

Exploring Culturally-Based Approaches in Mental Health Counseling: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract. *This study aims to identify culturally-based approaches in mental health counseling through a systematic literature review. Following PRISMA guidelines, this review evaluates 20 empirical studies integrating cultural values into counseling practices, utilizing data from qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches. The reviewed articles focus on diverse cultural populations, with interventions including narrative therapy, community-based approaches, and spirituality integration. Findings reveal that culturally responsive counseling effectively enhances client engagement, satisfaction, and therapeutic outcomes, especially among marginalized groups. Thematic analysis shows that interventions tailored to clients' cultural backgrounds can reduce stigma, strengthen psychological resilience, and empower clients through the acknowledgment of their cultural identity. However, there are limitations regarding the generalizability of findings, particularly due to specific population focus and counselors' skills in understanding clients' cultures. Future research is recommended to broaden the focus on more diverse populations and develop digital-based interventions that incorporate cultural aspects to strengthen accessibility and the depth of therapeutic interactions.*

Keywords: *Culturally-Based Counseling; Mental Health; Cultural Adaptation; Client Engagement; Resilience*

INTRODUCTION

Counseling in mental health is increasingly recognizing the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to effectively meet the needs of a diverse global population (Arye et al., 2024). As mental health issues become more recognized in different regions and communities, the integration of cultural understanding in therapeutic practice is crucial. Cultural values, beliefs, and norms shape individuals' perceptions of mental health, how they deal with psychological challenges, and their openness to counseling interventions (Mcdermott et al., 2024; Sadusky et al., 2024). Studies show that when cultural dimensions are respected and integrated into counseling, client engagement and therapeutic outcomes improve significantly. This growing body of evidence highlights the importance of reviewing culture-specific interventions in mental health counseling.

Culturally adaptive mental health interventions respond to the needs of individuals from diverse backgrounds, promoting not only mental well-being but also cultural integrity and community cohesion (Arora et al., 2021; Spencer et al., 2019). Such interventions have emerged in response to conventional counseling methods that may lack sensitivity to cultural differences, and often fail to engage clients from minority backgrounds. Recent research emphasizes the important role of cultural knowledge in counselling frameworks, especially in multicultural societies, where a one-size-fits-all approach is increasingly recognized as inadequate (Edge & Lemetyinen, 2019; Strauss-Hughes et al., 2022). Therefore, culturally adapted counseling frameworks are important to improve the accessibility and relevance of mental health services.

Despite the increasing recognition of cultural factors in counseling, many mental health services still lack a systematic approach to integrating these elements (Carbonell et al., 2020). This deficiency can lead to misunderstandings, misdiagnosis, and ultimately, ineffective treatment outcomes for clients from diverse backgrounds (McQuaid et al., 2024; Trent et al., 2024). In the United States, for example, numerous studies have shown disparities in access and quality of mental health services for minority populations, revealing significant gaps in culturally competent care (Mongelli et al., 2020). Similar trends are seen globally, where traditional counseling practices sometimes conflict with local or indigenous conceptualizations of mental health, further complicating clients' recovery paths (Gone, 2023; Sofouli, 2021).

To address this gap, various culturally-informed frameworks have been developed, each designed to align mental health practices with the beliefs and values of a specific cultural group. These frameworks include the integration of traditional healing practices alongside modern therapeutic techniques, adapting language, metaphors, and treatment goals to better align with the client's cultural background. Such innovations demonstrate the importance of flexible and client-centered approaches in mental health counseling. However, a comprehensive analysis of these approaches and their effectiveness in various contexts is still limited.

This systematic literature review aims to consolidate evidence on culturally specific mental health counseling approaches. By reviewing and synthesizing findings from various studies, we seek to identify the most effective strategies and outcomes associated with culturally tailored interventions. Furthermore, this review will explore how culturally-based mental health counseling practices contribute to increased engagement, satisfaction, and therapeutic success. Understanding these dynamics is important for developing future counseling interventions that respect and utilize cultural context as a pathway to mental well-being.

METHODOLOGY

This systematic literature review followed PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and rigor in the research process. The review used the PICOS framework-Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, and Study Design-to define and organize the inclusion criteria:

- a. Population (P): Individuals from various cultural backgrounds receiving mental health counseling services.
- b. Intervention (I): A culturally adapted counseling approach, focusing on the integration of specific cultural values, beliefs, and practices.
- c. Comparison (C): Conventional counseling methods without cultural adaptation.
- d. Outcome (O): Improved client engagement, satisfaction, and mental health outcomes.
- e. Study Design (S): Empirical study with qualitative, quantitative, or mixed approaches; systematic literature review excluded to focus on original research.

PRISMA Process Flow

The PRISMA data shows the article identification, screening and selection steps undertaken in this review, ensuring all included articles are relevant and meet the research criteria. This workflow can be visualized in Figure 1.

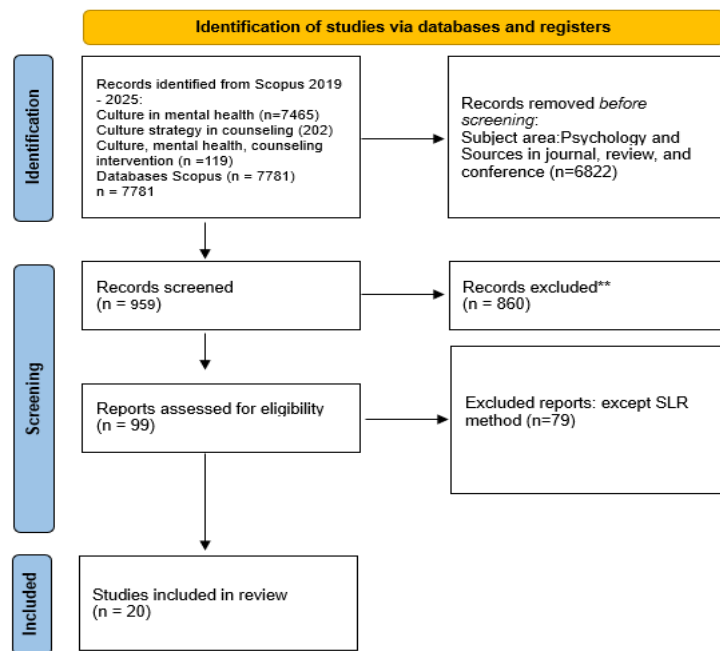


Figure 1: Workflow of the planning, identification and feasibility process.

Source: author

Data Sources and Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted through the Scopus database, covering publications from 2019 to 2025. The keywords used included “Culture in mental health,” “Culture strategy in counseling,” and “Culture, mental health, counseling intervention.” The initial search identified a total of 7,781 articles, with the following results:

- Culture in mental health* yielded 7,465 articles.
- Culture strategies in counseling* yielded 202 articles.
- Culture, mental health, counseling intervention* yielded 119 articles.

Screening Process

After removing 6,822 irrelevant articles (from journals, reviews, and conference sources outside the field of psychology), 959 articles were screened for relevance to the research focus on culturally adapted counseling in mental health. After title and abstract screening, 860 articles were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria. In addition, 79 studies were excluded for using a systematic literature review methodology, leaving only primary research studies.

Eligibility Assessment

Of the remaining 99 studies, each article was assessed for eligibility using the PICOS framework. The final review included 20 articles that met all inclusion criteria and demonstrated high methodological quality in addressing culturally adapted counseling practices.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data from each selected study was extracted and organized systematically. Important information such as author name, year of publication, study population, methodology, cultural adaptations applied, and key findings were documented. The extracted data were then thematically coded to identify frequently used intervention strategies, such as narrative-based and community-based approaches, which emphasize culturally relevant counseling activities. Quantitative studies provided data on counseling effectiveness, while qualitative studies provided insights into experiences and perceptions of culturally adapted counseling.

Quality Assessment

To ensure the reliability of the findings, each study underwent a quality assessment based on methodological clarity, internal and external validity, and cultural relevance. Studies that did not meet the minimum quality standards were excluded from the final analysis.

Synthesis and Analysis

Thematic analysis identified common strategies and themes across studies, uncovering the impact of culturally adapted counseling on mental health outcomes. The findings were synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of how culturally-based counseling increases engagement, satisfaction, and therapeutic effectiveness, as well as identify areas for further research.

RESULTS

1. Data Recapitulation and Key Findings

The results of the data extraction to be studied related to the culture-based approach in mental health counseling can be seen in the following table.

Table 1. List of Articles Related to Culturally Based Approaches in Mental Health Counseling

ID	Authors (Year)	Sample	Methodology	Title	Aim of the Study	Main Findings
1	Gu et al. (2024)	Chinese gay and bisexual men	Mixed- methods	Stigma-Related Stress and Counseling for Sexual Minorities	Examine stigma-related stress in counseling for sexual minorities	Improved trust and mental health by addressing stigma in counseling

2	Kurhade et al. (2024)	Individuals with mental health disorders	Exploratory research	Development of a Ramayana-based Counseling Module	Develop a culturally adapted Ramayana-based counseling module	Enhanced client engagement through traditional narratives
3	Thanasiu & Pizza (2019)	Children and adolescents in grieving	Practice-based approach	Culturally Sensitive Creative Interventions for Grieving Youth	Provide culturally sensitive interventions for grieving youth	Increased coping for youth in grief using culturally sensitive methods
4	Van Brakel et al. (2019)	Diverse health-related stigma groups	Conceptual model	Cross-cutting Health-Related Stigma and Intervention	Create a model for cross-cutting health-related stigma intervention	Identified common interventions for stigma reduction across groups
5	Helling & Chandler (2021)	Black college students	Strength-based resilience	Promoting Mental Health in Black College Students	Promote mental health resilience in Black college students	Strengthened resilience through identity-affirming support
6	Hughes et al. (2020)	School psychologists	Qualitative analysis	Developing a Responsive School Culture	Develop a responsive school counseling culture	Enhanced psychological safety and acceptance in schools
7	Wright et al. (2024)	Black male children in elementary schools	Single group design	School-Based Mental Health Counseling for Black Male Youth	Support mental health for Black male youth in school settings	Increased engagement and reduced stress in Black youth

8	Jackson et al. (2024)	University students	Qualitative study	Digital Mental Health Interventions in University Settings	Assess digital mental health interventions in universities	Increased accessibility of mental health support digitally
9	Robertson et al. (2022)	Adults with severe obesity	Systematic analysis	Cultural Representation in Weight Management Research	Analyze cultural representation in weight management	Improved participation with culturally adapted weight management
10	Bercean et al. (2020)	Chinese migrants with depression	Thematic analysis	Culturally Sensitive Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	Adapt CBT for Chinese migrants experiencing depression	Enhanced therapeutic outcomes with adapted CBT
11	Hwang & Wood (2019)	Asian Americans	Empirical review	Adapting Evidence-Based Therapy for Asian Populations	Adapt evidence-based therapy for Asian American populations	Improved therapy efficacy with culturally adapted frameworks
12	Summerton & Blunden (2022)	First Nations Australians	Review analysis	Cultural Interventions for Mental Health in First Nations Australians	Evaluate traditional mental health interventions for Indigenous populations	Strengthened well-being using traditional and community practices
13	Curling et al. (2019)	Counseling psychology	Conceptual framework	Religion, Spirituality, and Counseling Psychology	Explore the role of religion and spirituality in counseling	Enhanced resilience by integrating spirituality
14	Leblanc (2020)	Cajun women in Louisiana	Qualitative insights	Counseling Females in the Cajun Culture	Empower Cajun women through culturally adapted counseling	Empowered Cajun women through culturally relevant counseling

15	Canfield (2020)	Diverse cultural identities	Qualitative book chapter	Intercultural Perspectives on Family Counseling	Examine family dynamics in multicultural counseling	Enhanced outcomes by considering family and cultural dynamics
16	Bercean et al. (2020)	Chinese migrant community	Qualitative research	Culturally Sensitive CBT for Chinese Migrants	Evaluate culturally adapted CBT for Chinese migrants	Improved therapy results with culturally sensitive CBT
17	Kocayoruk & Simsek (2020)	Turkish adolescents	Psychometric study	Validity of Time Perspective Inventory for Adolescents	Validate Time Perspective Inventory for Turkish adolescents	Validated TPI for cross-cultural mental health assessment
18	Tanaka-Matsumi (2022)	Multi-cultural contexts	Empirical review	Counseling Across Cultures: Multi-Decade Review	Review culturally sensitive counseling across multiple contexts	Improved therapeutic alliances in multicultural settings
19	Park et al (2023)	Diverse counseling contexts	Thematic analysis	Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Counseling Practices	Examine spirituality in cross-cultural counseling	Enhanced engagement with spirituality-aligned practices
20	Johnson et al., 2023	Pacific Islanders	Cultural adaptation study	Psychotherapy for Pacific Islanders in Cultural Contexts	Adapt psychotherapy for Pacific Islanders' cultural contexts	Improved mental health outcomes with culturally adapted therapy

Studies on culturally-based approaches in mental health counseling from 2019 to 2025 highlight the importance of integrating cultural elements and spirituality in supporting better mental health outcomes. Research such as that conducted by (Gu et al., 2024; Van Brakel et al., 2019) show that culturally sensitive counseling approaches can

reduce stigma-related stress in minority groups, including Chinese gay and bisexual men and communities with specific health stigmas. In addition, tradition-based counseling modules, such as the one developed by (Kurhade et al., 2024) on the theme of Ramayana, increased client engagement through cultural narratives they were familiar with. Another study highlighted the adaptation of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for migrant communities and Asian-American populations, showing that approaches that adapt to the client's cultural context, such as those by (Bercean et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2023) result in higher therapeutic effectiveness.

This culturally responsive approach also benefits young and marginalized groups in educational settings, as seen in the studies of (Hughes et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2024) which showed increased engagement and psychological safety of students in schools. On the other hand, spirituality-based interventions, as studied by (Curling et al., 2019), increased mental resilience and provided stronger coping support for individuals with religious backgrounds. This research, taken together, suggests that counseling that integrates cultural or spiritual values and practices not only increases client engagement but also makes mental health services more relevant and effective for various cultural groups.

2. Recapitulation of Research Approaches

The results of the calculation of articles based on the research approach can be seen in the following table:

Table 2. Recapitulation of Research Approaches

Study Reference	Method	Research Type
Quantitative Studies		
Hwang & Wood (2019)	Empirical review	Quantitative
Kocayoruk & Simsek (2020)	Psychometric study	Quantitative
Qualitative Studies		
Kurhade et al. (2024)	Exploratory research	Qualitative
Thanasiu & Pizza (2019)	Practice-based approach	Qualitative
Van Brakel et al. (2019)	Conceptual model	Qualitative
Hughes et al. (2020)	Qualitative analysis	Qualitative
Jackson et al. (2024)	Qualitative study	Qualitative
Bercean et al. (2020)	Thematic analysis	Qualitative
Summerton & Blunden (2022)	Review analysis	Qualitative
Curling et al. (2019)	Conceptual framework	Qualitative
Leblanc (2020)	Qualitative insights	Qualitative
Canfield (2020)	Qualitative book chapter	Qualitative

Tanaka-Matsumi (2022)	Empirical review	Qualitative
Park et al (2023)	Thematic analysis	Qualitative
Experimental Studies		
Wright et al. (2024)	Single group design	Experimental
Mixed-Methods Studies		
Gu et al. (2024)	Mixed-methods	Mixed-Methods
Helling & Chandler (2021)	Strength-based resilience	Mixed-Methods
Robertson et al. (2022)	Systematic analysis	Mixed-Methods
Bercean et al. (2020)	Qualitative research (CBT)	Mixed-Methods
Johnson et al., 2023	Cultural adaptation study	Mixed-Methods

The table categorizes the studies based on the research method used. In the quantitative research category, there are two studies, namely by (Park et al., 2023) who used an empirical review, and (Kocayoruk, 2020) who used a psychometric study. In the qualitative research category, some studies covered a variety of methods, such as exploratory research by (Kurahde et al., 2024), practice-based approach by (Thanasiu & Pizza, 2019), conceptual model by (Van Brakel et al., 2019), as well as qualitative analysis by (Hughes et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2024). Other studies have also used thematic analysis such as those by (Bercean et al., 2020; Park et al., 2023), as well as an empirical review by (Tanaka-Matsumi, 2022). In the experimental research category, only one study by (Wright et al., 2024) that used a single-group design. Meanwhile, in the mixed methods research category, there is a study by (Gu et al., 2024) that used mixed methods, (Helling & Chandler, 2021) with a strength-based resilience approach, and (Bercean et al., 2020; Robertson et al., 2022) who conducted a systematic analysis and qualitative research on CBT, followed by (Hwang & Chan, 2019) who examined cultural adaptation in therapy. This division shows the variety of methodologies used to understand culture-based approaches in mental health counseling.

3. Effectiveness of Counseling Approaches

The main findings show that culturally-based counseling approaches are significantly effective in improving mental health outcomes by reducing stigma, strengthening psychological resilience, and empowering clients through recognition of cultural identity and values (Abe et al., 2018; Lauricella et al., 2021; Levitt & Whelton, 2024). Culturally tailored therapies, such as adaptations of CBT, use of traditional narratives, and integration of spirituality and community, were shown to increase client engagement and trust, especially in marginalized communities. This approach not only improves therapeutic outcomes but also increases the accessibility and relevance of mental health services across diverse populations.

DISCUSSIONS

The Relevance of Culture in Supporting Mental Health

Culturally-based counseling approaches have shown great relevance in supporting the mental health of clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. Most of the studies analyzed emphasized that recognition and acceptance of the client's cultural values, identity, and traditions is an essential first step to building trust and engagement in the counseling process. The success of counseling often depends on how well a counselor understands and appreciates the cultural background of the client. Research by Gu et al. (2024) and Hwang & Wood (2019) highlight that culturally sensitive counseling approaches can significantly alleviate the stigma that often prevents individuals from marginalized groups from seeking help. Clients who feel their cultural identity is valued tend to be more open, cooperative, and engaged in the counseling process, which ultimately contributes to the improvement of their mental well-being.

In addition, studies such as the one conducted by Kurhade et al. (2024) show that the use of cultural elements familiar to clients, such as traditional narratives or folktales, can strengthen clients' emotional attachment to the therapeutic process. In this case, cultural narratives are not only a communication tool, but also build a sense of safety for clients to express themselves and understand their mental problems in a context that is relevant to them. For example, the use of counseling modules based on Ramayana stories helps clients connect with values and traditions that are already familiar to them, thereby increasing the effectiveness of therapy. Approaches like these show that cultural adaptation is not just an add-on, but a core element in creating an inclusive counseling environment, where clients feel heard, valued and supported in their journey towards better mental health.

Effectiveness of Counseling Approaches

The main findings indicate that culturally-based counseling approaches are significantly effective in improving mental health outcomes by reducing stigma, strengthening psychological resilience, and empowering clients through the recognition of their cultural identities and values. A key strength of these approaches is their capacity to alleviate stigma, especially within minority and marginalized communities. In many cases, stigma serves as a barrier to seeking help or fully engaging in therapy (Shechtman et al., 2018). However, when clients feel that their cultural backgrounds and experiences are respected, they are more likely to trust the therapeutic process, ultimately lowering the psychological barriers to receiving care.

Additionally, culturally-based counseling plays an essential role in strengthening psychological resilience (Hunter et al., 2022; Pepic et al., n.d.). Affirming cultural identity within therapy helps build a foundation for clients to cope with social or systemic pressures they may encounter. This

empowerment process is vital, as clients who see their cultural identity validated in therapy develop a stronger sense of self-worth, enhancing their ability to navigate challenges. Integrating traditional practices and spiritual beliefs into therapy further fosters empowerment by aligning therapeutic strategies with clients' cultural frameworks. This ensures that therapy is not only a form of psychological support but also a reinforcement of their identity and worldview, making the counseling process more effective and meaningful (Woodhouse & Hogan, 2020).

Practical Implications in Counseling

In terms of practice, culture-based counseling approaches provide more effective and relevant strategies to support clients' mental health, especially in the context of psychological resilience and empowerment. Click or tap here to enter text.emphasized that cultural identity affirmation plays an important role in strengthening the psychological resilience of Black students in higher education. The support that counselors give to clients' cultural identity helps them feel valued, which in turn strengthens their sense of self-worth and ability to deal with various challenges, both social and structural in nature. By acknowledging clients' cultural identities, counselors not only provide validation, but also provide a safe space for clients to understand and cope with pressures from society that often discriminate or devalue their identities (DP39_Clean-201113-130522, n.d.). This creates a strong foundation for clients to develop resilience, which is a key component in maintaining mental well-being.

In addition, adaptations of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) that integrate clients' cultural values have been shown to be effective in improving therapeutic outcomes, especially in the context of migrant communities and culturally diverse populations. (Bercean et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2023)and Hwang et al. (2023) showed that when therapy is tailored to clients' cultural values and social context, such as in Chinese and Pacific Islander migrant communities, engagement and therapy outcomes are significantly improved. Therapy that considers clients' cultural context allows them to feel more connected to the therapeutic process and more open to proposed behavioral changes. In addition, (Curling et al., 2019) highlighted the importance of spirituality in counseling for clients who have strong religious beliefs. In this case, counseling that includes spiritual elements not only provides deep emotional support, but also taps into the client's pre-existing spiritual resources as a coping mechanism (*Exploring Social Workers' Spiritual Meaning of Their Reconstruction Processes after the Unanticipated Death of a Client(s)*, 2023; Woods, n.d.). This helps clients to find meaning in the challenges they face and develop more effective ways to cope with stress and psychological distress through the lens of spirituality.

Limitations

While the culture-based approach offers many benefits, some limitations also emerge from the analyzed studies. Firstly, there are limitations regarding the generalizability of the research results, especially as most of the studies focused on specific population groups such as migrant communities or specific religious groups. For example, Summerton & Blunden (2022) focused on Australia's First Nations population, and while the findings demonstrated the effectiveness of community-based and traditional approaches, the generalizability of these results to other populations still needs to be further tested. In addition, some studies noted that the lack of counselors who have a deep understanding of the client's culture can be a barrier in effectively implementing these approaches. Jackson et al. (2024) also identified challenges in implementing culture-based digital counseling, especially in maintaining meaningful interactions through digital platforms.

Future Research

To increase the effectiveness of culture-based counseling approaches, future research needs to expand the focus on more diverse population groups as well as develop interventions that cover a wider variety of cultures. For example, the adaptation of CBT for communities other than Chinese and Pacific Islander migrants needs to be further explored to see the extent to which this technique can be applied across different ethnic groups. In addition, there is a need for more research exploring how culture-based counseling approaches can be integrated with digital technology. Jackson et al. (2024) demonstrated the great potential of culture-based digital counseling, however additional research is needed to understand how these digital interventions can be further personalized and maintain the depth of meaningful interactions.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, culturally-based counseling approaches have proven effective in improving mental health outcomes by tailoring the counseling process according to clients' cultural values, spirituality, and local traditions. Findings from the 20 articles analyzed in this review suggest that culture-based approaches help overcome stigma, strengthen psychological resilience, and empower clients from different marginalized groups. Despite some limitations related to generalizability and counselor training, the potential of this approach is great for creating a more inclusive and meaningful therapeutic environment. Future research should focus on developing more comprehensive interventions and integrating culture-based approaches with digital technology to improve the accessibility and effectiveness of counseling services.

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