

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Fostering inclusivity through Ubuntu philosophy: A culturally relevant approach to Nigerian youth mental health counseling**

**Olayinka Adenike Adesehinwa<sup>1\*</sup>, Olawoyin Alimat Aderoju<sup>2</sup> and Ogunlehin Christiana Olutoyin<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Special Education and Guidance and Counselling, Faculty of Specialized and Professional Education, Emmanuel Alayande University of Education, Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria.

<sup>3</sup>Medical Social Services, University Health Center, Ladoke Akintola University, Ogbomosho, Oyo State, Nigeria.

Received 20 December, 2024; Accepted 2 April, 2025

The underutilization of mental health services among Nigerian youth underscores the significant influence of cultural beliefs on psychological well-being. In Nigeria, youth mental health is primarily managed within family and community structures, where parents and significant others provide emotional and psychological support grounded in culturally-based approaches. Many caregivers prefer traditional healing systems and communal networks over Western psychotherapy, which is often perceived as incongruent with their cultural realities. The Ubuntu philosophy, an African ethical framework emphasizing interconnectedness and relational healing, aligns with these caregiving practices. Through the lens of critical psychology, this paper critiques the dominance of Western therapeutic models and advocates for a hybridized mental health framework that integrates indigenous healing traditions with contemporary interventions. Recognizing the pivotal role of caregivers in shaping youth mental health outcomes, this study proposes community-based strategies rooted in collective well-being. Such an approach can enhance mental health literacy, improve service accessibility, and foster a more inclusive, culturally responsive mental health system in Nigeria.

**Key words:** Nigerian youth mental health, culturally responsive counseling, Ubuntu philosophy.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The prevalence of mental health disorders among young people has reached alarming levels globally, with a

significant proportion of cases emerging between the ages of 15 and 24 (Basta et al., 2022).

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [oa.adesehinwa@acu.edu.ng](mailto:oa.adesehinwa@acu.edu.ng). Tel: +2348023293509.

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Studies indicate that depression, anxiety disorders, and suicidality are particularly common among undergraduate students, with approximately one-third exhibiting significant symptoms (Riddinger, 2023). Additionally, evidence suggests gender disparities in mental health experiences, as women are more likely than men to report depressive symptoms. Major depression has now become the second-leading cause of disease worldwide (Feigin et al., 2021), and projections indicate that mental illness could surpass physical illness as the leading cause of disability and mortality by 2029. Suicide, a critical public health issue, claims nearly one million lives annually, with millions more attempting self-harm.

Despite the rising prevalence of mental health disorders, access to care remains a significant challenge, particularly in low-resource settings. Studies show that only a small proportion of young individuals with mental health conditions seek professional help, with less than 27% of affected students in the United States consulting formal mental health services (Dyrbye et al., 2021). The situation is even more concerning in African contexts, where mental health services are scarce and stigma surrounding mental illness remains pervasive (Ohajunwa and Sefotho, 2024). Research on Nigerian students indicates that only 1.5% of those experiencing depression consider seeking professional help. Cultural stigma, inadequate awareness, and limited mental health infrastructure further compound this problem, pushing many young people to rely on informal support networks such as religious leaders, traditional healers, and family members (Wright and Jayawickrama, 2021). Family networks and voluntary sector participation in the care of people with intellectual disability. While these informal systems provide some level of psychological support, they may also contribute to misinformation and delayed treatment, exacerbating mental health challenges rather than alleviating them (Beresford and Rose, 2023).

Given these systemic barriers, scholars have emphasized the importance of culturally adapted mental health interventions that align with indigenous knowledge systems (Oppong, 2024). In this regard, Ubuntu, a philosophical framework rooted in African traditions offers a viable, culturally relevant approach to mental health care. Ubuntu, which embodies the principles of communalism, interdependence, and collective healing, provides a foundation for mental health interventions that prioritize relational well-being over individualistic therapeutic models. Unlike Western psychological paradigms that emphasize self-reliance and autonomy, Ubuntu recognizes psychological health as a shared responsibility; where healing occurs within the context of social networks and community support (Okpara and Ekeh, 2025).

Traditional African counseling practices, which emphasize storytelling, peer support, and faith-based

interventions, align closely with the Ubuntu philosophy and have demonstrated effectiveness in fostering psychological resilience (Ndasauka, 2024). For example, Yabar and Bilotta (2024) found that community-based mental health programs rooted in Ubuntu principles helped Nigerian youth, particularly in rural areas, develop coping mechanisms through collective healing. Similarly, Obara and Banyard (2025) highlighted the effectiveness of Ubuntu-driven trauma counseling in Kenya, which improved mental health outcomes among survivors of post-election violence, reinforcing the value of indigenous frameworks in addressing psychological distress. Integrating Ubuntu philosophy into counseling offers a holistic, culturally relevant approach to addressing the mental health challenges faced by Nigerian youth. By fostering inclusivity and community-centered care, this approach enhances the accessibility and acceptance of professional interventions. Leveraging familiar cultural concepts promotes effective mental health support. A shift towards Ubuntu-based counseling can bridge the gap between traditional healing and modern psychological practices, leading to sustainable mental health outcomes.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual approach to explore the integration of Ubuntu into Nigerian mental health counselling. Conceptual research is appropriate when existing theoretical frameworks require expansion or adaptation to new contexts. Given the limited empirical studies on Ubuntu-based counseling in Nigeria, this paper synthesizes theoretical insights, recent research findings, and cultural analyses to propose an innovative mental health framework.

### Data sources and analytical framework

The study draws from recent peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, and theoretical discourses on Ubuntu and mental health. Academic sources published within the last four years provide contemporary insights into the application of Ubuntu in psychotherapy. A thematic analysis approach is used to identify key themes related to Ubuntu's psychological relevance, decolonization of mental health, and hybridized counseling models. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on culturally responsive mental health care, offering practical recommendations for implementation in Nigeria.

### Data sources

#### *National surveys and reports on youth mental health*

- 1) National mental health policy reports (Nigeria): The 2013 report provides national statistics on mental health issues affecting youth, including prevalence rates of conditions like depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.
- 2) WHO global mental health atlas: This atlas offers data on mental health initiatives and challenges in Nigeria and other African countries.

3) Nigeria demographic and health survey (NDHS): The 2018 NDHS, conducted by the National Population Commission (NPC) and ICF International, provides comprehensive demographic data, including mental health-related statistics for youth.

#### **Academic research and journals**

- i) Peer-reviewed journals on African psychology, youth mental health, and counseling practices.
- ii) Studies on Ubuntu philosophy in relation to social work and counselling practices, which will provide theoretical and empirical insights into its applicability to mental health.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Ubuntu: An African philosophical framework of community and humanity**

Ubuntu, an African philosophy, encapsulates the notion of 'I am because we are,' emphasizing communalism, relational interdependence, and shared humanity. This philosophy underscores the intrinsic link between individual well-being and the collective welfare of society, promoting empathy, compassion, and collective responsibility to foster social harmony (Chigangaidze, 2021). Historically, Ubuntu has shaped African ethical systems, governance structures, and social interactions, reinforcing the belief that human existence is deeply rooted in collective identity. While popularized in South Africa, its principles extend across the continent, influencing various cultural and social frameworks (Boboyi, 2024).

Contemporary discussions highlight Ubuntu's role in decolonizing research methodologies, particularly in participatory approaches within the Global South (Marovah and Mutanga, 2023). Furthermore, Ubuntu's relevance extends beyond social structures to inform debates on social justice, community development, and the integration of indigenous knowledge into modern governance and mental health interventions. The Ubuntu approach to mental health emphasizes relational healing, interconnectedness, and community-based support, differing from Western models that prioritize individual autonomy. Instead, Ubuntu fosters collective responsibility for well-being within families and communities (Chigangaidze, 2021; Boboyi et al., 2024). Traditional African healing practices, such as storytelling and spiritual guidance, align with Ubuntu's emphasis on emotional, social, and spiritual balance. In clinical social work, Ubuntu is recognized as a culturally responsive framework for mental health care (Chigangaidze, 2021).

Integrating Ubuntu into Nigerian counseling practices can enhance resilience, strengthen support networks, and promote holistic healing (Marovah and Mutanga,

2023). This approach ensures inclusive, community-driven interventions that align with African socio-cultural realities, fostering long-term well-being.

### **Exploring Ubuntu's role in mental health and well-being**

Ubuntu-based mental health interventions are increasingly recognized as culturally relevant for addressing youth mental health challenges in Africa. Community-driven healing strategies, rooted in Ubuntu principles, enhance psychological resilience and reduce stigma. Research by Mbazzi (2023) identifies Ubuntu as a protective factor, promoting emotional stability through collective support, and advocates for integrating Ubuntu into mental health training to improve cultural competence. Similarly, Oppong (2024) highlights the benefits of Ubuntu-based group therapy in fostering peer support and social cohesion. These findings suggest that Ubuntu-driven counseling can complement or serve as an alternative to Western mental health models. A comparative analysis underscores the need for culturally responsive mental health interventions in Nigeria. Unlike Western psychotherapy, which emphasizes individualism, Ubuntu-based approaches prioritize collective storytelling, community engagement, and shared problem-solving (Chigangaidze, 2021; Sefotho and Letseka, 2024). Given Nigerian youth's reliance on familial and communal support, Western techniques may not fully resonate with their experiences. Scholars advocate for a hybrid model that blends Ubuntu principles with evidence-based Western interventions to promote inclusivity and effectiveness.

This decolonized approach ensures culturally relevant, sustainable, and accessible mental health care (Demkowicz, et. al, (2025). In Nigeria, integrating Ubuntu into contemporary counseling practices holds immense potential for transforming youth mental health care. By framing psychological well-being as a communal responsibility rather than an individual one, Ubuntu aligns with indigenous mental health frameworks that emphasize resilience, shared healing, and collective support (Boboyi et al., 2025; Msomi and Akhurst, 2023). Leveraging Ubuntu principles alongside contemporary counseling can help overcome stigma, limited access to care, and Western-dominated models in Nigeria. This approach fosters a holistic and inclusive mental health framework for youth, bridging formal psychotherapy with community-based healing to enhance mental health literacy and encourage help-seeking behaviors. Furthermore, it promotes culturally resonant support systems aligned with Nigerian youth's lived experiences. Ultimately, this paradigm shift strengthens the accessibility and effectiveness of mental health care.

### **Ubuntu philosophy and its psychological counselling implications: A path to healing through community and compassion**

Mokgolodi (2023) emphasizes that the Ubuntu philosophy promotes collective identity, relational healing, and culturally embedded therapy models in psychological counseling. Unlike Western approaches, which prioritize individual autonomy, Ubuntu fosters emotional resilience through interconnected social support networks. Community storytelling and shared rituals serve as therapeutic tools for individuals experiencing anxiety, depression, and social isolation. This culturally responsive framework aligns with African mental health care traditions, where family and communal bonds play a crucial role in emotional well-being. Incorporating Ubuntu into counseling practices makes mental health interventions more inclusive and contextually relevant to diverse communities' lived experiences. Creighton-Randall (2023) highlights Ubuntu's effectiveness in trauma counseling, particularly for survivors of gender-based violence, where peer support and spiritual counseling enhance emotional security. Boboyi et al. (2025) and Msomi and Akhurst (2023) further explore Ubuntu's role in men's mental health, demonstrating that male support groups foster emotional openness and reduce stigma through communal solidarity. Research by Musili and Owusu-Ansah (2024) discusses Ubuntu's application in East African mental health interventions, integrating communal dialogues and spiritual mediation. Boboyi et al. (2025) illustrates how Ubuntu bridges Western psychotherapy with indigenous healing traditions. Rotzinger et al. (2025), and Oppong (2024) critique the dominance of Western psychological models, advocating for decolonized mental health care that incorporates traditional healing practices, collective well-being, and sustainable interventions for marginalized groups.

#### ***Implications for Nigerian mental health practices***

Integrating Ubuntu-inspired counseling into Nigerian mental health care necessitates a paradigm shift toward community-based models that align with indigenous cultural values. This approach enhances the relevance and acceptance of mental health services, ultimately improving accessibility and therapeutic outcomes. Unlike Western-centric models, Ubuntu-driven interventions emphasize collective healing, relational interdependence, and shared responsibility. However, challenges such as policy reforms, professional training, and systemic barriers must be addressed to facilitate seamless integration. Overcoming these obstacles can create a more inclusive and culturally responsive mental health framework in Nigeria.

### ***Hybridizing western and indigenous counseling models***

The integration of Western psychological counseling with indigenous African wellness practices enhances cultural relevance and effectiveness in mental health care. Research highlights the need for hybrid models that combine modern psychotherapy with traditional healing methods (Bedi, 2018; Stewart, 2019). Studies on similar approaches in Pacific Island nations emphasize culturally sensitive practices and collaboration between Western-trained professionals and indigenous healers. In Nigeria, training counselors in Afrocentric therapy and integrating traditional healing can create more inclusive and sustainable mental health interventions for youth.

#### ***Case studies of Ubuntu philosophy in mental health counseling in Africa***

The growing application of Ubuntu philosophy in mental health counseling across African countries highlights its effectiveness in fostering collective healing, social cohesion, and culturally resonant therapeutic interventions. In South Africa, initiatives like the Institute for Healing of Memories (IHOM) and community-based trauma counseling programs have successfully employed Ubuntu's emphasis on relational therapy and group support to help apartheid survivors' process psychological distress (Lapsley, 2017; Cooper and Ratele, 2022). Similarly, in Kenya and Zimbabwe, Ubuntu-inspired interventions such as community healing circles and the Friendship Bench initiative have demonstrated success in addressing PTSD and depression through peer-led and communal approaches (Ndeti et al., 2023). As Nigeria seeks to develop more inclusive mental health strategies, emerging community-based programs integrating traditional healing methods and peer-support structures highlight Ubuntu's potential to complement Western therapeutic models and enhance culturally appropriate mental health care (Nwoko, 2023).

#### ***Ubuntu as a framework for culturally responsive counseling***

Ubuntu provides a culturally relevant framework for counselling psychology, emphasizing holistic well-being, social support, and collective healing. Unlike Western psychological models that prioritize individual autonomy, Ubuntu-based counselling recognizes the interconnected nature of mental health, reinforcing the idea that an individual's psychological well-being is inseparable from the health of their community. This collectivist approach challenges the dominant Western notion of individual-

centered mental health care, advocating instead for a communal model of healing that aligns with African social structures. By integrating traditional African values with modern therapeutic interventions, Ubuntu-based counselling offers a culturally sensitive model that resonates with Nigerian youth, ensuring that mental health care is both accessible and contextually appropriate.

### ***Integrating Ubuntu into contemporary counseling practices***

The practical application of Ubuntu in mental health care requires the implementation of community-based interventions, culturally grounded counselling models, and institutional support. Establishing peer support groups, training community leaders, and developing mental health education materials in local languages can promote awareness and resilience among Nigerian youth. Ubuntu-inspired counselling models, such as group therapy rooted in shared storytelling and mentorship programs, can further strengthen community-based support networks. Additionally, integrating traditional healing methods with evidence-based psychological therapies enhances therapeutic outcomes by ensuring cultural relevance.

Institutional support and policy advocacy are essential for embedding Ubuntu into national mental health frameworks. Encouraging mental health professionals to adopt culturally responsive counselling strategies and advocating for government policies that incorporate Ubuntu-based approaches can lead to more inclusive mental health care.

Collaborations between universities, counseling institutions, and government agencies can further ensure that Ubuntu principles are incorporated into psychology curricula, fostering a new generation of culturally competent mental health practitioners. By implementing these strategies, Ubuntu-based counselling can serve as a sustainable and effective framework for addressing youth mental health challenges in Nigeria.

### ***Ubuntu as a conceptual model for mental health counseling in Nigeria***

Ubuntu's emphasis on interconnectedness, shared humanity and relational healing makes it a valuable framework for counselling psychology, particularly in addressing youth mental health challenges in Nigeria. Unlike Western psychological models, which often focus on individual pathology, Ubuntu promotes a collective approach that acknowledges the intricate link between psychological well-being, social support, and environmental factors (Hanks, 2008; Janz, 2004; Panse,

2006). This communal perspective aligns with African cultural understandings of mental health, where distress is viewed not solely as an individual burden but as a collective concern requiring social intervention (Brooke, 2008).

Traditional African healing practices, such as storytelling, spiritual guidance, and communal problem-solving, reflects Ubuntu's holistic perspective by integrating mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being (van Breda, 2019). These practices contrast with Western psychological models that tend to prioritize individual self-sufficiency, often failing to accommodate the lived realities of African populations (Hanks, 2008). Several key Ubuntu principles can inform mental health counselling in Nigeria, including relational healing (*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*), which highlights the role of community networks in fostering resilience; collective responsibility (*ujima*), which encourages familial and societal participation in mental health interventions; and social justice (*ubulungiswa*), which addresses systemic barriers such as poverty and discrimination (Ndeti et al., 2023). By incorporating these values, Ubuntu-informed counselling can enhance the accessibility, inclusivity, and cultural responsiveness of mental health services, ensuring they align with the needs and experiences of Nigerian youth.

### ***Integrating Ubuntu into contemporary counselling practices in Nigeria***

Integrating Ubuntu into Nigerian counseling practices presents a transformative approach to addressing youth mental health challenges by merging traditional African knowledge systems with contemporary therapeutic methods. A community-driven model is central to Ubuntu-based mental health interventions, fostering resilience, inclusivity, and cultural relevance. Establishing peer support groups that emphasize collective healing creates safe spaces for young individuals to share experiences and receive emotional support. Furthermore, training educators, community leaders, and families in Ubuntu-aligned psychological support techniques enhances mental health literacy and reduces stigma. Mental health awareness campaigns incorporating indigenous storytelling, proverbs, and oral traditions increase accessibility and cultural resonance, rendering interventions more effective and relatable (McCarty, 2023).

These strategies ensure that mental health care extends beyond clinical settings, reinforcing community involvement and shared responsibility in promoting psychological well-being.

Beyond community initiatives, integrating Ubuntu into counseling models and national policies is crucial for its sustainable impact. Therapeutic approaches that

combine communal dialogue, intergenerational mentorship, and traditional healing practices with evidence-based methodologies can create holistic and culturally responsive mental health interventions (Hove et al., 2023). By fostering a sense of belonging and shared problem-solving, Ubuntu-based therapy can help bridge the gap between Western psychological models and indigenous African worldviews. Systemic support through policy advocacy is also essential, ensuring that Ubuntu principles are incorporated into national mental health strategies and counseling education. This can be achieved by integrating indigenous psychological frameworks into university curricula to train culturally competent mental health professionals. Furthermore, cross-disciplinary research exploring Ubuntu's effectiveness in psychology, psychiatry, and social work will solidify its credibility and encourage broader adoption (Kpokiri et al., 2023; Seehawer, 2023). By embracing Ubuntu as a foundational principle in mental health care, Nigeria can develop an inclusive and sustainable mental health system that prioritizes communal well-being, resilience, and culturally relevant healing.

### **Implementation strategy for Ubuntu-based counseling in Nigeria**

The authors strongly advocate for integrating Ubuntu into Nigerian mental health counselling practices, emphasizing that its core principle, "*I am because we are*," aligns deeply with Nigeria's communal structures. Western individualistic psychotherapy approaches often fail to resonate with African cultural values, leading to resistance and underutilization of mental health services. By embedding Ubuntu in counselling, culturally sensitive therapeutic approaches can be developed, prioritizing interconnectedness, collective healing, and community engagement. To ensure successful implementation, the following steps should be taken:

- 1) Institutional integration: Ubuntu-based approaches should be formally recognized and integrated into Nigeria's national mental health strategies.
- 2) Training of counselor's: Mental health professionals should receive specialized training in culturally responsive counselling that incorporates Ubuntu principles.
- 3) Community engagement: Traditional leaders, religious figures, and family structures should be actively involved mental health awareness and intervention programs.
- 4) Public awareness campaigns: Advocacy efforts should focus on reducing stigma and promoting the acceptance of community-based mental health interventions.
- 5) Hybridized therapy models: Counseling programs should blend indigenous healing practices with Western psychological techniques to create holistic, effective

therapeutic interventions. By implementing these strategies, Ubuntu can serve as a culturally aligned framework for youth mental health interventions in Nigeria, fostering resilience, social cohesion, and long-term psychological well-being.

### **Conclusion**

Integrating Ubuntu into counseling psychology offers a culturally relevant approach to youth mental health in Nigeria, promoting inclusivity and collective well-being. This aligns with decolonization efforts by incorporating indigenous knowledge into mental health care. By emphasizing relational healing, shared responsibility, and social justice, Ubuntu-based interventions can enhance accessibility and effectiveness. Implementing community-driven initiatives, Ubuntu-centered counselling models, and policy reforms can foster resilience and long-term psychological well-being among Nigerian youth. Further insight into this conceptual discussion highlights the necessity of rethinking conventional mental health frameworks in Nigeria by embracing Ubuntu's communal ethos, which fosters culturally embedded, sustainable, and holistic psychological interventions tailored to the lived experiences of African youth.

Integrating Ubuntu into counseling psychology offers a culturally relevant approach to youth mental health in Nigeria, promoting inclusivity and collective well-being. This approach aligns with decolonization efforts by incorporating indigenous knowledge into mental health care. By emphasizing relational healing, shared responsibility, and social justice, Ubuntu-based interventions can enhance accessibility and effectiveness. Implementing community-driven initiatives, Ubuntu-centered counseling models, and policy reforms can foster resilience and long-term psychological well-being among Nigerian youth. This conceptual discussion underscores the necessity of rethinking conventional mental health frameworks in Nigeria by embracing Ubuntu's communal ethos. This ethos fosters culturally embedded, sustainable, and holistic psychological interventions tailored to the lived experiences of African youth, ultimately promoting a more inclusive and responsive mental health care system.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

The authors declared no conflict of interests.

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