

Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Traditional Counselling Practices among the Nambya Community in Hwange District, Zimbabwe

Bhiri Kuziwa, Mapfunde Davie

Zimbabwe Open University

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ABSTRACT

This study examines indigenous knowledge systems and traditional counselling practices among the Nambya community in Hwange District, Zimbabwe. Anchored in an interpretivist paradigm, the research adopts an ethnographic design to explore culturally embedded mechanisms of guidance, conflict resolution, and psychosocial support. Data were generated through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation involving community elders, traditional leaders, and selected household members. The findings indicate that traditional counselling among the Nambya is deeply rooted in communal values, ancestral belief systems, and oral traditions that emphasize social harmony, moral development, and collective responsibility. Key counselling agents include elders, spirit mediums, and family heads, who utilize culturally specific approaches such as storytelling, proverbs, rituals, and mediation. The study further reveals that these indigenous systems coexist with, and are increasingly influenced by, formal counselling models, Christianity, and socio-economic transformations associated with modernization. Despite their continued relevance, traditional counselling practices face challenges including cultural erosion, generational shifts, and limited institutional recognition. The study concludes that integrating indigenous counselling knowledge into contemporary practice could enhance culturally responsive counselling interventions and promote the preservation of Nambya cultural heritage.

Keywords: Counselling, ethnography, Hwange District, indigenous knowledge systems, Nambya

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous knowledge systems remain a vital foundation for understanding how communities conceptualize wellbeing, social order, and interpersonal relationships. In many African contexts, including Zimbabwe, traditional counselling practices are embedded within cultural norms, belief systems, and communal ways of life. These practices offer contextually relevant approaches to addressing psychosocial challenges, often emphasizing collective responsibility, moral guidance, and restoration of harmony rather than individual pathology.

The Nambya community of Hwange District represents a culturally rich yet understudied group whose indigenous counselling systems continue to play a significant role in everyday life. Rooted in ancestral traditions and guided by elders, family heads, and spiritual authorities, traditional counselling among the Nambya encompasses practices such as storytelling, proverbs, rituals, and mediation. These culturally grounded approaches serve not only as mechanisms for conflict resolution but also as tools for socialization, identity formation, and emotional support.

However, the growing influence of modernization, formal education, Christianity, and Western counselling models has introduced new dynamics that both complement and challenge indigenous practices. This has raised concerns about the marginalization and gradual erosion of traditional counselling knowledge. Against this backdrop, this study adopts an ethnographic approach to explore the nature, significance, and contemporary relevance of indigenous counselling systems among the Nambya of Hwange District, with the aim of contributing to culturally responsive counselling practice and the preservation of indigenous knowledge.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The recognition of indigenous knowledge systems has grown globally due to their contribution to culturally appropriate health, wellbeing, and psychosocial support. Indigenous counselling practices are grounded in holistic worldviews that emphasize spirituality, communal responsibility, and cultural values, and they continue to complement formal counselling approaches, particularly where access to professional mental health services is limited (Moodley & West, 2005; Gone, 2010). Scholars advocate for integrating indigenous knowledge into contemporary counselling frameworks to improve cultural relevance and effectiveness (Smith, 2012).

In Africa, traditional counselling has long been an integral part of social organization and community life. It is typically conducted by elders, family members, and spiritual leaders through culturally embedded methods such as storytelling, proverbs, rituals, and mediation (Gelfand, Mavi, Drummond, & Ndemera, 1985). These practices are informed by African philosophies such as Ubuntu, which emphasize interconnectedness and social harmony (Mbiti, 1969). However, colonialism and the introduction of Western education, Christianity, and biomedical mental health models contributed to the marginalization of indigenous counselling systems (Nsamenang, 2007).

In Zimbabwe, indigenous counselling remains important, especially in rural communities where it is accessible, culturally relevant, and trusted (Chireshe, 2013). Although these systems coexist with modern counselling approaches, they remain under-documented and under-recognized within academic and policy frameworks, raising concerns about their preservation (Mpofu, 2002).

Among the Nambya people of Hwange District, traditional counselling practices are deeply rooted in ancestral beliefs, communal values, and oral traditions. Elders, traditional leaders, and spirit mediums provide guidance through mediation, rituals, and other culturally specific methods that address physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of wellbeing. However, socio-cultural changes driven by mining, tourism, urbanization, Christianity, and formal education are increasingly influencing traditional values and practices, particularly among younger generations, threatening the continuity of indigenous counselling systems (Ranger, 1999).

Despite the cultural significance of the Nambya community, limited empirical research has focused specifically on their indigenous counselling practices. Existing studies often generalize across ethnic groups or focus on larger communities, leaving minority perspectives underrepresented. Therefore, this study seeks to explore indigenous knowledge systems and traditional counselling practices among the Nambya of Hwange District through an ethnographic approach, contributing to the documentation, preservation, and promotion of culturally responsive counselling practices. (Moodley & West, 2005; Gone, 2010; Smith, 2012; Gelfand et al., 1985; Mbiti, 1969; Nsamenang, 2007; Chireshe, 2013; Mpofu, 2002; Ranger, 1999).

Statement of the Problem

The indigenous counselling system among the Nambya people of Hwange District remains an important source of culturally relevant psychosocial support based on indigenous knowledge, communal values, and spiritual beliefs. However, these traditional practices are increasingly threatened by modernization, Western counselling approaches, formal education, and religious changes. Despite their continued relevance, there is limited research documenting how these indigenous counselling systems function, adapt, and survive in a changing socio-cultural environment. This knowledge gap hinders the recognition and integration of indigenous counselling practices into contemporary counselling frameworks, creating a need to explore and document their relevance, challenges, and potential contributions to modern counselling practice.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore indigenous knowledge systems and traditional counselling practices among the Nambya community of Hwange District in Zimbabwe, with a view to understanding their nature, significance, and contemporary relevance in a changing socio-cultural context.

Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To explore the indigenous knowledge systems that underpin traditional counselling among the Nambya community of Hwange District in Zimbabwe.
2. To identify the key agents and methods used in traditional counselling within the Nambya community.
3. To examine the roles and functions of traditional counselling in promoting social cohesion and wellbeing among the Nambya people.
4. To assess the challenges facing indigenous counselling systems in the context of modernization and cultural change.
5. To explore the relevance of integrating traditional counselling practices into contemporary counselling frameworks.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What indigenous knowledge systems underpin traditional counselling among the Nambya community?
2. Who are the main agents involved in traditional counselling, and what methods do they use?
3. What roles does traditional counselling play in promoting social cohesion and wellbeing among the Nambya people?
4. What challenges are affecting the continuity and effectiveness of indigenous counselling systems?
5. How can traditional counselling practices be integrated into modern counselling frameworks in a culturally appropriate manner?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in that it contributes to the growing body of knowledge on indigenous knowledge systems and culturally grounded counselling practices within African contexts. By focusing on the Nambya community of Hwange District in Zimbabwe, the study helps to fill a gap in literature concerning minority ethnic groups whose traditional counselling systems have often been under-researched and under-documented.

Academically, the study provides empirical insights that may inform counselling psychology, anthropology, and indigenous knowledge studies by highlighting how traditional counselling operates within a lived cultural context. It also offers a framework for understanding the interaction between indigenous and modern counselling approaches.

Practically, the findings may assist counsellors, social workers, and mental health practitioners in developing culturally sensitive interventions that respect and incorporate indigenous values and practices. For policymakers and cultural heritage institutions, the study provides evidence that can support the preservation and integration of indigenous counselling systems into community development and mental health strategies.

Furthermore, the study is valuable to the Nambya community itself, as it promotes awareness, documentation, and preservation of their cultural heritage, ensuring that traditional counselling practices are not lost amid rapid socio-cultural change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indigenous Knowledge Systems Underpinning Traditional Counselling among the Nambya Community

Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) constitute the accumulated knowledge, beliefs, practices, and skills developed by communities over generations and transmitted primarily through oral traditions and cultural practices (Sillitoe, 2006). In African societies, these systems provide the foundation for understanding human behaviour, wellbeing, and social harmony, including approaches to counselling and psychosocial support (Odora Hoppers, 2002). Traditional counselling is rooted in communal worldviews that prioritize collective wellbeing and interconnectedness rather than individualism. This perspective is reflected in Mbiti's (1969) philosophy of "I am because we are," which emphasizes the role of the community in shaping identity and addressing social and psychological challenges.

In Zimbabwe, indigenous knowledge systems continue to influence counselling practices, particularly in rural areas where formal mental health services are less accessible. Indigenous counselling integrates spiritual, social, and moral dimensions of life and often involves elders, spirit mediums, and family leaders as custodians of cultural knowledge (Mpofu, 2002). These systems are guided by beliefs that promote harmony among individuals, the community, the ancestors, and the natural environment.

Among the Nambya people of Hwange District, indigenous knowledge systems are closely linked to ancestral beliefs, oral traditions, and communal values. Knowledge is transmitted through storytelling, proverbs, rituals, and everyday social interactions, which serve as mechanisms for moral education and behavioural regulation. Elders play a significant role in counselling by drawing on culturally grounded understandings of distress, conflict, and social relationships (Gelfand et al., 1985). Furthermore, Nambya counselling practices adopt a holistic perspective that integrates physical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions of wellbeing. Psychological distress is often understood as a disruption of social or spiritual harmony, requiring restoration through communal and culturally prescribed processes (Nsamenang, 2007).

Although indigenous knowledge systems remain relevant and resilient, they face increasing challenges from modernization, formal education, urbanization, and religious transformation, which have weakened traditional mechanisms of knowledge transmission, particularly among younger generations (Ranger, 1999). Nevertheless, the literature indicates that indigenous knowledge systems continue to provide the conceptual and practical foundation of traditional counselling among the Nambya and other African communities. However, limited ethnographic research has specifically examined how these systems function within the Nambya community, highlighting the need for context-specific studies to document, preserve, and better understand their contribution to counselling practice (Sillitoe, 2006; Odora Hoppers, 2002; Mbiti, 1969; Mpofu, 2002; Gelfand et al., 1985; Nsamenang, 2007; Ranger, 1999).

Key Agents and Methods Used in Traditional Counselling within the Nambya Community

Traditional counselling in African societies is facilitated by culturally recognized individuals whose authority is derived from social status, lived experience, and spiritual legitimacy rather than formal professional training. Elders, family heads, and spiritual practitioners serve as key providers of psychosocial support and are regarded as custodians of cultural wisdom responsible for maintaining social harmony and resolving conflicts (Gelfand, Mavi, Drummond, & Ndemera, 1985). Elders, in particular, play a central counselling role due to their experience and knowledge of cultural values, while family heads address domestic and marital issues, and spiritual leaders provide guidance on matters linked to ancestral or supernatural influences (Mbiti, 1969; Nsamenang, 2007; Mpofu, 2002).

Among the Nambya of Hwange District, elders are often the first point of consultation in times of personal or family difficulties. Their guidance is rooted in indigenous knowledge systems that emphasize communal responsibility, respect for authority, and social cohesion (Chavunduka, 1994). In cases involving illness, misfortune, or unexplained distress, spirit mediums and traditional healers may be consulted to interpret ancestral influences and recommend culturally appropriate interventions (Ranger, 1999).

Traditional counselling methods are largely oral, symbolic, and relational. Storytelling is used to transmit moral lessons and cultural values across generations (Vansina, 1985), while proverbs and idiomatic expressions provide indirect yet effective guidance on sensitive issues (Finnegan, 2012). Rituals and ceremonies are employed to restore social and spiritual harmony, functioning as therapeutic processes that integrate psychological, social, and spiritual healing (Asante, 2007). Mediation by respected elders is also widely used to resolve disputes, promote reconciliation, and strengthen community cohesion (Zartman, 2000).

Among the Nambya, these counselling practices are embedded within communal life and reflect the philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasizes interconnectedness, mutual responsibility, and collective wellbeing (Ramose, 2002). Consequently, counselling is viewed as a community-based process involving family and social networks rather than an individual clinical activity, contrasting with Western counselling approaches that emphasize individual autonomy and confidentiality (Sue & Sue, 2016).

Although modernization, formal education, urban migration, and religious transformation have challenged the transmission of indigenous counselling knowledge, traditional counselling systems remain relevant and resilient in many rural African communities (Nsamenang, 2007; Ranger, 1999). Existing literature highlights the continued importance of culturally sanctioned counsellors and indigenous counselling methods among communities such as the Nambya. However, limited ethnographic research has specifically examined how these practices are currently enacted and adapting within the Nambya community, underscoring the need for further context-specific investigation (Mpofu, 2002).

Roles and Functions of Traditional Counselling in Promoting Social Cohesion and Wellbeing among the Nambya People

Traditional counselling in African societies serves important psychosocial, moral, and spiritual functions that promote collective wellbeing, social harmony, and cultural continuity. Unlike Western counselling approaches that primarily focus on individual outcomes, indigenous counselling emphasizes communal responsibility and the maintenance of social order (Mbiti, 1969; Nsamenang, 2007). As such, counselling functions not only as a response to personal challenges but also as a mechanism for preserving community stability and cultural values (Gelfand, Mavi, Drummond, & Ndemera, 1985).

A key function of traditional counselling is conflict resolution, where elders and respected community members mediate disputes with the aim of restoring relationships and achieving reconciliation rather than assigning blame (Zartman, 2000). This approach reflects the philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasizes interconnectedness, mutual responsibility, and social cohesion (Ramose, 2002). Traditional counselling also plays a crucial role in moral socialization through the use of storytelling, proverbs, and folklore, which transmit ethical values and behavioural expectations across generations (Mbiti, 1969; Finnegan, 2012).

In addition, indigenous counselling provides therapeutic support by addressing emotional distress and psychosocial problems within a holistic framework. Distress is often understood as resulting from social disharmony, spiritual imbalance, or ancestral displeasure, and healing involves rituals, cleansing ceremonies, and ancestral consultations aimed at restoring balance between individuals, the community, and the spiritual world (Mpofu, 2002; Chavunduka, 1994; Asante, 2007).

Among the Nambya of Hwange District, these functions are reflected in counselling practices led by elders, family heads, spirit mediums, and traditional healers. They provide guidance on matters such as marriage disputes, inheritance conflicts, behavioural correction, illness, and community disagreements using indigenous principles that emphasize respect, communal responsibility, and social harmony (Chavunduka, 1994; Ranger, 1999). Counselling is often conducted collectively, involving family and community members in problem-solving and decision-making processes, thereby strengthening social bonds, shared accountability, and a sense of belonging (Sue & Sue, 2016; Nsamenang, 2007).

Although urbanization, formal education, religious pluralism, and other socio-cultural changes have challenged traditional authority structures and indigenous counselling systems, these practices remain resilient and continue to provide culturally relevant support, particularly in rural communities (Ranger, 1999; Mpofu, 2002). Existing literature therefore highlights the significant role of traditional counselling in conflict resolution, moral

education, psychosocial healing, and social cohesion among African communities, including the Nambya. However, limited ethnographic research has specifically examined how these functions are practiced and sustained within the Nambya cultural context, demonstrating the need for further context-specific investigation.

Challenges Affecting the Continuity and Effectiveness of Indigenous Counselling Systems

Indigenous counselling systems in Africa have historically played an important role in promoting psychosocial wellbeing, social cohesion, and moral regulation. However, contemporary literature indicates that these systems are increasingly challenged by modernization, globalization, and the expansion of Western-oriented counselling and mental health frameworks, which threaten their continuity and effectiveness (Nsamenang, 2007; Mpofu, 2002).

One of the major challenges facing indigenous counselling systems is cultural erosion resulting from rapid social change. Colonialism and postcolonial modernization disrupted traditional knowledge transmission processes by privileging Western education, religion, and governance systems, leading to the marginalization of indigenous counselling practices (Ranger, 1999). Furthermore, indigenous knowledge systems often struggle for legitimacy in contexts where scientific and biomedical approaches are regarded as superior sources of knowledge and intervention (Sillitoe, 2006).

Formal education has also contributed to generational discontinuities in the transmission of indigenous counselling knowledge. Many young people are socialized through Western-oriented educational systems that provide limited exposure to traditional values, oral traditions, and communal approaches to counselling. This has created a growing gap between elders, who are custodians of indigenous knowledge, and younger generations who may have limited familiarity with traditional counselling practices (Nsamenang, 2007; Odora Hoppers, 2002).

Religious transformation, particularly the spread of Christianity, presents another challenge to indigenous counselling systems. Traditional practices such as ancestral veneration, rituals, and spirit consultation are often viewed as incompatible with Christian teachings, resulting in their rejection, modification, or stigmatization in some communities (Asante, 2007; Chavunduka, 1994). Consequently, the influence of traditional healers, spirit mediums, and other indigenous counselling agents has diminished in certain contexts.

Socio-economic changes, including urbanization and labour migration, have further weakened indigenous counselling structures by disrupting extended family systems and communal networks that traditionally supported counselling processes (Mpofu, 2002). As communities become more mobile and individualistic, opportunities for collective problem-solving, intergenerational learning, and communal support are reduced.

Another challenge is the limited institutional recognition of indigenous counselling systems. Formal counselling and mental health frameworks often fail to incorporate indigenous knowledge and practices, resulting in the marginalization of culturally grounded approaches to psychosocial support (Mpofu, 2002). This lack of integration restricts opportunities for collaboration between indigenous and formal systems and limits the broader recognition of indigenous counselling as a legitimate source of support.

Despite these challenges, scholars argue that indigenous counselling systems remain resilient and adaptive. Indigenous knowledge systems are dynamic rather than static and continue to evolve in response to changing social, cultural, and economic conditions (Nsamenang, 2007). In many African societies, traditional counselling continues to coexist with formal counselling services, demonstrating adaptation and hybridity rather than complete displacement (Sillitoe, 2006).

The literature therefore demonstrates that indigenous counselling systems face significant challenges related to cultural erosion, generational shifts, religious transformation, socio-economic change, and limited institutional support. Nevertheless, these systems continue to adapt and remain relevant in many African communities, highlighting their enduring value in promoting culturally grounded psychosocial support (Nsamenang, 2007; Mpofu, 2002; Sillitoe, 2006).

Relevance of Integrating Traditional Counselling Practices into Contemporary Counselling Frameworks

The integration of indigenous knowledge systems into contemporary counselling frameworks has received increasing scholarly attention as part of efforts to decolonize psychology and develop culturally responsive mental health services. Scholars argue that counselling models grounded primarily in Western epistemologies often fail to adequately address the cultural realities, belief systems, and lived experiences of African populations, thereby creating a need for approaches that incorporate indigenous perspectives and practices (Sue & Sue, 2016; Kirmayer, 2012; Moodley & West, 2005).

Indigenous counselling systems provide holistic approaches to wellbeing by integrating psychological, social, spiritual, and communal dimensions of human experience. African indigenous counselling and healing systems emphasize harmony between individuals, families, communities, and the spiritual world, offering broader conceptualizations of mental health and distress than approaches that focus primarily on individual pathology and intrapsychic processes (Mpofu, 2002; Gone, 2010). The integration of these perspectives can therefore enrich counselling practice and enhance its relevance within diverse cultural contexts.

The importance of integration is further supported by the concept of cultural competence, which emphasizes the need for counsellors to understand and respect clients' cultural backgrounds, values, and indigenous belief systems (Sue & Sue, 2016). Traditional counselling methods such as storytelling, proverbs, rituals, and communal mediation can strengthen therapeutic relationships, improve trust, and enhance client engagement. In African contexts, such integration is consistent with the philosophy of Ubuntu, which promotes interconnectedness, dignity, and communal wellbeing (Ramose, 2002). Similarly, Afrocentric perspectives advocate for the recognition and incorporation of indigenous epistemologies to ensure that mental health interventions remain culturally meaningful and socially relevant (Asante, 2007).

Within African countries, there is growing recognition of the need to bridge formal counselling systems and indigenous knowledge frameworks. Integrating traditional counselling and healing practices into mainstream mental health services has the potential to improve accessibility, acceptability, and cultural responsiveness, particularly in communities where indigenous systems remain influential (Mpofu, 2002). However, scholars caution that such integration should be grounded in mutual respect, dialogue, and ethical engagement rather than the assimilation or replacement of indigenous knowledge systems (Kirmayer, 2012).

Despite its potential benefits, integration faces several challenges, including epistemological differences between Western and indigenous knowledge systems, limited formal recognition of traditional counsellors, and inadequate policy frameworks to support collaboration (Mpofu, 2002; Nsamenang, 2007). Nevertheless, the literature suggests that integrating indigenous counselling practices into contemporary frameworks can enhance the cultural relevance, accessibility, and effectiveness of mental health services while preserving valuable indigenous knowledge systems (Moodley & West, 2005; Sue & Sue, 2016; Kirmayer, 2012; Mpofu, 2002; Gone, 2010; Ramose, 2002; Asante, 2007; Nsamenang, 2007).

Theoretical Framework and Justification

The study is guided by both Ecological Systems Theory and Afrocentric Theory. Ecological Systems Theory explains traditional counselling as a product of interactions within multiple environmental systems, including the family, community structures, institutions, and broader cultural and historical influences such as colonialism and modernization (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Nsamenang, 2007). This perspective highlights the embedded nature of counselling practices within interconnected social environments.

Afrocentric Theory complements this framework by emphasizing African worldviews, indigenous epistemologies, spirituality, communalism, oral traditions, and ancestral beliefs as central to understanding indigenous counselling practices (Asante, 2007; Mpofu, 2002). It provides a culturally grounded lens that prioritizes African perspectives rather than relying solely on Western interpretations.

Together, the two theories offer a comprehensive framework for understanding traditional counselling by combining an analysis of environmental influences with recognition of indigenous cultural values and knowledge systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Asante, 2007; Nsamenang, 2007; Mpofu, 2002).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Philosophy

This study is guided by the interpretivist research philosophy, which views reality as socially constructed and understood through the meanings individuals attach to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interpretivism is appropriate for exploring indigenous knowledge systems and traditional counselling practices because these are embedded within cultural beliefs, values, language, and spirituality.

From this perspective, knowledge is context-dependent and shaped by culture and subjective interpretation rather than being objective or universal (Schwandt, 1994). This aligns with traditional counselling systems, which are relational, experiential, and grounded in communal worldviews rather than standardized clinical models (Mpofu, 2002). Understanding such practices therefore requires engagement with participants' lived experiences, cultural narratives, and oral traditions.

Interpretivism also supports qualitative and ethnographic approaches that facilitate in-depth exploration of meanings and practices within their natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This enables the researcher to examine the roles of elders, spiritual leaders, family structures, and culturally significant practices such as storytelling, rituals, and proverbs. Furthermore, the paradigm recognizes the researcher as part of the knowledge construction process and emphasizes reflexivity and the co-creation of meaning between researchers and participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This promotes culturally sensitive inquiry and the authentic representation of indigenous perspectives.

Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, which is appropriate for exploring indigenous knowledge systems and traditional counselling practices among the Nambya community in Hwange District, Zimbabwe. A qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural context, focusing on meanings, experiences, and interpretations rather than numerical measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Given that traditional counselling is embedded in cultural beliefs, oral traditions, and lived experiences, a qualitative approach enables the researcher to capture rich descriptive data through interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This approach is particularly suitable for examining how elders, family heads, and spiritual leaders interpret and apply indigenous counselling practices in everyday life.

Overall, the qualitative approach supports a holistic and contextualized exploration of the Nambya counselling system, ensuring that participants' voices and cultural perspectives are authentically represented.

Research Design

This study adopts an ethnographic research design, which is well-suited for exploring indigenous knowledge systems and traditional counselling practices among the Nambya community in Hwange District, Zimbabwe. Ethnography focuses on the in-depth study of people, cultures, and social practices within their natural settings, with the aim of understanding meanings from the perspective of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The ethnographic design enables the researcher to engage closely with the Nambya community to observe and interpret how traditional counselling is practiced in everyday life. This includes examining the roles of elders, family heads, and spiritual leaders, as well as culturally embedded methods such as storytelling, proverbs, rituals,

and mediation. Through prolonged engagement and immersion in the community, ethnography allows for the collection of rich, contextual, and detailed data that reflects lived cultural realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This design is particularly appropriate because indigenous counselling systems are deeply rooted in cultural norms, oral traditions, and communal interactions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. Ethnography therefore provides a holistic understanding of how counselling practices are socially constructed, maintained, and transformed within the Nambya cultural context.

Population, Sample, and Sampling Technique

The target population for this study comprises members of the Nambya community residing in Hwange District, Zimbabwe. Specifically, the population includes traditional leaders (chiefs and headmen), village elders, spirit mediums, family heads, and selected community members such as youths and women who are knowledgeable about indigenous counselling practices. These groups are considered key custodians and users of traditional counselling systems within the community.

Given the qualitative and ethnographic nature of the study, a small, purposively selected sample was used to ensure depth of information rather than statistical generalization. The sample included approximately 20–30 participants drawn from different social roles within the community to capture diverse perspectives on indigenous counselling practices.

The study employed purposive sampling as the main sampling technique. This method was appropriate because it allows the researcher to deliberately select individuals who possess rich, relevant, and in-depth knowledge of traditional counselling systems (Patton, 2015). In addition, snowball sampling was used to identify spirit mediums and other culturally knowledgeable individuals who are often not easily accessible or formally recognized within community structures.

This combined sampling strategy ensured that participants were both information-rich and representative of the various actors involved in indigenous counselling. It also enhanced the credibility and authenticity of the data by ensuring that key cultural voices within the Nambya community were included in the study.

Data Collection Methods and Limitations

Data Collection Methods

This study employed qualitative data collection methods, namely in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observation, to explore indigenous knowledge systems and traditional counselling practices. In-depth interviews with traditional leaders, elders, spirit mediums, and family heads generated detailed accounts of counselling practices, knowledge transmission, and lived experiences, allowing participants to express their cultural interpretations freely (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Focus group discussions were used to gather collective perspectives from community members, facilitating the exploration of shared meanings, social norms, and generational views on indigenous counselling systems (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Participant observation enabled the researcher to observe counselling practices within their natural contexts, providing rich contextual information and insights into the symbolic and non-verbal dimensions of indigenous counselling (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Limitations of the Data Collection Methods

Despite their strengths, the selected data collection methods had certain limitations. In-depth interviews may be affected by recall bias or selective reporting, as participants might omit or alter information due to memory lapses or cultural sensitivities (Patton, 2015).

Focus group discussions may also be influenced by group dynamics, where dominant participants overshadow quieter individuals, potentially limiting the diversity of views expressed. Additionally, sensitive cultural issues may not be fully disclosed in group settings due to fear of judgement or respect for authority figures.

Participant observation, while valuable, is time-consuming and may be affected by the observer effect, where participants alter their behaviour due to the presence of the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). There is also the risk of researcher bias, as interpretation of cultural practices may be influenced by the researcher's own worldview.

Furthermore, access to certain cultural practices, particularly those involving spiritual or sacred rituals, may be restricted, limiting the completeness of data collected. Despite these limitations, triangulation of methods was used to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings.

STUDY FINDINGS

Indigenous Knowledge Systems Underpinning Traditional Counselling among the Nambya Community

Elders' Perspectives

Elders consistently described indigenous counselling as deeply rooted in ancestral wisdom, oral traditions, and communal responsibility. One elderly participant explained:

"We do not teach counselling from books. We teach through stories, proverbs, and the traditions passed on by our ancestors."

Another elder emphasized that knowledge is not individual but collective:

"The knowledge of advising people comes from living for a long time and listening to elders. A person cannot claim to be a counsellor without the roots of their family."

These responses indicate that indigenous counselling among the Nambya is anchored in lived experience, oral transmission, and respect for ancestral authority.

Traditional Leaders' Perspectives

Traditional leaders highlighted the structured role of cultural norms and chieftaincy systems in guiding counselling practices. One headman stated:

"When there are disputes in the community, we resolve them using our customs and traditions. We do not immediately rely on external courts."

Another leader added:

"Our customary laws are what guide justice. Culture is our book for teaching people."

These views show that indigenous counselling is institutionalized within traditional governance systems, where cultural norms function as guiding frameworks for resolving disputes and promoting harmony.

Spirit Mediums' Perspectives

Spirit mediums emphasized the spiritual and ancestral dimension of indigenous knowledge systems. One participant noted:

"When a person has a problem that cannot be explained, the ancestors must be consulted. They give us answers through the spirit."

Another explained:

“Conflict within families can be caused by disrespecting the ancestors. Counselling involves restoring relationships with the ancestral spirits.”

These responses indicate that indigenous counselling is not only social but also spiritual, with ancestral consultation forming a key component of knowledge systems.

Family Heads’ Perspectives

Family heads emphasized the role of the family as the primary unit of counselling and knowledge transmission. One participant stated:

“The family is the first school. Children learn life skills from parents and elders in the household.”

Another added:

“When there are problems, we sit down as a family and discuss them before seeking outside help.”

This shows that indigenous counselling knowledge is transmitted within family structures through dialogue, observation, and shared decision-making.

Youth Perspectives

Youths acknowledged the presence of indigenous knowledge systems but noted increasing generational distance. One young participant remarked:

“Some cultural practices we hear about, but we no longer fully practice them like the elders used to.”

Another stated:

“When facing many problems today, some young people prefer modern counsellors or churches.”

These responses reflect partial retention of indigenous knowledge among youth, alongside growing influence of modern counselling systems.

Key Agents and Methods Used in Traditional Counselling within the Nambya Community

Elders’ Perspectives

Elders consistently identified themselves as primary custodians and first-line counsellors within the community. Their responses emphasized experience-based wisdom and oral communication as central to counselling practice. One elder explained:

“When people have problems, they first come to us because we are the ones who have lived longer and understand life better.”

Another added:

“We counsel people through stories and proverbs. We do not rush to judge; we first listen and guide using tradition.”

These responses show that elders function as both advisors and mediators, relying heavily on oral tradition as a counselling method.

Traditional Leaders' Perspectives

Traditional leaders highlighted their formal role in dispute resolution and maintaining social order. One headman stated:

“We call people together when there is conflict and allow both sides to speak. After that, we guide them to reconciliation.”

Another noted:

“Our duty is to ensure peace in the community. We use customary law to settle disputes.”

These accounts indicate that traditional leaders use structured mediation processes grounded in customary law to resolve conflicts and maintain harmony.

Spirit Mediums' Perspectives

Spirit mediums emphasized their role in addressing spiritually attributed problems. One participant explained:

“Some problems are not ordinary. We consult the ancestors to understand what is happening.”

Another added:

“We use rituals and communication with the spirit world to bring healing and guidance.”

These responses highlight that spiritual consultation and ritual practice are key methods used when counselling issues are believed to have ancestral or supernatural origins.

Family Heads' Perspectives

Family heads described counselling as a collective family responsibility. One participant stated:

“In our families, we sit together and talk through problems. No one is left out.”

Another added:

“We use dialogue within the home to solve issues before they become bigger problems.”

This reflects the use of family meetings and dialogue as primary counselling methods within household structures.

Youth Perspectives

Youths acknowledged traditional counselling agents but showed preference for mixed approaches. One participant remarked:

“We still go to elders, but sometimes young people also prefer churches or modern counsellors.”

Another stated:

“Proverbs and stories are still used, but not all youths understand them clearly today.”

These responses indicate partial engagement with traditional counselling methods alongside modern alternatives.

Roles and Functions of Traditional Counselling in Promoting Social Cohesion and Wellbeing among the Nambya People

Elders' Perspectives

Elders strongly emphasized that traditional counselling is central to maintaining peace, moral order, and unity within the community. One elder explained:

“Without counselling from elders, people would fight and hate each other. We are the ones who bring them back together.”

Another added:

“Our role is to teach people how to live well with others and to avoid bad behaviour that destroys families.”

These responses show that elders view counselling as a tool for restoring harmony and guiding moral behaviour.

Traditional Leaders' Perspectives

Traditional leaders highlighted the role of counselling in conflict resolution and maintaining community stability. One headman stated:

“When we solve disputes, we are not just helping individuals but the whole community because peace is restored.”

Another noted:

“Counselling helps us prevent conflicts from growing into bigger problems that can divide the village.”

These accounts indicate that traditional counselling functions as a key mechanism for social cohesion and communal stability.

Spirit Mediums' Perspectives

Spirit mediums emphasized the spiritual function of counselling in restoring balance between people and ancestors. One participant explained:

“When families are troubled, it is often because the ancestors are not happy. Counselling helps restore that relationship.”

Another added:

“Once rituals are done, peace returns to the family and people feel emotionally relieved.”

These responses highlight the belief that counselling promotes both spiritual and emotional wellbeing through ancestral reconciliation.

Family Heads' Perspectives

Family heads focused on the role of counselling in strengthening family unity and communication. One participant stated:

“Counselling helps us stay united as a family because we solve problems together instead of blaming each other.”

Another added:

“It helps children grow up knowing what is right and wrong within the family and community.”

This shows that counselling functions as a tool for family cohesion and socialization.

Youth Perspectives

Youths acknowledged the importance of traditional counselling but also noted changes in its influence. One participant remarked:

“It still helps bring people together, especially in villages where elders are respected.”

Another stated:

“Some young people feel more comfortable talking to modern counsellors, but traditional counselling still has value.”

These responses indicate that while youth recognize the role of traditional counselling in social cohesion, its influence is gradually weakening among younger generations.

Challenges Affecting the Continuity and Effectiveness of Indigenous Counselling Systems

Elders' Perspectives

Elders expressed concern that indigenous counselling systems are gradually weakening due to modernization and reduced respect for cultural authority. One elder stated:

“Nowadays young people no longer listen to elders as they used to. They prefer phones and modern ways of solving problems.”

Another added:

“Our teachings are being lost because children are going to school and forgetting traditional ways.”

These responses highlight concerns about generational change and loss of cultural transmission.

Traditional Leaders' Perspectives

Traditional leaders emphasized the impact of external legal and institutional systems on customary counselling structures. One headman explained:

“Some disputes are now taken directly to police or courts, ignoring traditional leaders.”

Another noted:

“People are beginning to doubt customary law, yet it used to solve many problems effectively.”

These accounts show that formal institutions are increasingly replacing traditional dispute resolution mechanisms.

Spirit Mediums' Perspectives

Spirit mediums highlighted declining belief in ancestral practices as a major challenge. One participant stated:

“Some people no longer believe in consulting ancestors, so our work is not taken seriously.”

Another added:

“When rituals are ignored, problems in families continue because people do not follow tradition.”

These responses indicate weakening spiritual belief systems that underpin indigenous counselling.

Family Heads' Perspectives

Family heads pointed to breakdowns in family communication and urban migration as key challenges. One participant explained:

“Families are no longer staying together like before. People go to towns and lose contact with their roots.”

Another added:

“It is now difficult to gather the whole family to solve problems together.”

These findings reflect the impact of migration and changing family structures on counselling practices.

Youth Perspectives

Youths identified education, religion, and modern lifestyles as influencing their reduced engagement with traditional counselling. One participant remarked:

“We learn more about modern counselling at school and church, so traditional ways are not very familiar to us.”

Another stated:

“Some traditional practices are seen as outdated by young people today.”

These responses show a shift in worldview among younger generations.

Relevance of Integrating Traditional Counselling Practices into Contemporary Counselling Frameworks

Elders' Perspectives

Elders strongly supported the idea of integrating traditional counselling with modern approaches, emphasizing cultural continuity. One elder explained:

“Even if times are changing, counselling should still respect our traditions because they are what made our communities strong.”

Another added:

“Modern counsellors should learn from elders so that they understand how we solve problems in our culture.”

These responses show that elders view integration as a way of preserving cultural identity while adapting to change.

Traditional Leaders' Perspectives

Traditional leaders emphasized collaboration between customary systems and formal institutions. One headman stated:

“There should be cooperation between traditional leaders and modern counsellors so that people get full help.”

Another noted:

“If we combine both systems, disputes and social problems can be handled better.”

These accounts highlight the perceived value of a complementary approach to counselling systems.

Spirit Mediums' Perspectives

Spirit mediums stressed the importance of respecting spiritual dimensions in any integration process. One participant explained:

“Any counselling system that ignores ancestors will not fully solve people’s problems.”

Another added:

“Traditional healing and counselling should not be removed but respected even in modern systems.”

These responses reflect the belief that spiritual elements are essential for holistic counselling.

Family Heads' Perspectives

Family heads supported integration for strengthening family and community wellbeing. One participant stated:

“If modern counsellors include family discussions like we do, it will help people more.”

Another added:

“Families should be part of counselling processes because they understand the real problems.”

These findings suggest that family-centered approaches are seen as valuable in both systems.

Youth Perspectives

Youths showed openness to integration but emphasized accessibility and modern relevance. One participant remarked:

“It would be good if counsellors understand both modern issues and traditional culture.”

Another stated:

“Young people will accept traditional counselling more if it is combined with modern methods.”

These responses indicate that integration may improve acceptance among younger generations.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Indigenous Knowledge Systems Underpinning Traditional Counselling

The findings reveal that indigenous knowledge systems among the Nambya are deeply rooted in oral traditions, ancestral beliefs, and communal values. Elders, traditional leaders, spirit mediums, and family heads consistently emphasized storytelling, proverbs, and lived experience as key sources of counselling knowledge. This aligns with Mbiti (1969), who argues that African knowledge systems are fundamentally communal and transmitted orally across generations. Similarly, Gelfand et al. (1985) note that Zimbabwean indigenous systems rely heavily on elders as custodians of cultural wisdom.

The spiritual dimension identified in the findings, particularly the role of ancestors in guiding behaviour and resolving distress, is consistent with Mpofu (2002), who highlights the integration of spiritual and social explanations in indigenous counselling systems. The emerging generational gap, where youths show partial detachment from traditional knowledge, supports Nsamenang (2007), who observed that modernization disrupts indigenous knowledge transmission structures.

Overall, the findings confirm that Nambya indigenous counselling is a dynamic system shaped by cultural continuity and gradual transformation.

Key Agents and Methods Used in Traditional Counselling

The study found that elders, traditional leaders, spirit mediums, and family heads are central agents of counselling, using methods such as storytelling, mediation, proverbs, rituals, and family dialogue. This supports Chavunduka (1994), who emphasizes that African traditional counselling is relational and authority-based rather than professionalized.

The use of mediation and communal dialogue aligns with Zartman (2000), who argues that African conflict resolution prioritizes reconciliation over punishment. The reliance on proverbs and storytelling is consistent with Finnegan (2012), who identifies oral literature as a key pedagogical and counselling tool in African societies.

However, the increasing preference for modern counselling among youths reflects Nsamenang (2007), who notes that Western education systems often weaken traditional counselling transmission. Thus, while traditional agents remain active, their influence is increasingly shared with modern systems.

Roles and Functions of Traditional Counselling

The findings show that traditional counselling promotes social cohesion, conflict resolution, moral guidance, family unity, and spiritual balance. This aligns strongly with Mbiti (1969), who argues that African counselling systems are primarily concerned with restoring social harmony rather than individual therapy.

The emphasis on reconciliation and community healing reflects the Ubuntu philosophy discussed by Ramose (2002), which prioritizes interconnectedness and collective wellbeing. Similarly, Asante (2007) highlights the holistic nature of African counselling systems, which integrate spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions of wellbeing.

The findings also support Mpofu (2002), who notes that indigenous counselling systems function as both therapeutic and moral regulatory mechanisms. However, the weakening influence among youths suggests increasing alignment with Sue and Sue (2016), who observe a global shift toward individualized counselling models.

Challenges Affecting Indigenous Counselling Systems

The study identified key challenges such as modernization, urban migration, formal legal systems, declining spiritual beliefs, and generational shifts. These findings align with Ranger (1999), who argues that colonial and postcolonial transformations significantly disrupted indigenous knowledge systems in Zimbabwe.

Nsamenang (2007) similarly highlights that Western education systems contribute to generational disconnection from indigenous practices. The influence of Christianity on reducing belief in ancestral consultation reflects Chavunduka (1994), who documented tensions between African spirituality and Christian doctrine.

The replacement of traditional dispute resolution with formal courts supports Mpofu (2002), who notes the marginalization of indigenous counselling within formal institutional frameworks. Despite these challenges, the persistence of traditional counselling in rural areas reflects Sillitoe (2006), who argues that indigenous knowledge systems are resilient and adaptive.

Integration of Traditional and Contemporary Counselling

The findings show strong support for integrating traditional counselling with modern frameworks. Elders and traditional leaders emphasize cultural preservation, while youths highlight adaptability and relevance. This supports Sue and Sue (2016), who advocate for culturally competent counselling that incorporates indigenous knowledge systems.

The emphasis on holistic wellbeing and spirituality aligns with Mpofu (2002) and Asante (2007), who argue that African counselling systems provide valuable frameworks for culturally responsive practice. The call for

collaboration between traditional and modern counsellors reflects the Ubuntu philosophy (Ramose, 2002), which promotes relational and inclusive approaches to wellbeing.

However, challenges related to epistemological differences and institutional recognition remain consistent with Nsamenang (2007), who warns that integration must be carefully managed to avoid cultural distortion. Overall, the findings suggest that integration is both necessary and feasible, provided it is grounded in mutual respect and cultural sensitivity

CONCLUSION

This study explored indigenous knowledge systems and traditional counselling practices among the Nambya community of Hwange District in Zimbabwe. The findings demonstrate that Nambya traditional counselling is deeply rooted in indigenous knowledge systems transmitted through oral traditions, ancestral beliefs, and communal structures. Elders, traditional leaders, spirit mediums, and family heads were identified as key custodians and practitioners of counselling, using culturally embedded methods such as storytelling, proverbs, mediation, rituals, and family dialogue.

The study further established that traditional counselling plays a significant role in promoting social cohesion, moral regulation, conflict resolution, and holistic wellbeing within the community. However, these indigenous systems are increasingly challenged by modernization, urban migration, formal education, religious transformation, and the growing influence of Western counselling models. Despite these challenges, there remains strong cultural resilience and continued relevance of traditional counselling practices, particularly in rural settings.

Overall, the study concludes that Nambya indigenous counselling systems are dynamic and evolving, reflecting both continuity and transformation. There is a clear need to recognize, document, and support these systems as valuable components of culturally responsive counselling frameworks.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

Firstly, there is need to integrate indigenous counselling practices with modern counselling frameworks to enhance culturally responsive mental health services that reflect the realities of the Nambya community.

Secondly, the government cultural institutions and researchers should systematically document Nambya traditional counselling practices to preserve them for future generations and prevent cultural loss.

Thirdly, professional counsellors should be trained in indigenous knowledge systems to improve cultural competence and strengthen engagement with rural communities.

Fourthly, awareness programs should be implemented to educate younger generations on the value of traditional counselling systems, ensuring intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Fifthly, policy frameworks should formally recognize the role of elders, spirit mediums, and traditional leaders in community counselling and conflict resolution.

Lastly, additional ethnographic studies should be conducted to explore other aspects of Nambya indigenous knowledge systems and their application in contemporary psychosocial support systems.

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