

Integrating Traditional Practices in Kenyan Counseling: A Contemporary Approach

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Abstract: This article attempts to examine an integration of traditional practices within contemporary counselling in Kenyan culture which is embedded in almost all facets of her people's life including counselling is a timely subject. The objective of this paper is to highlight the potential benefits and challenges of incorporating rich cultural heritage and diverse traditional healing modalities present in Kenya into counselling approaches. Through a review of existing literature on cultural practices and theoretical framework within counselling practices, this article proposes strategies for cultural competence and effective integration of counselling across cultures; highlighting the importance of collaboration and embracing local knowledge systems within traditional practices that will enable psychotherapists in Kenya to enhance relevance and accessibility of mental health services while honoring cultural diversity and promoting holistic well-being.

Keywords: Kenyan counselling, traditional practices, contemporary approaches, cultural competence.

1. Introduction

Despite the growing interest in traditional healing practices, there remain hurdles to be overcome including efficacy, quality control and safety (Ozioma et al., 2019). The World Health Organization (WHO) through its Traditional Strategy 2014-2023 has been keen not only on expanding knowledge base on alternative traditional treatment but also providing guidance and quality assurance standards (Ghosh & Mukherjee, 2019). While attempting to narrow the gap between traditional and contemporary approaches to counselling, mental health practitioners and policy makers need to refer to this guidance to develop their own protocols.

Kenya is composed of at least 42 ethnic groups representing a rich blend of cultural traditions and indigenous healing practices that have long been intertwined with the fabric of society. (KNBS, 2019). From the healing rituals of traditional healers to the communal support systems embedded within various ethnic groups, these traditions reflect deep-rooted beliefs about health, illness, and the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of integrating traditional practices within the context of modern mental health care. (Abbo, 2019). This article aims to explore the contemporary approach to integrating traditional practices in Kenyan counselling, acknowledging the unique cultural landscape of

the country and the potential benefits of honoring traditional wisdom alongside evidence-based interventions.

2. Overview of Traditional Counselling Practices in Kenya

Traditions and socio-cultural factors should be included in counselling as it permeates the counselling sessions and in a large extent, determines the outcomes thereof. (Okunade, 2023). Inclusion of traditional healing practices is premised on the integral role that cultural factors play to the health and well-being of Kenyan communities for centuries. Traditional healing involves incorporating traditional knowledge and socio-cultural practices in identification of health challenges, resolution and management of the health challenges through a collective approach. (Chiboola, 2020). Collective approach identifies the significance of community elders, the role of traditional healers when conducting rituals and ceremonies aimed at promoting good health and averting onset of illnesses attributed to non-adherence of these traditional practices. These practices encompass a wide range of modalities, including herbal medicine, spiritual rituals, storytelling, music and dance. Traditional healers, known by various names such as herbalist or diviner, play a central role in providing healing and guidance to individuals and communities facing mental, emotional, and spiritual challenges. Despite the prevalence of traditional healing, there has been a historical divide between traditional and modern forms of healing, with Western biomedical models often dominating the mental health landscape. (Jidong et al, 2021)

3. Importance of Cultural Context in Mental Healthcare

Culture provides the framework with which most individuals fashion identity, life goals and aspirations. (Ogundare, 2020) These factors in turn determine thoughts, feelings and behavior towards phenomena. Maladaptive behaviors are a major cause of mental distress, treatment seeking patterns, modes of expressing emotional distress, client-therapist relationships and consequently the outcomes of therapeutic interventions. (Kirmayer, 2019) This necessitates the need to embrace bio-psycho-social-cultural and spiritual aspects in a holistic approach to successful therapeutic interventions in the Kenyan context.

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4. Methods

This paper applied desk review research design to critically analyze various articles on traditional practices and contemporary approaches that integrate counselling across cultures with specific reference to Kenya. The paper further illustrates the challenges and considerations that psychotherapists are likely to face in implementing culturally competent counselling.

5. Traditional Counselling Practices in Kenya

In Kenya, traditional medicine intertwines deeply with spiritual and cultural beliefs. Many traditional healers subscribe to the idea that illness originates from spiritual discord or the influence of malevolent forces. Consequently, their approaches often incorporate spiritual rituals, prayers, and incantations aimed at summoning ancestral spirits or appeasing divine entities. Traditional medicine's scope extends beyond physical health to encompass mental (Lobine, 2020) and emotional well-being. These healers offer guidance and support to individuals grappling with issues such as grief, interpersonal conflicts, or spiritual predicaments. Serving as mentors and advisors, they share their wisdom and aid individuals in navigating life's challenges (Musyimi *et al.*, 2018). Traditional healers have a way to describe mental illnesses. According to Musyimi *et al.*, (2018), the traditional healers categorized symptoms and diagnosis by way of observation, interview and in some cases laboratory tests. In cases where illness was not categorized by symptom or causation, spiritualism and supernatural forces were consulted. (Ozioma *et al.*, 2019), maintained that the traditional healers work is based on culture, religion, background, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs ascribed to by their community members. Their cultural sensitivity and patient centered approach fit well into the globally acceptable multicultural counselling. Traditional healers, comprising herbalists and witch doctors, play a pivotal role in numerous African communities, providing treatments rooted in cultural norms. They frequently rely on herbal remedies, ceremonies, and counselling to address various health concerns (Mbwayo, *et al.*, 2013). Unlike formal medical practitioners, traditional healers typically acquire their expertise through familial inheritance or hands-on experience, often guided by ancestral spirits. Faith healers, another subset of traditional healers, employ prayers, religious interpretation, and counselling in their practice (Owuor, 2006). While some may have undergone formal education through seminars or workshops, many in rural areas lack basic formal schooling. Furthermore, traditional healers are officially recognized by the government through the Traditional Health Practitioners' bill (Republic of Kenya, 2014). However, they typically do not refer patients to hospitals. This legislation aids in distinguishing between 'fake' and 'authentic' healers, with 'fake' healers often perceived as uneducated and prone to administering incorrect treatments or exploiting their followers financially (Okatch *et al.*, 2013). Despite the availability of formal biomedical healthcare, nearly half of Africa's population seeks assistance from traditional and religious healers for mental health issues. In Kenya, a

significant portion of mental health patients consult both Western medical practitioners and traditional healers (Ndetei, *et al.* 2008). This preference can be attributed to factors such as cost-effectiveness, flexibility, and accessibility, as the ratio of traditional healers to the population is much higher compared to medical doctors (Atindanbila, 2011; Lähteenvuori, 2021). Recognizing the treatment gap in mental healthcare and the substantial number of patients seeking help from traditional healers, there is increasing acknowledgment of the importance of involving them in improving mental health services in Kenya. Integrating traditional healers could improve access to care and address the need for cultural sensitivity when expanding mental health services.

6. Story Telling

Kenya has a rich storytelling heritage embedded in its culture as it has been one of the approaches of communication that seeks to impart indigenous wisdom, proverbs, myths, folktales and used as entertainment. (Akpabio, 2023). Storytelling can lead to conscientization, provide healing and narrative closure or finality to traumatic experiences as was witnessed by rhetoric narratives postulated by various survivors of the 2007-2008 post-election violence witnessed in Kenya. (Mbutu, 2022). Storytelling is one of the indigenous practices that has been embraced by contemporary counselling approaches called narrative therapy. Narrative therapy allows clients to develop their own stories, embracing their own life experiences and interactions. Further exploration and externalization of their stories in counselling may lead to identification of the problem and empowering the client to change behavior. (White, 2024). However, in some instances where indigenous forms of storytelling is translated into documented culturally sensitive contemporary approaches such as narrative therapy, there is evidence of some elements of the rich context, theoretical foundations, practical applications and potential benefits being lost or misinterpreted. (Kotut *et al.*, 2024).

7. Music and Dance

It could seem that psychotherapy is a luxury in African nations. In Africa, two types of psychotherapy are perceived: western psychotherapy and traditional or faith healing psychotherapy (Vorholter, 2021). Although psychotherapeutic care is given by traditional and faith healers; however, with the growing problems associated with urbanization, traditional healers frequently appear unable to appropriately address patients' newly structured psychopathologies, such as substance abuse, psychosomatic disorders, and other chronic diseases (Mbwayo, *et al.*, 2013). In order to consider culture-specific psychopathology and treatment methods a cross-cultural model considering African cultural, social, economic and historical conditions should be considered. According to Bruscia, employing music in therapy is an interpersonal process in which clients are assisted by the therapist in maintaining or enhancing their physical, emotional, mental, social, artistic, and spiritual well-being. He goes on to say that music therapy is a methodical intervention in which the therapist uses musical experiences

and the relationships that arise from them as a dynamic force of change to assist the client in achieving health (Situmorang,2018). Traditional healers in Nigeria are the main practitioners who use music to promote healing. They utilize music as medication and as an accompaniment to healing rites (Nzewi, 2002). Mereni, the founder of the Nigerian Association for Music Therapy, was quoted by (Aluede ,2008) to state that anxiolytic, tensionlytic, algolytic, psycholytic, and patholytic therapeutic qualities of dance and music that used to increase prognosis in therapy. Human structure and internal processes are managed through dance and music. This suggests that dancing and music help people boost prophylactically, which in turn helps them deal with issues like loneliness, crowd anxiety, and difficulty focusing and communicating.

A study conducted to determine the effectiveness of music-based intervention (MBI) in enhancing problem recognition among clients with substance use disorders in residential treatment in Kenya (Chege, et al., 2022) reported that, there was a strong positive correlation between the covariate (problem recognition pre-test) and the dependent variable (problem recognition post-test), which was statistically significant at $r = .71$, $n = 40$, $p = .00$. The MBI included live sessions using the guitar, tambourine, and traditional djembe drum. (Luvai,2023) adds that the appropriate context for employing music and dance can be achieved by establishing the right environment and acknowledging the subtleties of cultural disparities as well as by integrating play and mutual learning into individual and group therapy sessions. If music and dance can be incorporated into contemporary therapeutic approaches, then the question is to what extent have music and dance been integrated into therapeutic approaches in the Kenyan Psychotherapeutic practice?

8. Contemporary Approach and Integration of Counselling in Kenya

Historically, consulting a person perceived to be a stranger with intrapersonal and interpersonal issues was not an acceptable practice. Individuals approached respectable people in the community such as spiritual healers and elders for advice on these matters. In recent years, with the emergence of HIV/AIDS pandemic, terror attacks, school and university unrests and various national disasters in the past twenty years or so, the Kenyan society has gradually embraced counselling as an integral part of resolving life challenges. Reconciling the traditional practices and mainstream frameworks and models of counselling requires a shift towards integrating both worldviews of counselling in Kenya (Okech,2013). Contemporary approach acknowledges the strengths of both traditional and western healing systems and seeks to create synergies that promote holistic well-being. One key aspect of this approach is recognition of the tripartite framework in psychological interventions that includes the individual, culture and universal considerations. Culturally competent approaches through inclusion of bio-psycho-socio-cultural and spiritual models in psychotherapy therapy would be more inclusive and future centered in the Kenyan context. Some traditional cultural counselling concepts such as story-telling and music and dance

have been embedded in counselling techniques of narrative therapy and play therapy respectively. Moreover, inclusion of multicultural dynamics in counselling curriculums within tertiary institutions would inculcate a renewed appreciation of culture in therapy. In addition, exploration of ways to integrate culture and counselling through continuous education, research and promotion of best practices in implementing bio-psycho-social-cultural and spiritual models in the therapy sessions would enhance competence in this contemporary approach. Thirdly, recognition of the end goal of therapy which is better mental health outcomes for clients necessitating a level of collaboration to create a better understanding between traditional healers and mental health professionals, fostering mutual respect, dialogue, and shared learning. By working together, counsellors and traditional practitioners can leverage their respective expertise and resources to provide comprehensive and culturally responsive care to clients.

9. Challenges and Considerations

While the integration of traditional practices holds great promise, it also presents unique challenges and ethical considerations. These may include issues related to cultural competence, informed consent, confidentiality, and the potential for harm. Counsellors must navigate these complexities with sensitivity and humility, recognizing the importance of ongoing training, consultation, and reflexivity in their practice. Additionally, there may be legal and regulatory considerations to address, such as licensing requirements and professional standards of conduct. By approaching integration with mindfulness and critical reflection, counsellors can strive to uphold ethical principles while honoring the diversity of healing traditions present in Kenya.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, an amalgamation of traditional practices and contemporary counselling approaches embraces cultural competence in practicing psychotherapy and overall promotion of mental health and well-being in Kenya. Mental health professionals working in multicultural contexts and indeed in every counselling practice may need to incorporate cultural perspectives to create more inclusive and effective therapeutic environments. However, this endeavor requires community engagement, cultural competence, ethical principles, extensive research and training modules for a more holistic and culturally responsive approach to mental health care in Kenya.

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