



Indigenous knowledge systems and mental health management: A case study of Parirenyatwa Mental Health Unit (Annexe), Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study explores the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in the management of mental health at the Annexe Mental Health Institution in Zimbabwe. Using qualitative case study methods, it examines the perceptions of healthcare workers and patients regarding the application of traditional healing practices in mental health care. Findings highlight the cultural significance of IKS in Zimbabwe and the challenges posed by the lack of formal recognition within national health policies. The paper advocates for a hybrid model that incorporates both IKS and biomedical approaches to provide culturally relevant and effective mental health care.

Key words: culture, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), mental health, healthcare workers, traditional healing

Introduction

Cervical cancer Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) simply refer to the understandings, skills and philosophies that are developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings (Balogun & Kalusopa, 2021). IKS is very fundamental in various aspects of life in the sense that it informs daily practices in which mental health management is not an exception. IKS is characterised in terms of being local, orally transmitted, being shareable to other forms of knowledge, and having a focus on individuals. Practitioners can fully understand the management of psychological well-being through the existing culturally rooted frameworks (Sitsha, 2023). According to Dixit (2024), IKS plays a pivotal role in promoting mental and emotional intelligence evidenced by studies that were carried out in Indian communities. It is proven that the IKS in Indian communities are hardwired in the culture and societies making it accessible and applicable to all walks of life (Dixit, 2024; Munaki, 2024). Munaki's paper on the Shona people's perception of mental illness reflects the contribution of IKS in understanding mental health based on cultural influences towards seeking mental health services. Thus, cultural perspectives highly promote the addressing of difficulties experienced by mental health patients as well as the role of spiritual and traditional therapies. The relevance of IKS is enshrined in its integration of cultural contexts, traditional beliefs, healing practices, community involvement, and knowledge transmission (Nyahunda, 2024).

Mental health in Zimbabwe is increasingly getting recognized in which conditions such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are primarily affecting a notable segment of the population. WHO (2023) reports that about 20% of Zimbabweans are experiencing mental health challenges. The main factors attributed to contributing to mental health challenges include economic instability, drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, and poverty (Munyaradzi & Chikwati, 2024). Given the high precedence of mental health illness in Zimbabwe, stigma, discrimination, and cultural attitudes act as stumbling blocks to the process of seeking mental health services. The country has made positive strides in trying to improve mental health in the country by enacting legislative frameworks such as the Mental Health Act (Chapter 15:12). Various stakeholders including government departments and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are playing a huge role in leveraging the use of IKS in the management of mental health services in the country.

IKS contains its historical roots that are primarily shaped by lived experiences, cultural practices, as well as environmental interactions of indigenous communities. Mkhize & Ndimande-Hlongwa (2014) explored the African languages and IKS in terms of how they reflect the cultural heritage and oral traditions. Chauke, Baloyi, Mapindani, Chauke, & Mptlhaka (2021) assessed the role of traditional leaders in terms of preservation and the application of IKS in their communities. The major contributions of traditional leaders were found to be cultural custodians, holistic healthcare, community trust and accessibility, and education and knowledge transmission. The integration of IKS and mental health management takes into consideration the effectiveness and cultural relevance of mental healthcare in which traditional practices are recognized alongside modern psychiatric methods (Mkhize, Ndimande-Hlongwa, Nwoye, & Mtyende, 2016). Mkhize et al. (2016) outlined the immense contribution of IKS (traditional and spiritual healing) to the mental needs of patients which promotes effective treatment options.

Mental health issues, which affect approximately 10% of Zimbabwe's population, are often interpreted through cultural lenses that attribute these disorders to spiritual or ancestral causes (World Health Organization, 2020).

Literature shows that the integration of IKS into mental health management is faced with various barriers that include stigma and misunderstanding, power imbalances, lack of recognition, cultural gaps, and policy and regulatory issues (Sustainability Directory, 2023). Thus, the implementation process appears to be associated with a complex array of challenges in which this study focuses on exploring the integration of IKS and mental health management at Parirenyatwa Group of Hospitals in Harare province. This institution is one of the largest health institutions in Zimbabwe that plays a critical role in mental health management (inpatient and outpatient care, psychiatric assessments, and therapeutic interventions (Mudzingwa, 2019). This paper seeks to address the gap in the formal recognition of IKS by proposing a hybrid model of mental health management that respects both traditional healing and biomedical approaches. To explore the role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in managing mental health issues at Annexe.

- To assess the challenges and benefits of integrating IKS with modern healthcare practices.
- To propose a hybrid model that combines IKS and modern mental health practices for improved patient outcomes.

Literature review

The role of IKS in health management

IKS have historically played a central role in health management across Africa, particularly in the treatment of mental health disorders (Mavhunga, 2019). IKS encompasses holistic approaches to healing that address the spiritual, emotional, and physical dimensions of illness (Mudzingwa, 2019). In Zimbabwe, traditional healers, known as n'anga, are often the first point of contact for individuals experiencing mental health issues (Gelfand, 2018).

Research shows that IKS is particularly valuable in culturally grounded communities, where spiritual and ancestral beliefs are central to understanding illness (Petersen et al., 2019). Studies in South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria have shown that traditional healers can significantly contribute to mental health care when their practices are integrated with modern medical systems (Gureje & Nortje, 2018).

Mental health in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's mental health system is under-resourced, with limited access to formal care and a high degree of stigma surrounding mental illness (Sorsdahl & Stein, 2019). Mental health services are concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural populations, who rely heavily on traditional healers, with little access to formal care (Chibanda et al., 2020). Furthermore, the Zimbabwean Mental Health Act of 1996 does not provide a legal framework for the integration of IKS into formal healthcare, further marginalizing traditional practices (Mudzingwa, 2019). The interplay of these factors reflects the need for comprehensive reforms. Addressing resource limitations, expanding services into rural areas, and creating a supportive legislative environment for IKS integration are essential steps toward building a more inclusive and effective mental health system in Zimbabwe. Such reforms could help reduce stigma and improve overall mental health outcomes for the population.

Integration of IKS and modern healthcare practices

There has been growing recognition of the potential benefits of integrating IKS with biomedical approaches to mental health care. Studies in countries like South Africa and Ghana have shown that such integration can improve patient satisfaction, compliance, and health outcomes by aligning treatment with cultural beliefs (Bodeker & Kronenberg, 2019; Osei, 2020). However, challenges remain, particularly regarding the lack of formal recognition and regulation of traditional healing practices (Sorsdahl & Stein, 2019). Without a clear framework, traditional healers may struggle to collaborate with biomedical practitioners in health institutions thus limiting the potential for holistic care. Furthermore, the absence of guidelines can lead to inconsistencies in practice and undermine the credibility of traditional methods. Notably, to realize the benefits of integration, it is fundamental to establish regulatory frameworks that recognize and validate traditional healing practices and other components of IKS. This would not only enhance collaboration between traditional and biomedical practitioners but also empower communities to access culturally relevant mental health care.

Gaps in the literature

Given that research has been conducted on the role of IKS in health management, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding its integration into formal mental healthcare systems, particularly in Zimbabwe (Chibanda et al., 2020). Additionally, most studies have focused on the perspectives of healthcare providers, with little attention given to patients' experiences and preferences (Osei, 2020). This study seeks to fill these gaps by exploring both the healthcare workers' and patients' perspectives at Annexe, offering a comprehensive understanding of the potential for a hybrid model of care. The existing gaps prevent the attainment of a deeper understanding of how IKS can complement the existing mental health services in local mental health institutions. Thus, comprehensive approaches to practical pathways for IKS integration can be integrated into formal mental health systems.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the role of IKS in mental health management at Annexe. Case studies are particularly useful for gaining an in-depth understanding of complex issues, such as the intersection of IKS and biomedical practices, within a specific context (Creswell & Poth, 2021). The qualitative design allowed for the collection of rich, detailed data that reflects the lived experiences of both healthcare workers and patients at Annexe.

Sampling technique

Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of 10 participants: eight caregivers and traditional healers involved in mental health management, and 2 healthcare managers at Annexe. Purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative studies that seek to gather in-depth insights from individuals with direct experience and knowledge of the research topic (Levy & Thompson, 2021). The inclusion of both traditional healers and modern healthcare providers allowed for a comparative analysis of the two systems.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), which provided the flexibility needed to explore participants' experiences and perceptions in detail (Maree, 2021). Interviews with traditional healers focused on their approaches to mental health treatment, while discussions with healthcare providers centred on the potential for integrating IKS into the formal healthcare system. All interviews and discussions were recorded, transcribed, and coded for thematic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

Ethical considerations

Given the cultural sensitivity surrounding mental health and traditional healing practices, ethical approval was obtained from the Ministry of Health, and informed consent was secured from all participants (See attached copy: Appendix B). Measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality of participants and to minimize any potential harm or distress (Maree, 2021).

Data analysis

Thematic content analysis was employed to identify and categorize key themes emerging from the data. The themes were organized according to the research objectives, focusing on the role of IKS, the challenges of integration, and the potential benefits of a hybrid healthcare model (Maree, 2021). This method of analysis allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and the drawing of meaningful conclusions from the qualitative data (Levy & Thompson, 2021).

Results

The role of IKS in mental health management

The data revealed that Indigenous Knowledge Systems play a significant role in mental health management at Annexe, particularly among patients who hold strong cultural beliefs about the spiritual causes of mental illness (Mudzingwa, 2019). Traditional healers are often the first point of contact for individuals experiencing mental health disorders, with many patients reporting that they initially sought spiritual intervention before seeking biomedical care (Gureje & Nortje, 2018).

Healthcare providers at Annexe acknowledged the importance of IKS in culturally grounded communities, noting that many patients are more receptive to treatment when their cultural beliefs are respected. One healthcare manager stated,

"If we don't consider their cultural beliefs, the patients often don't follow through with the treatment" (Participant 1, personal interview, 2024).

Many individuals in our community rely on traditional healing practices that have been passed down through generations. When we incorporate these practices into formal treatment plans, patients feel more understood and supported (Participant 3 personal interview, 2024).

IKS offers valuable insights into how mental health issues are perceived in different cultures. For example, some patients may view mental illness as a spiritual challenge rather than a medical one (Participant 5 personal interview, 2024).

These findings reflect a broader trend observed in various healthcare settings, where cultural dissonance can lead to patient disengagement. The findings suggest that mental health professionals must prioritize cultural competence, actively seeking to understand and incorporate patients' beliefs and values into their treatment plans. This underscores the need for a more culturally sensitive approach to mental health care. These findings call for a paradigm shift in mental health care that emphasizes the integration of cultural beliefs and traditional practices. By fostering collaboration between formal healthcare systems and traditional healers, mental health professionals can enhance treatment adherence and improve outcomes for diverse populations. This holistic approach not only respects cultural diversity but also promotes a more inclusive and effective mental health care system.

Challenges in integrating IKS with modern healthcare practices

Despite the clear cultural significance of IKS, several challenges hinder its integration with modern healthcare practices at Annexe. The most prominent challenge is the lack of formal recognition and regulation of traditional healing practices within Zimbabwe's health policies (Mudzingwa, 2019). Healthcare providers expressed concerns about the safety and efficacy of some traditional treatments, particularly those involving herbal remedies, which are not subject to the same rigorous testing as pharmaceutical drugs (Sorsdahl & Stein, 2019).

Moreover, there is scepticism among some medical professionals regarding the scientific validity of traditional healing practices. One healthcare worker noted,

There is no framework in place that allows us to formally work with traditional healers, even though we know patients often use both systems (Participant 2, personal interview, 2024).

One of the main challenges in integrating IKS with modern healthcare is the lack of formal recognition for traditional healing practices. Many healthcare providers view these practices as unscientific or inferior, which creates a barrier to collaboration (Participant 3, personal interview, 2024).

Many healthcare systems lack the funding and infrastructure needed to support the integration of IKS. This includes training for healthcare providers on cultural competencies and the development of collaborative frameworks that include traditional healers (Participant 5, personal interview, 2024).

This lack of collaboration between traditional healers and biomedical professionals limits the potential for a truly integrative approach to mental health care.

Benefits of a hybrid approach

Despite these challenges, the study's participants highlighted the potential benefits of integrating IKS with modern healthcare. Patients who use both systems reported higher satisfaction levels, noting that traditional practices provide emotional and spiritual healing, while modern medicine addresses the physical aspects of their illness (Gureje & Nortje, 2018). This dual approach allows patients to feel that their cultural beliefs are respected, which can improve treatment adherence and outcomes.

One caregiver stated:

When both traditional and hospital treatments are used together, the patient feels more complete (Participant 3, focus group discussion, 2024).

This sentiment was echoed by several participants, who emphasized the importance of spiritual healing in the overall treatment process (Bodeker & Kronenberg, 2019).

Moreover, this integration highly enables greater community trust in healthcare services. When patients see their traditional healers collaborating with medical professionals, it can reduce stigma and encourage more individuals to seek help. Ultimately, adopting both IKS and modern healthcare paves the way for a more inclusive and effective health system that embraces the diverse needs of all mental health patients.

Discussion

The need for policy reform

The findings of this study highlight the need for policy reforms that formally recognize the role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in mental health management. Currently, Zimbabwe's Mental Health Act does not provide a legal framework for the integration of traditional healing practices with modern healthcare (Mudzingwa, 2019). This lack of formal recognition limits the potential for collaboration between traditional healers and biomedical professionals, thereby hindering the development of a more holistic approach to mental health care (Petersen et al., 2019).

The success of hybrid models in other countries, such as South Africa and Ghana, demonstrates the potential benefits of integrating IKS with modern healthcare (Gureje & Nortje, 2018; Osei, 2020). These models have been shown to improve patient satisfaction and compliance by aligning treatment with cultural beliefs, suggesting that similar approaches could be successful in Zimbabwe if supported by appropriate policies (Chibanda et al., 2020).

The role of healthcare professionals

Healthcare professionals play a critical role in the successful integration of IKS with modern healthcare practices. Training programs that educate healthcare workers on the benefits of IKS, combined with community engagement initiatives, could facilitate better collaboration between traditional healers and biomedical professionals (Sorsdahl & Stein, 2019). Such integration would not only improve patient outcomes but also reduce the stigma associated with mental health disorders by aligning treatment approaches with cultural beliefs (Petersen et al., 2019).

Furthermore, healthcare professionals must be open to working with traditional healers in a complementary manner, recognizing the strengths of both systems. One healthcare provider noted, "We need to move away from the idea that it's either traditional or modern medicine—both can coexist and work together" (Participant 4, personal interview, 2024). This sentiment reflects the growing recognition of the value of integrative healthcare models (Osei, 2020).

A hybrid model for mental health management

Based on the findings of this study, a hybrid model of mental health management is proposed, which would integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems with modern biomedical practices. Such a model would recognize the cultural beliefs of patients while providing them with the necessary biomedical treatments. This approach would require collaboration between the Ministry of Health, traditional healers, and mental health professionals, as well as the creation of regulatory frameworks to guide the safe and effective use of traditional healing practices (Chibanda et al., 2020).

The hybrid model includes the following components:

- **Cultural Sensitivity Training:** Healthcare workers should receive training on the cultural significance of IKS and how to integrate traditional practices into patient care.
- **Collaboration with Traditional Healers:** Formal partnerships should be established between hospitals and traditional healers, allowing for referrals and collaborative treatment plans.
- **Regulatory Frameworks:** Policies should be developed to regulate the use of herbal remedies and other traditional treatments to ensure patient safety.

Recommendations and conclusion

Recommendations

- **Policy development:** The Zimbabwean government should develop policies that formally recognize the role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in healthcare, particularly in mental health management.
- **Training and collaboration:** Healthcare professionals should receive training on the benefits of IKS, and partnerships with traditional healers should be encouraged to improve patient outcomes.
- **Community Engagement:** Public health campaigns should educate communities on the complementary role that IKS and modern medicine can play in mental health treatment.
- **Further Research:** Future studies should explore the effectiveness of hybrid mental health treatment models in other parts of Zimbabwe and beyond.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role that Indigenous Knowledge Systems play in mental health management in Zimbabwe, particularly among patients at Annexe. However, the lack of formal recognition and integration of IKS within Zimbabwe's healthcare policies limits its potential to contribute to comprehensive mental health care. A hybrid model that combines both IKS and modern biomedical practices offers a promising solution to this issue, providing culturally relevant and effective care for patients.

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