousness about environmental issues affecting their homeland. Students studying environmental sciences, agriculture, and related fields explicitly connected their education to community needs. One individual shared: “Being here has made me realize that our tribal way of life is not something outdated. It’s something that can be strengthened, evolved, and even made into something that benefits our people economically and environmentally.”

The development of eco-cultural competence involved negotiating between Indigenous knowledge systems and academic disciplines. Students described learning to articulate traditional practices in scientific terms while maintaining respect for Indigenous epistemologies. This bilingual competence, speaking both Indigenous and academic languages, positioned them as cultural brokers capable of bridging knowledge systems. As Perez and Marsico (2021) described in their work on the Mapuche people’s connection to ancestral lands, this reflected the strengthening of semiotic ties during displacement, where physical distance enhanced symbolic and emotional connections to homeland. These engagements also served therapeutic functions by reducing students’ isolation, providing continuity with their home environments, and supporting their meaning-making across life transitions.

Pathways to Community-Centered Counseling

Pathways to community-centered counseling emerged through Indigenous support systems that functioned as culturally grounded approaches to mental health and well-being. These Indigenous counseling models operated through narrative practices where elders shared stories that provided guidance and perspective; collective problem-solving in talking circles and community meetings; prayer meetings and Church services that facilitated healing and transition; and mentorship relationships that combined practical support with emotional care. Students emphasized that support was most effective when grounded in shared cultural understanding.

Within this landscape of community-based care, some practitioners navigated roles that bridged Indigenous healing traditions and formally trained mental health practices. Mental health practitioners from Naga backgrounds described working at the intersection of traditional and clinical approaches. A counseling psychologist from the Naga community explained: “I integrate and use what I learned in my training with our traditional ways of healing. Sometimes, connecting a student to their Church community or organizing a traditional meal together is more therapeutic than individual counseling sessions.”

Students identified specific elements that made community-based support effective including shared cultural understanding that eliminated the need for extensive explanation; collective approaches that normalized struggles and reduced isolation; holistic support addressing spiritual, social, and practical needs simultaneously; and flexibility to adapt support based on individual and situational needs. These elements aligned with Indigenous counseling principles that prioritize relational healing over symptom reduction.

Challenges within these support systems included generational differences in understanding mental health; stigma around seeking formal counseling services; limited resources for addressing severe mental health concerns; and tensions between traditional approaches and clinical interventions. Despite these challenges, community support remained the primary source of psychological care for most students.

Sustainable Homecoming and Future Aspirations

Sustainable homecoming and future aspirations emerged in participants’ accounts as collective orientations toward return and long-term community well-being, rather than as markers of individual success. Students described plans that emphasized cultural revitalization and shared responsibility, including establishing social enterprises that could generate local employment, initiating sustainable development projects rooted in local ecologies, documenting and preserving traditional knowledge, and developing culturally responsive educational and mental health services.

The concept of “sustainable homecoming” emerged as a framework for understanding how education could serve community development without perpetuating brain drain. Students described feeling responsibility to apply their education for collective benefit while maintaining personal fulfillment. One participant articulated: “My education is not just for me. It’s an investment my community has made. I want to return and create opportunities so future generations don’t have to leave to succeed.”

This orientation toward community benefit reflected Indigenous values of reciprocity and collective responsibility. Students viewed their education as creating obligations to contribute to community well-being, whether through direct return or remote support. The sustainability of homecoming depended on creating conditions where educated youth could apply their skills while maintaining quality of life.

Discussion

The current findings illuminated how Indigenous frameworks of community care and mentoring functioned as powerful resources for psychological well-being and cultural continuity among Naga students navigating educational migration. These community-based systems offered alternatives to individualistic counseling models by embedding care within collective structures that honored cultural values, ecological connections, and intergenerational relationships. When interpreted through SDT, the findings suggested that autonomy,

competence, and relatedness were enacted relationally and collectively rather than through individualized self-assertion. In this way, the study extends dominant interpretations of self-determination by demonstrating that psychological needs may be fulfilled through communal responsibility, cultural continuity, and future-oriented collective aspiration.

Naga student unions operated as contemporary rearticulations of the traditional morung system, maintaining its core functions of guidance, cultural transmission, and collective care while adapting to modern educational contexts. This supports Smith's (2012) argument that Indigenous knowledge systems remain dynamic rather than static. By sustaining mentorship, leadership development, and shared responsibility, these organizations embodied what Watkins and Shulman (2008) described as critical psychology's emphasis on community-level intervention. The current finding also aligns with community engagement models that position communities as sources of strength rather than deficit (Case & Hoxsey, 2023). Within these community structures, participants' experiences suggested that relatedness was fostered through structured belonging, competence through peer mentoring and leadership apprenticeship, and autonomy through guided involvement in communal decision-making. Autonomy, therefore, emerged not as separation from community but as responsible participation within it.

The development of eco-cultural competence through migration challenges assumptions of inevitable cultural loss. Physical distance from ancestral land often intensified students' appreciation and intentional engagement with their heritage. This resonates with Perez and Marsico's (2021) concept of strengthened semiotic ties to ancestral land during displacement. The students in this study's efforts to preserve and reinterpret cultural practices echo Gone's (2013) view of cultural revitalization through education, in which contemporary spaces become sites for sustaining traditional knowledge. For counseling psychology, this suggests that well-being must be understood as culturally and ecologically grounded rather than solely as individual emotional adjustment. Competence and relatedness were reinforced through collective cultural action, while autonomy was expressed through deliberate commitment to sustaining identity across contexts.

Community support systems also operated as *de facto* counseling frameworks. Storytelling, collective problem-solving, and ritual practices addressed psychological needs through culturally congruent approaches (Duran, 2006). At the same time, tensions between traditional practices and formal clinical models highlight the importance of thoughtful integration rather than replacement. The findings supported Rogers-Sirin's (2017) critique of the dominance of standardized treatments in psychotherapy and align with arguments for expanding conceptions of evidence-based practice, particularly for populations affected by historical trauma and ongoing marginalization (Keast et al., 2025). These Indigenous approaches met psychological needs through relational and ecological practices that differ from Western individual-centered models.

The articulation of sustainable homecoming further demonstrates how self-determination operated collectively. Students framed success not as individual mobility detached from community, but as preparation for future contribution. Aspirations to establish social enterprises, strengthen local systems, and develop culturally responsive services reflected autonomy oriented toward communal well-being. This challenges dominant Western career development frameworks and supports alternative counseling models with collective-oriented populations (Kozan & Blustein, 2018). The negotiated balance between personal fulfillment and communal responsibility suggests that SDT's construct of autonomy requires cultural contextualization when applied within Indigenous communities.

Taken together, these findings offer several theoretical contributions to SDT in Indigenous and collectivist contexts. While autonomy, competence, and relatedness appear culturally relevant, their manifestation was distinctly communal and ecologically situated. Autonomy emerged not as individual self-separation but as collective self-determination expressed through meaningful participation in community life and future-oriented responsibility. Competence extended beyond academic mastery to include cultural knowledge, ecological literacy, and the capacity to contribute to communal sustainability. Relatedness operated not only interpersonally but

temporally and spatially, linking students to ancestors, future generations, and their ancestral land. These patterns suggest that SDT's psychological needs may be fulfilled through systemic and collective structures rather than primarily through individual mechanisms. In this respect, the study expands the dominant interpretations of SDT by demonstrating that motivational processes among Indigenous youth navigating migration are sustained through communal continuity and anticipated community contribution, rather than solely through individual goal attainment.

Faith-based organizations also played a significant role in sustaining well-being. Churches provided emotional support, belonging, and practical assistance, reinforcing relatedness and meaning. This aligns with research on spirituality in Indigenous mental health and underscores the importance of engaging faith-based resources in culturally responsive counseling practice (Edwards et al., 2017). The integration of prayer, worship, and pastoral care within community systems demonstrates how Indigenous communities create multidimensional networks of support.

Implications for counseling psychology practice and training are substantial. Effective counseling with Indigenous students must engage with existing community systems rather than replace them with standardized clinical approaches. This may involve training community leaders in mental health support, building collaborative partnerships between clinical services and community organizations, and developing funding models that sustain community-based interventions (Baranowski et al., 2016). Counselor education programs must expand curricula to include Indigenous and non-Western healing approaches, while questioning assumptions embedded in mainstream theory. Incorporating Indigenous methodologies and community-based learning aligns with advocacy competencies essential for addressing systemic inequities affecting Indigenous mental health (Hill et al., 2022).

The findings also highlight ecological and place-based dimensions of mental health. Connections among land, identity, and well-being indicate that counseling approaches must attend to environmental and spatial contexts. Supporting clients' ties to ancestral lands and recognizing environmental justice as integral to mental health work reflects broader commitments to decolonizing practice (Flores et al., 2022). Rather than assuming expert authority, mental health professionals may act as collaborators who support community-led healing processes.

This study demonstrates that Indigenous frameworks of community care and mentoring remain vital within contemporary educational migration contexts. By documenting these community-based counseling systems, the research contributes to growing recognition of diverse approaches to mental health that operate beyond Western clinical paradigms. The persistence and adaptation of these systems underscore the need for counseling psychology to move beyond individual-centered interventions toward collective, ecological, and culturally grounded approaches that honor Indigenous knowledge and advance social and environmental justice.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study warrant consideration. The study focused on Naga students in two major cities. Therefore, experiences may differ elsewhere or among other Indigenous groups. Voluntary participation may have drawn students already connected to community support systems, potentially overlooking those who felt more isolated. The primary researcher's insider position, while enabling deeper engagement and cultural understanding, also may have influenced what participants felt comfortable sharing and how certain experiences were interpreted during analysis.

Future research should examine the experiences of students who return to their communities after completing their studies, particularly how they apply their learning during reintegration. Comparative studies with other Indigenous student populations, as well as attention to gender differences in accessing support systems, could provide more nuanced insights. Further inquiry into collaborations between Indigenous support networks and formal mental health services may help inform integrated and culturally responsive care models and

assist when examining how community-based systems support autonomy, competence, and relatedness within Indigenous contexts.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how Indigenous frameworks of community care and mentoring provide essential psychological support for Naga students navigating educational migration. By documenting these community-based counseling models, the research contributes to growing recognition of diverse approaches to mental health that operate outside Western clinical frameworks. The findings challenge counseling psychology to expand beyond individual-centered interventions toward collective, ecological, and culturally grounded approaches that honor Indigenous knowledge and support community well-being.

The persistence and evolution of Indigenous support systems in contemporary educational contexts revealed their ongoing relevance and effectiveness. As counseling psychology continues to grapple with its colonial history and work toward decolonization, learning from Indigenous communities becomes essential. The Naga student experience offers valuable insights into how education, culture, and mental health intersect in complex ways that require sophisticated, culturally responsive approaches to support. For counseling psychology, this means forming partnerships with Indigenous support networks and recognizing these community-based systems as legitimate and necessary forms of psychological care. Moving forward, the profession must commit not just to cultural competence but to fundamental transformation that centers Indigenous knowledge, supports Indigenous self-determination, and advances social and environmental justice for all communities.

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