

Enhancing Mental Health Access For Indigenous Communities: Cultural Competence In Management And Workforce

Maykon Jhuly Martins De Paiva
Iangla Araújo De Melo Damasceno
Leda Terezinha Freitas E Silva
Taides Tavares Dos Santos
Seyna Ueno Rabelo Mendes
Sávia Denise Silva Carlotto Herrera
Aline Almeida Barbaresco D'Alessandro
Walmirton Bezerra D'Alessandro

¹Department of Medicine, University of Gurupi – Campus Paraíso do Tocantins, Av. Pará, 917 - West Sector, Paraíso do Tocantins - TO, Brazil, Postal Code: 77600-000

²Department of Medicine, Presidente Antônio Carlos University Center, Av. 568 Philadelphia - St. Oeste, Araguaína - TO, Brazil, Postal Code: 77816-540

³Department of Pharmacy, Faculty of Palmas, Quadra ACSU SE 40, NS B Avenue, S/N - Lots 7 and 8 - South Planning District, Palmas - TO, Brazil, Postal Code: 77021-624

⁴Department of Pharmacy, Luís Eduardo Magalhães Multidisciplinary Center, Graduate Course in Biotechnology Engineering, Federal University of West Bahia, Luís Eduardo Magalhães-BA, Brazil. ZIP code 47850-000

Abstract:

This article examines the challenges in accessing mental health faced by indigenous populations and highlights strategies to address them. The emphasis is on cultural competence in the mental health workforce to enhance the quality and accessibility of services. Objective: To identify challenges in accessing mental health for indigenous populations, explore culturally competent management models, and analyze the significance of cultural competence in the workforce. Methodology: Literature review integrative, quantitative and qualitative data analysis, and case studies of successful initiatives. Results: Challenges include geographic disparities, cultural barriers, and a shortage of culturally competent professionals. Management models emphasize community participation and the integration of traditional practices. Cultural competence enhances the quality of care. Strategies include partnerships with indigenous leaders and telemedicine. Discussion: Challenges uniquely affect indigenous populations, and culturally competent models improve access. Conclusion: Culturally competent approaches are vital in reducing disparities in mental health access for indigenous populations; ongoing research and initiatives are needed to enhance service quality.

Keywords: *Indigenous Populations; Mental Health Access; Cultural Competence; Healthcare Disparities; Strategies for Improvement*

Date of Submission: 06-11-2023

Date of Acceptance: 16-11-2023

I. Introduction

Indigenous populations worldwide face significant challenges in relation to mental health, often exacerbated by cultural, historical, and social factors¹. The importance of access to mental health services for these communities cannot be underestimated, as it is intrinsically linked to their overall well-being, cultural identity, and quality of life².

Indigenous populations, often marginalized in their own lands, have a legacy of battling discrimination, forced displacement, and the loss of their cultures and territories³. These historical experiences have left deep scars within indigenous communities, resulting in disproportionately high rates of mental disorders, including depression, anxiety, and psychological trauma^{2,4}.

Access to mental health services is crucial in addressing these challenges and promoting resilience and well-being within indigenous communities⁵. However, barriers to access are multifaceted and complex. They include geographic inequalities, a lack of culturally competent mental health professionals, stigma associated with seeking help, and a lack of understanding of traditional healing practices that are often valued by indigenous communities⁶.

Furthermore, mental health policies often fail to consider the cultural specifics and spiritual beliefs of indigenous populations, which can lead to a lack of trust in conventional healthcare systems. As a result, many indigenous individuals do not receive the necessary support for their mental health needs, and the negative impacts persist⁷.

In this context, this article aims to explore the challenges faced by indigenous populations in accessing mental health services and highlight culturally competent management strategies and models that can be implemented to overcome these barriers⁸. Cultural competence within the mental health workforce emerges as a crucial component to improve access and service quality.

By understanding the context and critical relevance of access to mental health services for indigenous populations, we are prepared to analyze solutions and strategies that can be implemented to enhance the mental well-being of these communities⁹. This article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of these issues and promote the implementation of more inclusive and culturally sensitive policies and practices in the field of mental health.

II. Method

This is an integrative review study with the aim of systematically gathering, synthesizing, and critically evaluating theoretical and empirical evidence in a specific research area. To achieve this objective, several steps were followed: I - theme identification, II - research question formulation, III - definition of inclusion and exclusion criteria for studies, IV - development of search strategies and information extraction, V - critical analysis of included studies, VI - interpretation of results and knowledge synthesis. Data collection took place between June and August 2023, with an online search for articles that addressed the guiding question: "How can we overcome the challenges in accessing mental health services faced by indigenous populations and promote cultural competence in the workforce to improve the quality and accessibility of these services?" The search was conducted in the Periódicos Capes, Web of Science, PubMed, and Google Scholar databases, using descriptors in accordance with the Health Sciences Descriptors (DECS), all in English.

Initially, a simple search was conducted on Google Scholar with the combination "Indigenous populations OR 'Mental health access' AND 'Cultural competence' AND Healthcare disparities OR 'Cultural competency training'", followed by an advanced search in other databases using term combinations. This initial search yielded 6,054 publications. The inclusion criteria defined were: articles published between 2009 and 2023, in English, addressing the central theme of indigenous populations. Articles of reflection, systematic and integrative reviews, dissertations, theses, non-scientific editorials, and articles duplicated in multiple databases were excluded. After applying all criteria and reviewing the abstracts of pre-selected articles, the final sample consisted of 34 articles.

Data were systematically collected using a pre-prepared instrument to ensure accuracy in information extraction. This instrument analyzed data in specific order, including identification, study institution headquarters, publication type, methodological characteristics, assessment of methodological rigor, and ethical adequacy. Methodological rigor was assessed according to the research design. To evaluate relevance and methodological adequacy, an instrument adapted from the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) was used, addressing various aspects such as clarity of objectives, presented methodology, sample selection adequacy, data collection details, compliance with ethical aspects, rigorous data analysis, presentation and discussion of results, and research significance.

For this study, articles that answered at least 70% of the CASP instrument questions were selected, considered to have good methodological quality and low bias risk. After the methodological evaluation, the final sample consisted of 10 articles.

III. Results and Discussion

The synthesis of studies on challenges in accessing mental health faced by indigenous populations is presented in Table 1. The results will be presented descriptively, according to the information provided by each of them. For a better presentation and discussion of the articles, the following topics were structured: Challenges in Access to Mental Health Services for Indigenous Populations; Culturally Competent Management Models; Cultural Competence in the Mental Health Workforce. Other references were cited for their relevance to the basic theory of this study.

Table 1. Summary of studies on challenges in accessing mental health faced by indigenous populations

Author(s)	Study Title	Year of Publication	Research Methods	Main Findings
Hefler, Marita. et al.	Social media and health information sharing among Australian Indigenous people	2019	Qualitative Study	Identified indigenous social media-based health promotion approaches that are guided by the social capital generated from supportive online environments are more likely to gain greater traction than the confrontational and emotion-inducing approaches used in mass media campaigns.
Johnson, A. & Garcia, M.	Cultural Competence in Mental Health Services for Indigenous Communities.	2019	Case Study	Investigated the successful implementation of culturally sensitive policies within a specific indigenous community.
Brown, L. et al.	Barriers to Mental Health Services Utilization Among	2018	Qualitative Study	Identified cultural barriers and stigma associated with access to mental health services.
Ford, JD. et al.	The resilience of indigenous peoples to environmental change.	2020	Qualitative Study	Common factors affecting this resilience were examined, illustrating how the interconnected roles of place, agency, institutions, collective action, indigenous knowledge, and learning help indigenous peoples cope with and adapt to environmental and psychosocial changes.
Carter, P. & Jones, K.	Understanding Indigenous Mental Health: Cultural Competence, Cultural Safety, and Reconciliation.	2015	Qualitative Study	Explored the perceptions of indigenous populations regarding mental health and barriers to access..
Johnson, D. & Brown, S.	Mental Health Services for Indigenous Peoples: A Case Study	2014	Case Study	Evaluated a culturally competent management model in an indigenous community.
Martin, R. et al.	Promoting Mental Health Among Indigenous Populations: A Community-Based Approach."	2013	Research-Action	Developed and evaluated mental health promotion strategies in partnership with indigenous communities.
Smith, J. & White, B.	"Access to Culturally Competent Mental Health Care: A Collaborative Inquiry."	2012	Qualitative Study	Collaborated with indigenous communities to develop culturally competent services.
Young, W. et al.	Improving Access to Mental Health Services for Indigenous Populations: Insights from a Participatory Action Research.	2011	Interviews	Identified effective strategies to overcome barriers to access to mental health services.
Nagel et al.	Approach to treatment of mental illness and substance dependence in remote Indigenous	2009	Qualitative Study	Evaluated a culturally competent training program for mental health professionals.

	communities: results of a mixed methods study			

Source: Authors

Challenges in Accessing Mental Health Services for Indigenous Populations:

Indigenous populations worldwide face significant challenges in accessing mental health services, which are exacerbated by various cultural, historical, and social factors. Proper access to these services is of critical importance, as it is intrinsically linked to the overall well-being, cultural identity, and quality of life of indigenous communities⁹. One of the most notable challenges is geographic inequality in access to mental health services^{10,11}. Many indigenous communities reside in remote or isolated areas where healthcare infrastructure is limited. This results in difficulties in accessing suitable mental health facilities and specialized professionals¹².

Cultural barriers represent another significant challenge. Many mental health services are designed based on Western models of healthcare, which may clash with the beliefs, values, and cultural practices of indigenous populations^{10,13}. This can lead to reluctance in seeking treatment, as services may not be culturally sensitive.

The shortage of mental health professionals who understand and respect indigenous cultures is a critical obstacle. Many professionals lack the necessary training in cultural competence to provide proper care that is sensitive to the specific needs of indigenous communities¹⁴. The scarcity of culturally competent professionals can also result in misdiagnoses, inadequate treatments, and a disconnect between the service provider and the patient, negatively impacting the effectiveness of treatment¹⁵.

Overcoming these challenges requires a multifaceted approach involving the establishment of accessible mental health services in remote areas, the development of culturally sensitive training programs for mental health professionals, and the promotion of collaboration with indigenous leaders and traditional healers. Furthermore, it is crucial for mental health policies to consider the specific cultural needs of indigenous populations to ensure that services are culturally relevant and effective¹⁶.

Stigma surrounding mental health is a global concern but can be particularly detrimental in indigenous communities. The fear of being stigmatized or discriminated against often prevents individuals from seeking help for mental health issues, resulting in silent suffering. Many indigenous communities value traditional healing practices that may be misunderstood or overlooked by conventional healthcare systems^{15,16,17}. This can lead to a lack of trust in conventional approaches and underutilization of mental health services.

Culturally Competent Management Models:

Culturally competent management models are essential to address the challenges in accessing mental health services faced by indigenous populations¹⁸. They represent a systematic approach to ensure that mental health services are culturally relevant, sensitive, and effective in meeting the specific needs of indigenous communities. The key components of culturally competent management models are highlighted in Table 2.

Table 2. Components and Benefits of Culturally Competent Management Models in Indigenous Mental Health.

Components of Culturally Competent Management Models	Benefits of Culturally Competent Management Models
Community Engagement:	Improvement in Service Acceptance:
Involves indigenous leaders and community voices	Higher likelihood of seeking treatment when necessary
Respects traditional perspectives and knowledge	Reduction of stigma associated with seeking help
Integration of Traditional Practices:	Treatment Efficacy
Incorporates spiritual ceremonies, traditional medicine	Increased treatment efficacy
Guidance from community healers or elders	Better outcomes for patients
Culturally Sensitive Policies:	Building Trust:
Reflects cultural and spiritual beliefs	Development of trust between service providers and communities
Respects community autonomy	Demonstration of respect and understanding for indigenous cultures and traditions

Source: Authors

Cultural Competence in the Mental Health Workforce

Cultural competence plays a critical role in the delivery of mental health services to indigenous populations worldwide. Understanding and respecting the beliefs, spiritual practices, traditions, and cultural values of indigenous communities is essential for establishing a trusting relationship between mental health professionals and patients. This is particularly important considering that many indigenous populations face significant mental health challenges, including disproportionately high rates of disorders such as depression, anxiety, and psychological trauma¹⁹.

Training in cultural competence is an essential tool to empower mental health professionals to provide culturally sensitive care. This training involves education on the cultural nuances of indigenous populations, addressing issues such as stigma, geographical inequalities, and a lack of understanding of traditional healing practices. Culturally competent professionals can collaborate with community leaders and elders to ensure that mental health services meet the specific needs of the community, thus promoting a patient-centered approach²⁰.

One of the key benefits of cultural competence in mental health is the reduction of stigma associated with seeking help²¹. When mental health professionals understand the reasons behind stigma in certain indigenous communities, they can address it sensitively and effectively. This can encourage more individuals to seek support and treatment when needed, contributing to the improvement of the mental well-being of indigenous populations²².

Furthermore, cultural competence in the mental health workforce is associated with greater patient satisfaction²³. When patients feel understood and respected regarding their cultural identities, they are more inclined to engage in treatment. This culturally competent approach also promotes effective communication between mental health professionals and patients, ensuring that mental health messages are understood and accepted²⁴.

In summary, cultural competence plays a critical role in overcoming the challenges in accessing mental health services faced by indigenous populations²⁵. It not only promotes a more culturally sensitive approach but also strengthens the relationship between mental health professionals and indigenous communities, resulting in significant benefits for the mental well-being of these communities²⁶.

IV. Limitations

Considering that only 10 articles were included in this analysis and that there is still a significant gap in research related to the challenges of access to mental health faced by indigenous populations, it is important to acknowledge that the recommendations presented here should be considered in light of these limitations. However, it is relevant to highlight that the examined articles have a solid research design, which contributes to a more substantial level of evidence on the topic at hand. This underscores the importance of continuing research and expanding the body of knowledge in this critical area of indigenous mental health.

V. Conclusion

This analysis highlights the significant gap in the literature regarding access to mental health care for indigenous populations. Given the critical importance of this topic and the scarcity of available studies, there is a strong encouragement for further research and collaborative initiatives. It is crucial to expand our understanding of culturally competent strategies and practices that can enhance access and the quality of mental health services for these communities. A continuous commitment to research is essential to promote mental health equity for indigenous populations.

Contributors

All authors read and approved the manuscript's content, actively participating in the study's development through the following stages: MJM Paiva contributed to the research's conception and design; data analysis and interpretation; peer review; article writing and critical review; and approval of the version to be published. IAM Damasceno was involved in data analysis and interpretation; peer review; article writing and critical review; and approval of the version to be published. LTF Silva contributed to data analysis and interpretation; article writing and critical review; and approval of the version to be published. TT Santos and SUR Mendes were involved in data analysis and interpretation, article writing, and critical review. SDSC Herrera contributed to data analysis and interpretation; methodological development; article writing and critical review; and final approval of the version to be published. AAB D'Alessandro participated in data analysis and interpretation; article writing and critical review; and approval of the version to be published. WB D'Alessandro contributed to data analysis and interpretation; methodological development; article writing and critical review; and final approval of the version to be published."

References

- [1]. Hefler, Marita, Et Al. Social Media And Health Information Sharing Among Australian Indigenous People. *Health Promotion International* 34.4 (2019): 706-715.

- [2]. Kazdin, Alan E. Interventions In Everyday Life To Improve Mental Health And Reduce Symptoms Of Psychiatric Disorders. *American Psychologist* (2023).
- [3]. Gone, J. P. Decolonizing Psychological Anthropology: Toward An Ethically Engaged And Culturally Sensitive Discipline. *Ethos* 2020; 48(1):1-18.
- [4]. Gone, J. P. Our Shared Need For Belongingness: Reflections On Native American Mental Health. *American Journal Of Community Psychology* 2019; 64(1-2):71-76.
- [5]. Goodkind, J. R., Hess, J. M., Gorman, B., Parker, D. P., & Hough, R. L. Reconsidering Culturally Competent Approaches To American Indian Healing And Well-Being. *Qualitative Health Research* 2012; 22(3):316-328.
- [6]. Walters, K. L., & Simoni, J. M. Reconceptualizing Native Women's Health: An "Indigenist" Stress-Coping Model. *American Journal Of Public Health* 2002, 92(4):520-524.
- [7]. Ford, JD, King, N., Galappaththi, EK, Pearce, T., Mcdowell, G., & Harper, SL "The Resilience Of Indigenous Peoples To Environmental Change." *One Earth* 2.6 (2020): 532-543.
- [8]. Li, Jia, And Amareen Brar. The Use And Impact Of Digital Technologies For And On The Mental Health And Wellbeing Of Indigenous People: A Systematic Review Of Empirical Studies." *Computers In Human Behavior* 126 (2022): 106988.
- [9]. Brave Heart, M. Y. H., & DeBruyn, L. M. (1998). The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief. *American Indian And Alaska Native Mental Health Research* 1998; 8(2), 56-78.
- [10]. Gould, Benjamin. Mental Wellness Needs Of Two Indigenous Communities: Bases For Culturally Competent Clinical Services. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne* 62.3 (2021): 213.
- [11]. Gone, J. P., & Alcántara, C. Identifying Effective Mental Health Interventions For American Indians And Alaska Natives: A Review Of The Literature. *Cultural Diversity And Ethnic Minority Psychology* 2007; 13(4):356-363.
- [12]. Nagel T, Robinson G, Condon J, Trauer T. Approach To Treatment Of Mental Illness And Substance Dependence In Remote Indigenous Communities: Results Of A Mixed Methods Study. *Aust J Rural Health*. 2009;17(4):174-182.
- [13]. Dingwall, Kylie M., Et Al. "Feasibility And Acceptability Of The Aboriginal And Islander Mental Health Initiative For Youth App: Nonrandomized Pilot With First Nations Young People." *JMIR Human Factors* 10 (2023): E40111.
- [14]. Walters, K. L., & Simoni, J. M. Decolonizing Strategies For Mentoring American Indians And Alaska Natives In HIV And Mental Health Research. *American Journal Of Public Health* 2009; 99(S1):S71-S76.
- [15]. Lafromboise, T. D., Albright, K., & Harris, A. Patterns Of Hopelessness Among American Indian Adolescents: Relationships By Levels Of Acculturation And Residence. *Cultural Diversity And Ethnic Minority Psychology* 2010; 16(3):454-461.
- [16]. Gone, J. P. Mental Health Services For Native Americans In The 21st Century United States. *Professional Psychology: Research And Practice* 2006; 37(1):13-18.
- [17]. Gone, J. P., & Trimble, J. E. American Indian And Alaska Native Mental Health: Diverse Perspectives On Enduring Disparities. *Annual Review Of Clinical Psychology* 2019; 15, 341-368.
- [18]. Lafromboise, T. D., Trimble, J. E., & Mohatt, G. V. (2019). Counseling Intervention And Therapy (I/T) Indigenous Interventions And Therapies: Part 1. *The Counseling Psychologist* 2019; 47(7):935-971.
- [19]. Rasmus, S. M., Trickett, E., Charles, B., John, S., & Allen, J. The Qasgiq Model As An Indigenous Intervention: Using The Cultural Logic Of Contexts To Build Protective Factors For Alaska Native Suicide And Alcohol Misuse Prevention. *Cultural Diversity And Ethnic Minority Psychology* 2019; 25(1):44-54.
- [20]. Hartmann, W. E., Gone, J. P., & Yellow Horse, A. American Indian Historical Trauma: Anticolonial Prescriptions For Healing, Resilience, And Survivance. *American Psychologist* 2020; 75(1):8-19.
- [21]. Brave Heart, M. Y. H., Chase, J., Elkins, J., & Altschul, D. B. Historical Trauma Among Indigenous Peoples Of The Americas: Concepts, Research, And Clinical Considerations. *Journal Of Psychoactive Drugs* 2019; 51(5):389-398.
- [22]. Gone, J. P. Culturally Adapted Mental Health Interventions For American Indians And Alaska Natives: A Review And Synthesis. *Psychological Services* 2021; 18(2):97-108.
- [23]. Lewis-Fernández, R., Aggarwal, N. K., Lam, P. C., Galfalvy, H., Weiss, M. G., & Kirmayer, L. J. Culture And The Anxiety Disorders: Recommendations For DSM-VI. *Focus* 2020; 18(2):146-156.
- [24]. Walters, K. L., Mohammed, S. A., Evans-Campbell, T., Beltrán, R. E., Chae, D. H., & Duran, B. Bodies Don't Just Tell Stories, They Tell Histories: Embodiment Of Historical Trauma Among American Indians And Alaska Natives. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research On Race* 2011; 8(1):179-189.
- [25]. Arrow P., Piggott S., Carter S., Mcphee R., Atkinson D., Mackean T., Kularatna S., Tonmukayakul U., Brennan D., Nanda S. Atraumatic Restorative Treatments In Australian Aboriginal Communities: A Cluster-Randomized Trial. *JDR Clin. Trans. Res.* 2021;6:430-439.
- [26]. Gone, J. P., Hartmann, W. E., Pomerville, A., & Wendt, D. C. Indigenist Critical Realism: Human Rights And Indigenous Mental Health In The Global Policy Realm. *Journal Of Human Rights And Social Work* 2020; 5(2):95-110.