

Cultural Mediators in Action: Enhancing Psychological Counseling for International Students Through the PASSI@Unito Project

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Abstract

This article examines the critical role of cultural mediation in psychological counseling, focusing on its application in intercultural counseling for international students at the University of Turin, Italy. Drawing on professional clinical experiences from the PASSI@Unito service, the study explores how cultural mediators bridge linguistic and cultural gaps between local psychologists and international students. By analyzing selected clinical examples, the article highlights innovative strategies and practical tools employed by mediators to assist psychologists in understanding the cultural, political, and economic contexts that influence students' behaviors, thought processes, and communication styles. These examples underscore the challenges international students face in academic, social, and everyday settings due to cultural differences, emphasizing the mediators' pivotal role in fostering understanding, trust, and effective support. The findings also reveal the need for comprehensive training programs to enhance the skills of cultural mediators, ensuring the provision of high-quality psychological support for international students. Concluding with actionable recommendations, the article advocates for targeted training initiatives and improved strategies to promote culturally sensitive and effective psychological services in intercultural contexts.

Keywords: Cultural Mediation, International Students, Psychological Counseling

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Introduction: Research Context and Rationale

The increasing global mobility of students has transformed university campuses into multicultural environments, advancing the internationalization of higher education. While this phenomenon fosters cultural exchange and intellectual growth, it also poses unique challenges, particularly for the mental health and psychological well-being of international students. These students often face cultural, linguistic, and social barriers that complicate their adjustment to host countries, intensifying feelings of isolation, stress, and alienation (Arthur, 2017). Such challenges are especially pronounced in university settings, where academic pressures, cultural dissonance, and language difficulties intersect, creating a complex web of stressors that require specialized support.

Traditional psychological counseling often fails to address the specific cultural nuances that shape international students' experiences. Counseling frameworks rooted in Western paradigms tend to prioritize individualism, self-expression, and autonomy, which may not align with the cultural values of students from collectivist or non-Western societies (Leong & Kalibatseva, 2011). Without culturally sensitive interventions, counseling services risk being ineffective or even counterproductive, leaving international students underserved.

To address these gaps, cultural mediation has emerged as a transformative practice in psychological counseling. By bridging linguistic and cultural divides, cultural mediators enable counselors to provide empathetic and contextually relevant support, fostering mutual understanding and facilitating effective therapeutic outcomes. This article explores the concept, role, and significance of cultural mediation, with a focus on its transformative potential for international students in Italy.

Theoretical Background of Cultural Mediation

Cultural mediation is rooted in the broader principles of intercultural communication and sociocultural adaptation, offering a structured approach to bridging cultural gaps between individuals from diverse backgrounds. The concept originated in the mid-20th century within fields such as anthropology and sociology, where scholars began recognizing the need for intermediaries to facilitate understanding in culturally diverse contexts (Bennett, 1998). Early applications of cultural mediation were primarily in conflict resolution and immigrant integration, but the practice has since expanded into education, healthcare, and psychological counseling.

Cultural mediators serve as intermediaries who translate not only language but also the cultural values, norms, and behaviors that underpin communication and interaction. Unlike traditional translators, mediators provide contextual interpretations that help individuals from different cultural backgrounds understand each other more deeply. Their work is grounded in theories of intercultural competence, which emphasize the ability to navigate cultural differences effectively by developing awareness, knowledge, and skills (Byram, 1997).

In psychological counseling, cultural mediation has gained prominence as a strategy for addressing the complexities of intercultural therapy. Research highlights its dual role in improving access to services and enhancing the quality of therapeutic interactions. Mediators help counselors grasp the socio-cultural and political contexts shaping clients' experiences, while also empowering clients to articulate their concerns in culturally resonant ways (Baim

& Guthrie, 2014). This approach not only fosters mutual understanding but also mitigates the risk of cultural misunderstandings that can undermine therapeutic outcomes.

Cultural Competence and the Role of Mediation

At the heart of effective intercultural counseling lies cultural competence, a fundamental skill set for professionals working with diverse populations. Cultural competence is defined as the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact across cultural boundaries. It encompasses three critical components: cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills, which enable counselors to recognize and address cultural influences on clients' behaviors, emotions, and perceptions (Sue & Sue, 2013, p. 25). These competencies allow counselors to tailor their interventions, creating therapeutic environments that are inclusive and responsive to the needs of diverse populations.

However, achieving cultural competence is not without challenges. Most counseling frameworks are deeply rooted in Western psychological theories, which may overlook culturally specific behaviors and expressions of distress. For example, clients from non-Western societies may somatize psychological distress, expressing emotional pain through physical symptoms, or prioritize familial obligations over individual well-being (Kleinman, 1988, p. 14). Such cultural differences, if misunderstood, can lead to misdiagnoses and ineffective interventions, underscoring the need for complementary strategies like cultural mediation to bridge these gaps.

Cultural mediation provides a framework for addressing these complexities. It is particularly valuable in navigating differences in communication styles, culturally specific expressions of distress, and varying expectations of the counseling process. Clients from high-context cultures, such as many Asian societies, often rely on indirect communication and nonverbal cues, which may be misinterpreted by counselors accustomed to low-context, direct communication styles (Hall, 1976, p. 91). By offering critical interpretations, mediators help counselors understand the socio-cultural and political contexts influencing clients' experiences. This dual facilitation ensures that counseling sessions are both linguistically accessible and culturally attuned, enhancing mutual understanding and therapeutic efficacy (Baim & Guthrie, 2014, p. 34).

Specific Challenges Faced by International Students in University Settings

International students encounter a complex array of challenges that can significantly affect their mental health, academic success, and overall well-being. These challenges are deeply interconnected, often stemming from cultural, linguistic, and educational differences that complicate their adjustment to university life in a foreign country.

One of the most pervasive issues is the language barrier, which frequently limits international students' ability to express their thoughts and feelings effectively (Arthur, 2017). This challenge extends beyond academic settings, as limited language proficiency can hinder their engagement with peers, instructors, and mental health professionals. For instance, students may struggle to articulate their emotional distress in a second or third language, leading to feelings of frustration, isolation, and being misunderstood.

Cultural differences significantly amplify the challenges faced by international students in navigating unfamiliar educational systems and societal norms. These difficulties often stem

from fundamental mismatches between cultural values and academic expectations. For instance, Western academic settings typically prioritize active participation, independent thinking, and critical questioning as markers of academic engagement and success (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). However, students from cultures emphasizing hierarchical deference, collective harmony, and respect for authority may find these norms unfamiliar or uncomfortable (Hofstede, 1986; Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010). As a result, their behavior may be misinterpreted as disengagement or lack of motivation, when, in fact, it reflects deeply ingrained cultural frameworks and communication styles.

Moreover, cultural adjustment can impact not only academic participation but also interpersonal interactions. Research highlights that international students often struggle with forming social connections in host countries due to cultural and linguistic barriers (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). These challenges underline the need for institutions to adopt culturally responsive approaches to support international students, recognizing the diversity of their experiences and needs.

Social isolation and discrimination exacerbate these challenges, contributing to a profound sense of alienation. Many international students report difficulties in building meaningful relationships with local peers, who may perceive them through cultural stereotypes or fail to appreciate the complexities of their experiences. Instructors and mental health professionals, similarly, may lack the cultural awareness needed to effectively support these students, reinforcing feelings of being misunderstood or marginalized. These experiences highlight the urgent need for culturally sensitive interventions, such as cultural mediation, to create inclusive and supportive environments.

Research Insights From the Practical Model of the PASSI@Unito Project

This study is grounded in the professional clinical experiences of the PASSI@Unito project, a psychological counseling service designed to support international students at the University of Turin since 2019. Central to its methodology is the integration of cultural mediation, which serves as both a theoretical and practical innovation in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by international students. These challenges—arising from linguistic barriers, cultural dissonance, and the pressures of adapting to unfamiliar academic and social environments—demand interventions that are both tailored and culturally sensitive.

The PASSI@Unito project draws on theoretical frameworks of cultural competence, intercultural communication, and transcultural psychiatry. As Beneduce (2010) emphasizes, transcultural approaches in mental health prioritize an understanding of the historical, social, and political forces that shape individuals' experiences and suffering. Cultural mediation, a cornerstone of the PASSI project, operationalizes this perspective by situating the therapeutic encounter within the broader socio-cultural and political contexts of the students' lives. This aligns with Taliani's (2018) work on the "poetics of suffering", which underscores the importance of interpreting individual distress within culturally embedded narratives.

The project also incorporates insights from Sue and Sue's (2013) model of cultural competence, which advocates for counselors' awareness, knowledge, and skills to address cultural influences on their clients' behaviors and concerns. Intercultural communication theories, such as those by Hall (1976), inform the understanding of high-context versus low-context communication styles—an area where cultural mediation proves invaluable in

preventing misinterpretations. Mediators function as bridges, not merely translating language but also interpreting cultural codes and contextual meanings, thereby enriching the therapeutic process.

Through ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews, and detailed case studies, this research captures the transformative role of cultural mediation in enhancing counseling outcomes. One illustrative case involved a Chinese student whose hesitation to participate in class discussions was initially perceived by counselors as disengagement. Drawing on insights from Confucian cultural values, the mediator explained the student's deference to authority and preference for reflection over immediate response. This reframing helped the counselor adopt a culturally informed approach, fostering greater empathy and enabling the student to engage more confidently in academic settings.

Beneduce's (2016) notion of "displacement of suffering" resonates with the PASSI approach, as cultural mediation acknowledges and addresses the impact of migration, isolation, and systemic inequalities on students' mental health. Mediators provide critical socio-cultural interpretations that deepen counselors' understanding of the intersecting factors influencing students' experiences. This aligns with Arthur's (2017) findings that culturally attuned counseling reduces feelings of alienation and fosters a sense of belonging, which are critical to the mental health and academic success of international students.

By integrating cultural mediation into its practices, the PASSI@Unito project not only addresses linguistic and cultural barriers but also challenges traditional counseling models that may inadvertently marginalize non-Western perspectives. This article contributes to the broader discourse on intercultural counseling by critically analyzing the successes and challenges of the PASSI@Unito project. It offers a model for institutionalizing cultural mediation as a standard component of psychological support in multicultural university settings. The findings highlight the transformative potential of mediation in fostering equity, inclusivity, and efficacy in counseling practices while addressing the diverse needs of international students.

Cultural Mediation: Bridging Theory and Practice in Psychological Counseling

Cultural mediation is a dynamic, practice-oriented approach that addresses the complexities of cultural diversity in psychological counseling. It bridges gaps arising from cultural and linguistic differences, ensuring that services are accessible and culturally responsive. Mediators play a crucial role in fostering trust, understanding, and therapeutic effectiveness by navigating the intricacies of intercultural dynamics.

As Byram (1997) and Sue and Sue (2013) emphasize, cultural competence extends beyond awareness of differences to actively negotiating values and behaviors for shared understanding. This is vital in overcoming systemic barriers and communication challenges, particularly for international students and other culturally diverse populations. Research indicates that fostering such understanding promotes trust and engagement, key factors for effective therapy (Arthur, 2017).

Cultural mediation integrates these principles into a practical framework, aligning counseling methods with clients' cultural contexts. Mediators address divides in communication styles, expressions of distress, and behavioral norms. Grounded in theories such as Hall's (1976)

high- and low-context communication model, mediation helps counselors interpret implicit cultural codes, enhancing mutual understanding.

Additionally, mediation addresses culturally specific phenomena like the somatization of distress, common in collectivist cultures where emotional struggles manifest as physical symptoms (Kleinman, 1988). Mediators provide insights into these expressions, enabling culturally adaptive interventions that validate diverse experiences of distress (Leong, Eggerth, & Chang, 2017).

Effective mediation also requires critical reflexivity to avoid essentializing cultural practices. Cultural identities are fluid and shaped by multiple factors. Mediators must remain sensitive to this complexity, ensuring their interpretations respect the diversity of individual experiences (Hansen & Sassenberg, 2020).

By bridging cultural and linguistic divides, cultural mediation fosters inclusivity and understanding, enhancing therapeutic outcomes and advancing equitable mental health services.

Cultural Contextualization as a Relational Tool

Cultural contextualization plays a vital role in bridging the gap between counselors' expectations and students' culturally rooted behaviors. For instance, in a counseling session involving a Chinese student who was reluctant to discuss familial conflicts, I explained that this behavior reflected Confucian values prioritizing filial piety and family harmony (Huang, 2022). This cultural insight allowed the counselor to create a non-confrontational environment, encouraging the student to engage more openly. While this approach aligns with Sue and Sue's (2013) emphasis on cultural awareness and skill development, it also raises critical questions about the delicate balance between respecting cultural values and fostering self-expression within the therapeutic process. This tension underscores the need for mediators to facilitate a dynamic interplay between cultural validation and therapeutic goals.

High-Context vs. Low-Context Communication: Moving Beyond Simplification

Hall's (1976) framework of high- and low-context communication remains a valuable tool for understanding diverse communication styles but has faced criticism for oversimplifying individual experiences. High-context communication, often associated with Asian cultures, emphasizes nonverbal cues, indirectness, and reliance on shared cultural understanding. These tendencies often reflect cultural values such as humility and deference to authority (Giri, 2020). For instance, in one case, I explained to an Italian counselor that a Chinese student's minimal verbal feedback did not indicate disengagement but rather stemmed from these cultural norms. This insight allowed the counselor to adopt a more empathetic and culturally sensitive approach, enhancing the therapeutic relationship.

However, generalizations about communication styles must be approached with caution. Byram (1997) and more recent scholarship (Holliday, 2018) stress the need to recognize cultural tendencies as fluid and context-dependent rather than fixed. Individuals often navigate and adapt to multiple cultural frameworks, and over-reliance on broad categorizations risks essentializing identities and perpetuating stereotypes. Instead, a nuanced understanding of the interplay between cultural norms and individual agency is essential for effective intercultural communication in counseling settings.

Decoding Cultural Expressions of Distress

Cultural expressions of psychological distress often deviate significantly from Western norms, requiring mediators to interpret culturally specific manifestations. In collectivist cultures, emotional pain is frequently somatized, appearing as physical symptoms. Research has documented this phenomenon extensively, emphasizing the role of cultural factors in shaping how distress is expressed and understood (Kirmayer et al., 2001; Ryder et al., 2008). For instance, during a session with a Middle Eastern student reporting chronic headaches, I collaborated with the counselor to uncover underlying emotional stressors while addressing the cultural stigma surrounding mental health discussions. This approach aligns with Kirmayer's (2004) work on explanatory models, which stress the need for culturally informed understandings of illness.

Such culturally specific expressions of distress challenge counselors to adapt their therapeutic frameworks. Effective interventions must incorporate these cultural dynamics while ensuring inclusivity and maintaining therapeutic rigor. Integrating insights from cultural psychiatry (Kirmayer & Ban, 2013) helps bridge the gap between culturally influenced expressions of distress and effective psychological care.

Navigating Linguistic and Emotional Landscapes

Effective communication in intercultural counseling transcends literal translation, requiring mediators to navigate the cultural subtext and emotional nuances embedded in student expressions. Approaches such as dual-layered translation and narrative sharing exemplify how mediators create inclusive therapeutic environments that honor cultural diversity.

In dual-layered translation, mediators go beyond the literal meaning of words to preserve their emotional and cultural significance. For instance, a Middle Eastern student described academic challenges using culturally specific metaphors. Literal translation would have stripped these metaphors of their emotional depth, potentially alienating the student. By providing contextual interpretations, I ensured that the counselor grasped the full significance of the student's concerns. This practice resonates with Baim and Guthrie's (2014) emphasis on mediators as cultural interpreters, while also raising critical questions about the mediator's role in shaping the therapeutic narrative, particularly in maintaining neutrality and avoiding over-interpretation.

Narrative sharing, another key strategy, empowers students to articulate their concerns within their cultural frameworks, fostering deeper connections with counselors. Arthur (2017) underscores the therapeutic value of storytelling, which not only validates students' experiences but also provides counselors with insights into the cultural pressures shaping their distress. For example, a South Asian student's narrative about familial expectations illuminated the collectivist values influencing their anxiety, enabling the counselor to tailor their interventions accordingly. However, this approach also necessitates careful navigation of the ethical tension between cultural validation and the potential imposition of Western therapeutic norms, particularly in contexts that prioritize individual autonomy.

Building Trust Through Cultural Sensitivity

Trust forms the cornerstone of effective counseling, particularly for students from cultures where mental health discussions are stigmatized (Sue & Sue, 2013). Mediators play a crucial

role in fostering this trust by guiding counselors to demonstrate cultural sensitivity and validate students' practices. For instance, in working with a Chinese student who relied on traditional healing methods, I encouraged the counselor to acknowledge and integrate these practices into the therapeutic dialogue. This approach aligns with Hall's (1976) emphasis on understanding cultural context while critiquing Western-centric counseling models that may marginalize alternative health perspectives. By bridging these gaps, mediators contribute to creating therapeutic environments where students feel respected, valued, and understood.

Cultural Mediation in Practice

Cultural mediation plays a vital role in psychological counseling by bridging linguistic and cultural gaps, facilitating effective communication, and fostering mutual understanding. The following cases illustrate the difficulties and predicaments faced by international students due to cultural and language barriers. They also demonstrate how targeted mediation strategies can resolve these challenges, highlighting the essential role of cultural mediators in promoting inclusive and effective counseling practices.

Example 1: Misinterpreted Silence

The Chinese student in this case encountered a significant communication barrier stemming from cultural differences in communication styles. Silence, often misunderstood in Western contexts as disengagement or disinterest, is a common communication feature in many East Asian cultures. It can signify respect, thoughtfulness, or a need for reflection rather than avoidance or lack of participation. The counselor's interpretation of the student's silence as disengagement risked alienating the student and undermining the therapeutic relationship, creating a barrier to effective counseling.

As a cultural mediator, understanding the high-context communication style typical of East Asian cultures was essential. I explained to the counselor that in such contexts, silence often carries positive connotations, reflecting careful consideration or deference to authority. This reframing of silence allowed the counselor to approach the sessions with greater cultural sensitivity.

To foster engagement, I suggested the counselor to use open-ended questions that provided the student with opportunities to reflect and respond without the pressure of immediate articulation. Additionally, encouraging longer pauses after questions allowed the student to process information at their own pace. Over time, these strategies created a more comfortable and inclusive environment, enabling the student to share their concerns more openly. This case underscores the need to adapt counseling practices to accommodate high-context cultural norms, challenging the Western paradigm that equates verbal articulation with active participation.

Example 2: Academic Pressure and Cultural Expectations

The South Asian student in this scenario faced intense anxiety related to career decisions, deeply rooted in familial expectations and cultural norms prioritizing collective success. In collectivist societies, such as those prevalent in South Asia, family often plays a central role in shaping individual goals and aspirations (Hofstede, 2011). The student struggled to reconcile these expectations with their personal aspirations, creating a significant source of stress. The counselor's initial focus on encouraging individual autonomy—an approach

aligned with Western therapeutic models—risked alienating the student by failing to align with their cultural values.

The mediation process began by contextualizing the student's concerns within their cultural framework. I explained the importance of family in South Asian cultures, where career choices are often seen as collective decisions rather than purely individual ones. This cultural insight helped the counselor shift their focus from solely promoting individual autonomy to exploring solutions that integrated familial input.

Narrative sharing, as recommended by Arthur (2017), was employed to help the student articulate their experiences and pressures. The student was encouraged to share their story, highlighting their family's expectations and their own aspirations. This narrative approach not only validated the student's experiences but also provided the counselor with critical insights into the cultural dimensions of the student's anxiety.

By integrating the family into the counseling process—such as discussing ways to involve them in career planning without compromising the student's personal goals—the counselor was able to align therapeutic interventions with the student's values. This approach demonstrated the importance of adapting counseling practices to reflect collectivist worldviews, addressing systemic gaps in Western-centric frameworks.

Example 3: Addressing Cultural Distance

The Middle Eastern student in this case struggled with both linguistic and cultural barriers, making it difficult to articulate frustrations over perceived academic bias. The student's limited proficiency in Italian compounded the issue, as they were unable to fully express their concerns. Additionally, cultural values emphasizing fairness and respect were central to the student's dissatisfaction but were not immediately apparent to the counselor. This situation reflects the challenges of cultural distance, where differences in cultural frameworks can create misunderstandings and feelings of alienation (Guo & Chase, 2011).

As a mediator, my role involved translating not only the student's language but also the cultural subtext underlying their concerns. This dual-layered translation approach ensured that the student's values and emotions were accurately conveyed to the counselor. By contextualizing the student's frustrations within their cultural emphasis on fairness and respect, I helped the counselor understand the deeper significance of the student's grievances.

The counselor was then able to validate the student's experiences, addressing their concerns with empathy and collaboratively exploring strategies to mitigate academic bias. This included discussing institutional policies and advocating for fair treatment within the academic setting. The mediation process also helped the student feel seen and supported, reducing their sense of alienation.

This case highlights the importance of addressing both linguistic and cultural barriers in counseling. It underscores the need for systemic changes within host institutions to reduce cultural distance and promote equity for international students.

Impact of Cultural Mediation on Counseling Practices

Cultural mediation serves as a bridge to address the challenges posed by cultural diversity in psychological counseling, particularly for international students. It integrates cultural, linguistic, and systemic elements into therapeutic practices, significantly enhancing the quality of interactions and fostering inclusive counseling environments. By promoting mutual understanding and creating culturally responsive spaces, cultural mediation contributes to the psychological well-being of students while empowering counselors to adapt their approaches effectively. However, its transformative potential also underscores systemic barriers that must be addressed for its broader implementation.

Enhancing Student Well-being

Cultural mediation plays a critical role in helping international students feel validated, understood, and empowered within counseling contexts. By integrating cultural insights into therapeutic interactions, mediation ensures that students' cultural identities and unique experiences are respected. For instance, a Chinese student described feeling “understood in a way that respects my culture” during a mediated session, alleviating their anxiety and fostering engagement. This aligns with Sue and Sue's (2013) emphasis on cultural competence, which highlights the importance of integrating cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills into counseling to enhance therapeutic efficacy. Furthermore, Leong et al. (2017) underscore that culturally tailored interventions reduce barriers to mental health services, fostering trust and engagement.

Mediation also addresses culturally specific expressions of psychological distress, such as the somatization of emotional pain common in collectivist cultures (Kleinman, 1988). By helping counselors interpret and respond to such culturally grounded behaviors, mediators create therapeutic environments that validate students' cultural frameworks while addressing their mental health concerns.

Empowering Counselors Through Adaptation

Cultural mediation enhances counselors' abilities to navigate cross-cultural dynamics, equipping them with the tools to engage effectively with diverse clients. Mediators provide cultural contextualization, offering counselors insights into the norms, values, and behaviors shaping students' interactions. For example, understanding the Confucian emphasis on filial piety enables counselors to approach East Asian students' reluctance to discuss familial conflicts with greater sensitivity (Huang, 2022). This practice aligns with Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence, which highlights the dynamic process of negotiating meaning in cross-cultural interactions.

Qualitative feedback indicates that counselors working alongside mediators feel more confident in addressing the complex needs of international students. This is supported by Baim and Guthrie's (2014) assertion that mediators act as bridges across cultural divides, enriching the therapeutic alliance. Additionally, the integration of cultural humility—a framework emphasizing openness, self-awareness, and a commitment to learning from clients—further strengthens the therapeutic process (Hook et al., 2017).

Narrative Sharing and Cultural Understanding

Narrative sharing is a pivotal strategy in cultural mediation, allowing clients to articulate their experiences within their cultural frameworks. This approach fosters rapport and mutual understanding, providing counselors with critical insights into the cultural pressures and values influencing students' well-being. For example, a South Asian student's narrative about familial expectations illuminated the collectivist values shaping their anxiety, enabling the counselor to tailor interventions accordingly. Arthur (2017) emphasizes the transformative potential of storytelling in therapy, noting its role in fostering culturally attuned counseling practices.

However, integrating narrative approaches requires careful navigation to avoid imposing Western therapeutic norms on collectivist frameworks. Hansen and Sassenberg (2020) caution against oversimplified interventions, advocating for context-specific approaches that address the nuanced interplay of individual and cultural factors.

Systemic Barriers and Challenges

Despite its benefits, cultural mediation faces systemic challenges that limit its full integration into counseling practices. Institutional resistance, resource limitations, and reliance on Western-centric models often undermine its implementation. For instance, while a Middle Eastern student felt validated through mediation, their frustrations with academic bias highlighted broader systemic inequities beyond the scope of counseling. Guo and Chase (2011) similarly identify cultural distance and institutional biases as significant barriers for international students.

Reliance on mediators can also inadvertently shift the responsibility for cultural adaptation solely onto the mediator, rather than fostering shared accountability among all stakeholders. Addressing these challenges requires embedding cultural mediation into institutional policies, enhancing counselor training in cultural competence, and developing robust support structures for international students.

Conclusion

This study has explored the critical role of cultural mediation in psychological counseling, particularly through the PASSI@Unito project at the University of Turin, in addressing the complex needs of international students. By bridging linguistic and cultural divides, cultural mediation fosters mutual understanding, enhances therapeutic outcomes, and creates inclusive counseling environments. Grounded in theories of cultural competence (Sue & Sue, 2013) and intercultural communication (Byram, 1997), cultural mediation extends these frameworks by integrating innovative strategies such as cultural contextualization, dual-layered translation, and narrative sharing. These approaches align with Beneduce's (2016) emphasis on understanding the socio-political dimensions of suffering and Taliani's (2018) focus on the poetics of distress, allowing counselors to engage deeply with the nuanced realities of clients' lived experiences and cultural identities.

The case studies analyzed underscore the transformative impact of mediation, from addressing cultural misinterpretations to empowering counselors to adapt their practices to diverse cultural frameworks. These interventions not only improve students' psychological well-being but also address systemic barriers such as language challenges, cultural distance,

and institutional inequities (Guo & Chase, 2011; Hansen & Sassenberg, 2020). By fostering culturally sensitive support systems, cultural mediation contributes to reshaping counseling practices to better serve diverse populations and dismantling the structural inequalities that shape students' experiences (Beneduce, 2010).

However, challenges such as institutional resistance, resource limitations, and unconscious biases persist and must be addressed to maximize the potential of cultural mediation. Beneduce (2016) and Taliani (2018) caution against essentializing cultural identities, emphasizing the need for critical reflexivity and context-specific approaches. Future research should examine the long-term impacts of cultural mediation on individual and institutional outcomes, employing mixed-methods approaches to capture its multidimensional effects. Moreover, developing standardized training programs and embedding cultural competence in counselor education are essential steps for institutionalizing these practices effectively.

Cultural mediation is a vital tool in promoting equitable and responsive mental health services for international students. By honoring the diversity of student experiences and fostering inclusive therapeutic environments, cultural mediators play a pivotal role in addressing the growing global demand for culturally attuned counseling practices. Their work resonates with Beneduce's (2010) call for transcultural approaches that situate suffering within its historical and social contexts, ensuring that counseling practices remain both ethical and transformative in increasingly multicultural settings.

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