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Review

The role of culture in mindfulness practice: A brief review

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Abstract: Mindfulness has seen a worldwide increase in popularity, especially within Western psychological and health frameworks. Originally grounded in Eastern traditions, mindfulness is frequently utilized in various settings such as psychotherapy, education, and workplace training. As mindfulness crosses cultural borders, its interpretation, manifestation, and effectiveness are affected by the cultural context in which it is situated. This review examines the ways in which culture influences mindfulness practice. A systematic review was conducted between the years 2000 and 2024 and 34 studies were included. Studies from diverse regions, including Asia, North America, and Europe, examined both indigenous practices and Western secular adaptations. Cultural factors influence individual receptiveness to mindfulness, the tailoring of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), and the diverse philosophical underpinnings of mindfulness across various cultural settings. Cultural values such as collectivism versus individualism, religiosity, spirituality and language profoundly influence the experience of mindfulness. Also, cultural competence in mindfulness enhances effectiveness and engagement. Nevertheless, risks exist regarding the appropriation of culture, misinterpretation, and the removal of context from traditional mindfulness practices, while promoting approaches that are culturally sensitive and respect both the historical origins and modern requirements. Indeed more cross-cultural research is needed as well as development of culturally adaptive models of mindfulness that balance authenticity with accessibility.

Keywords: mindfulness; culture; cultural adaptation; mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs); cultural competence; cultural sensitivity; cultural barriers

1. Introduction

Mindfulness, traditionally defined as the act of paying attention to the present moment nonjudgmentally, has its roots in ancient Eastern spiritual practices, particularly Buddhism. In recent decades, mindfulness has been adapted and utilized in Western clinical and educational settings, divorced from its religious and cultural origins [1]. This transformation has sparked interest in how culture influences mindfulness practices both in how they are taught and received across different societies [2]. However, whether these adaptations account for cultural nuances remains understudied.

Culture encompasses the shared values, beliefs, norms, practices, customs, and social behaviors of a particular group or society. It shapes how individuals perceive the world, interpret experiences, and express psychological phenomena, including mindfulness [3]. As such, mindfulness cannot be viewed as a culturally neutral practice. Rather, it is inherently shaped by the cultural context in which it is embedded and expressed [4]. Western cultures tend to emphasize individuality, autonomy, and self-actualization, which may lead to a more introspective and self-improvement-focused interpretation of mindfulness. In contrast, Eastern cultures often highlight interconnectedness, harmony, and collective well-being, influencing a different

experiential orientation toward mindfulness [5]. These distinctions highlight the need to explore how mindfulness is understood and applied in culturally diverse settings.

Despite growing interest in global mindfulness programs, limited attention has been paid to cultural differences in how mindfulness is practiced or adapted [6]. This review seeks to fill this gap by examining the role of culture in shaping the development, implementation, and outcomes of mindfulness practice worldwide. Specifically, this review aims to (1) synthesize cultural variations in mindfulness practices and (2) evaluate their impact on implementation efficacy.

2. Methods

This review employed a systematic approach (PRISMA) to synthesize empirical theoretical studies and systematic reviews examining the intersection of mindfulness and culture [7]. The PRISMA flowchart (**Figure 1**) illustrates the screening process, including reasons for exclusion at each stage. Articles were sourced from PsycINFO, PubMed, and Google Scholar using keywords "mindfulness," "culture," "cross-cultural," "Buddhism," "Western adaptation," and "MBIs." Articles published between 2000 and 2024 were considered. The publication range was selected to reflect the period during which mindfulness gained significant traction in Western clinical and academic contexts in the early 21st century.

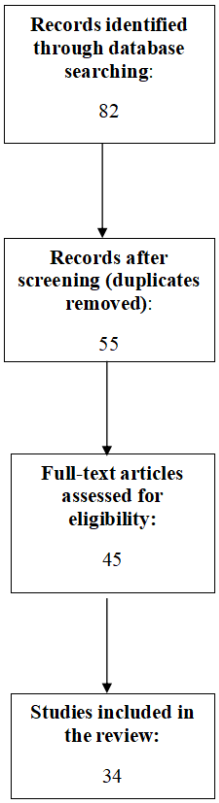

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart.

Inclusion criteria included studies that addressed either cultural variations in mindfulness practices, adaptations of mindfulness-based interventions across cultures, or the influence of cultural values on mindfulness outcomes. Exclusion criteria included articles not published in English, purely theoretical papers without empirical

data, and studies focused solely on non-human subjects.

Moreover, in this review, "mindfulness practices" are the specific methods, exercises, or rituals (e.g., breath awareness, body scans, chanting) used to cultivate mindfulness. Also, "experience of mindfulness" refers to the subjective and culturally mediated perception, meaning, and emotional resonance individuals associate with those practices. Then, "understanding" is considered an integral part of this experience, shaped by cultural narratives and contextual meanings, particularly in cultures where mindfulness is embedded within a religious or ethical framework.

A total of 82 articles were initially identified, of which 34 met the inclusion criteria after full-text review (**Table 1**). Qualitative, quantitative, reviews, and mixed-method studies were included to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Table 1. Summary of included studies (34 studies).

Study	Focus	Design	Cultural context	Population	Key findings
Daubenmier [8]	Examines yoga and mindfulness in relation to body awareness.	Empirical	USA	Yoga practitioners	Embodiment experience influenced by cultural gender norms.
Garland et al. [9]	Links mindfulness with positive reappraisal and emotional regulation.	Clinical trial	USA	Cancer patients	Mindfulness reframed to align with patients' spiritual beliefs.
Shapiro et al. [10]	Identifies mechanisms of mindfulness; foundational Western work.	Theoretical/Review	USA	N/A	Mindfulness mechanisms vary by culture
Christopher et al. [2]	Compares mindfulness understanding in Thailand vs. USA.	Comparative survey	Thailand/USA	University students	Cultural meaning of mindfulness differs; ethical vs. psychological orientation.
Gone [11]	Cultural identity and trauma in Indigenous communities.	Ethnographic	USA/Canada	Indigenous youth	Indigenous spirituality aligns with mindfulness principles.
Brown et al. [12]	Summarizes mindfulness theory in Western context.	Review	USA	N/A	Individualist contexts emphasize self-focus in mindfulness.
Hofmann et al. [13]	Loving-kindness and compassion meditation in therapy.	Review	USA	N/A	Cultural beliefs influence MBI engagement.
Singh et al. [14]	Mindfulness training for ADHD in children; parental engagement.	Empirical	USA	Children with ADHD	Cultural integration boosted family adherence.
Suzuki [15]	Explores Zen and Japanese cultural views on mindfulness.	Theoretical, historical review	Japan	N/A	"Zazen" reflects cultural discipline and ritualism.
Grossman and Van Dam [16]	Critiques Western interpretations of mindfulness.	Review	Germany/USA	N/A	Western mindfulness differs from traditional Buddhist practice.
Waldron [17]	Buddhism-science interface; cultural tension.	Theoretical	USA	N/A	Calls for cross-cultural humility in mindfulness.
Kwee and Kwee [18]	Describes Buddhist ethics and wisdom in mindfulness.	Theoretical	Netherlands	N/A	Combined Buddhism and local customs in MBI.
Azizi et al. [19]	MBSR with Iranian cancer patients; cultural adaptation discussed.	Experimental study	Iran	Cancer patients	Islamic-adapted MBSR had superior outcomes.

Table 1. (*Continued*).

Study	Focus	Design	Cultural context	Population	Key findings
Singh et al. [20]	Adult mindfulness training affecting children with ADHD.	Intervention study	USA	Parents of Children with ADHD	Multicultural framing of mindfulness effective with minority families.
Woods-Giscombé and Gaylord [21]	Mindfulness for African American stress disparities.	Qualitative	USA	African American women	Cultural pride themes increased MBI engagement.
Kira et al. [22]	Group therapy for refugees: culturally sensitive mindfulness.	Mixed-method	USA/Middle East	Refugees with PTSD	Group-based mindfulness with storytelling effective.
Khoury et al. [23]	Meta-analysis of MBIs; culture discussed.	Meta-analysis	Canada	Multiple cultures	Cultural adaptation increases MBI efficacy.
Hanley et al. [24]	Short mindfulness intervention in daily activity.	Qualitative	USA	Adult participants	Translation leads to conceptual drift in mindfulness meanings.
Chan and Ho [25]	School-family model promoting mental health in Hong Kong.	Experimental	Hong Kong	Adolescents	Group reflection enhanced cultural fit.
Cebolla et al. [26]	Mindfulness history and practice across cultures.	Review	Spain	General population	Instructor cultural relatability impacts success.
Koenig and Larson [27]	Religious factors influencing mental health.	Review	USA	N/A	Translation and religiosity shape mindfulness reception.
Alsubaie et al. [28]	MBCT and MBSR mechanisms; cultural moderators noted.	Systematic Review	UK	Adults with anxiety	Mindfulness viewed as patience/endurance.
Zhang et al. [29]	Confucian values in nursing mindfulness.	Survey	China	Chinese nurses	Confucian values influenced stress appraisal and mindfulness uptake.
Kim et al. [30]	Adapts mindfulness for Korean elderly.	Qualitative	South Korea	Elderly population	Mindfulness promoted through storytelling and tradition.
Purser [31]	Critique of commodified Western mindfulness.	Critical appraisal	USA	N/A	Argues against decontextualization and commercialization.
Nguyen et al. [32]	Mindfulness and moral values in Vietnamese teachers.	Survey	Vietnam	Vietnamese teachers.	Preferred mindfulness framed as moral virtue.
Cheung and Ng [33]	Cultural adaptation of MBSR in Hong Kong.	Empirical, Case study	Hong Kong	Clinical participants	Collectivist framing improves MBI outcomes.
Yoon et al. [34]	MBCT adapted for Korean university students.	RCT	South Korea	Korean university students.	Adapted MBIs more accepted than generic forms.
Torres et al. [35]	School-based collective mindfulness in Mexico.	RCT	Mexico	School teachers and parents	Family-integrated mindfulness boosted retention.
Lin et al. [36]	Mindfulness effects on healthcare workers in Taiwan.	Survey	Taiwan	Healthcare worker	Cultural framing influenced mindfulness engagement and stress outcomes.
Chan et al. [37]	Culturally adapted mindfulness for Chinese medical students.	RCT	China	Chinese medical students.	Culturally tailored MBI improved sleep and focus.
Herrera et al. [38]	Cultural mindfulness with displaced Colombian families.	Empirical, case study	Colombia	Displaced families	Cultural rituals integrated into mindfulness improved emotional resilience.

Table 1. (*Continued*).

Study	Focus	Design	Cultural context	Population	Key findings
Thompson et al. [39]	Land-based mindfulness in Aboriginal Australia.	Empirical, mixed method	Australia	Indigenous populations	Land-based mindfulness boosted cultural identity and healing.

Abbreviations: ADHD: Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, MBIs: mindfulness-based interventions, MBCT: Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, MBSR: Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, PTSD: Post traumatic stress disorder, RCT: Randomized controlled trial.

3. Results

3.1. Cultural perceptions and definitions of mindfulness

The concept of mindfulness varies considerably across cultures. In East Asian cultures such as Japan and China, mindfulness is often embedded in a larger context of spiritual or ethical practice. For example, in Japan, "Zazen" meditation emphasizes posture and discipline as central elements, in contrast to the more internalized, present-focused awareness in Western definitions [15]. In a comparative study by Christopher et al. [2], Thai participants understood mindfulness ("sati") not only as awareness but as a moral imperative tied to Buddhist teachings, while American participants focused on psychological presence and self-care.

3.2. Cultural framing and receptivity

Individualism versus collectivism emerged as a critical factor in receptivity to mindfulness. Studies by Hofmann et al. [13] and Cheung and Ng [33] found that individuals from collectivist cultures responded more favorably to mindfulness practices that emphasized interdependence, compassion, and community. Conversely, mindfulness practices that emphasized individual experience, personal growth, and self-monitoring resonated more with participants from individualistic societies such as the U.S., U.K., and Germany.

3.3. Language and semantic shifts

Translation plays a key role in shaping the practice of mindfulness. Words don't always have exact equivalents in other languages. When mindfulness concepts are translated (e.g., into Arabic, Korean, or Vietnamese), the meaning can shift. These shifts affect how people understand**,** accept, or practice mindfulness in different cultural settings. A study by Hanley et al. demonstrated that in translating "nonjudgmental awareness" into Korean, the resulting phrase implied passive acceptance rather than active, curious observation and active mindfulness [24]. This led to misunderstandings in practice goals. Similar findings were noted in Arabic-speaking populations, where the term used for mindfulness closely resembled "patience," emphasizing endurance rather than alertness, which again shifts the original meaning [28]. In Vietnamese**,** the word used for mindfulness is closely tied to moral virtue**,** adding a strong ethical or even religious dimension to the practice. In such settings, mindfulness is not merely a tool for present-moment awareness but is framed as a reflection of ethical character and proper conduct [32]. These semantic shifts illustrate how translation does not simply convert terms but transforms how practices are framed, experienced, and evaluated across cultures.

3.4. Effectiveness of adapted mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs)

When MBIs are culturally adapted, for example, by integrating local metaphors, spiritual values, or indigenous practices, their effectiveness improves. For example, in a study in Iran by Azizi et al., an MBSR program was adapted to incorporate Islamic values, prayer, and Qur'anic metaphors, significantly improving participant engagement and outcomes among women undergoing cancer treatment [19]. In Mexico, Torres et al. adapted mindfulness programs to a school, and interventions were tailored for families that emphasized storytelling and collective rituals, which aligned with local cultural values around community and family cohesion. This ultimately resulted in higher levels of participation and retention [35]. Similarly, in Aboriginal Australian communities, a land-based mindfulness model grounded in Indigenous traditions and deep connections to nature was used to support trauma recovery. This culturally embedded approach not only promoted emotional resilience but also reinforced cultural identity and intergenerational healing [39].

3.5. Delivery format and cultural fit

The format in which mindfulness is delivered, whether individually, in groups, or embedded within communal rituals, plays a critical role in its cultural fit and effectiveness. Several studies in this review highlighted that the success of mindfulness interventions often depends not only on what is taught but also on how it is introduced and experienced within the target cultural context.

For instance, in East African refugee populations, Kira et al. found that group-based mindfulness sessions incorporating storytelling elements and communal sharing were more effective in reducing PTSD symptoms than silent, introspective individual practice. The group setting aligned with participants' cultural traditions of collective healing and oral narrative, making the practice feel familiar, meaningful, and emotionally safe [22]. Similarly, in Indigenous Australian communities, Thompson et al. documented the use of land-based mindfulness practices that were integrated into outdoor group activities. These sessions emphasized a deep connection to ancestral lands and incorporated traditional knowledge, rituals, and collective reflection. This approach not only supported trauma recovery but also strengthened cultural identity and intergenerational continuity goals that would likely be missed in standard, clinical mindfulness delivery formats [39].

In Western settings**,** on the other hand, many participants reported a preference for individual formats**,** including silent meditation, journaling, or app-based self-guided practices. These modes resonate with cultural values emphasizing autonomy, introspection, and privacy. For example, Hanley et al. observed that American participants favored mindfulness activities they could personalize and engage in alone, seeing them as tools for self-regulation and personal growth [24]. Moreover, the role of the instructor or facilitator cannot be understated in relation to delivery format. In collectivist societies, the facilitator is often viewed not just as a teacher but as a trusted guide or community elder whose cultural alignment with participants significantly enhances trust and participation. In Spain, for example, Cebolla et al. noted that Spanish-speaking participants responded more openly when instructors shared their linguistic and cultural background, reinforcing the relational and group-oriented

aspects of mindfulness [26].

Taken together, these examples underscore that there is no universally effective delivery format for mindfulness. Cultural congruence must be considered when designing and implementing mindfulness-based interventions. Formats that reflect the social fabric, communication style, and healing traditions of a community are more likely to engage participants and produce sustained outcomes.

3.6. Instructors' cultural competency and identity

Several studies noted that instructor identity, particularly cultural background and perceived relatability, impacted participant trust and openness. Cebolla et al. [26] found that Spanish-speaking participants were more receptive to instructors who shared their language and cultural heritage, which created a greater sense of safety and community.

3.7. Challenges in minority or marginalized groups

Mindfulness programs in marginalized communities faced specific barriers, such as distrust in clinical systems or perceived irrelevance of practices. In African American populations, for example, mindfulness programs that integrated cultural pride and historical resilience themes had more sustained engagement [21].

4. Discussion

The findings of this review highlight the multifaceted role of culture in shaping how mindfulness is understood, practiced, and received across the globe. While mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have demonstrated significant psychological benefits, their effectiveness is not universal and is deeply influenced by cultural context. A key insight from the included studies is that although the core components of mindfulness—such as present-moment awareness, non-judgment, and acceptance—are broadly applicable, their meanings and applications are not culturally neutral. For instance, collectivist cultures may interpret mindfulness through relational or spiritual lenses, while Western, individualist societies often emphasize mindfulness as a tool for personal well-being and self-regulation.

Several studies in the review demonstrated the positive outcomes of culturally adapted MBIs, particularly when these interventions were co-developed with communities or embedded within local traditions. These adaptations ranged from linguistic modifications to the incorporation of culturally relevant metaphors, rituals, or spiritual frameworks. The success of such interventions underscores the importance of cultural humility and participatory design in clinical and educational settings. Without this sensitivity, mindfulness programs risk cultural imposition or superficial appropriation, which may alienate participants or dilute the practice's deeper meanings. Cultural humility refers to an ongoing process of self-reflection and self-critique that individuals, especially practitioners, engage in to acknowledge and mitigate power imbalances and biases when working across cultural contexts. Unlike cultural competence, which emphasizes acquiring knowledge about other cultures, cultural humility focuses on maintaining an open stance and learning from others' lived experiences [40]. For example, a mindfulness instructor working with Native

American communities may co-develop a program that incorporates tribal rituals and land-based practices, thereby respecting indigenous ways of knowing rather than imposing a standard MBI protocol [41].

Notably, the review also draws attention to the ongoing tension between the secularization of mindfulness in Western psychology and its spiritual and ethical roots in Eastern contemplative traditions. To further clarify key terms in this debate, secularism in this context refers to the removal of religious or spiritual elements from mindfulness practices to make them accessible in clinical or educational settings [42]. Then, religiosity is defined as the degree to which individuals or communities adhere to and express religious beliefs and rituals, which may influence how they perceive and practice mindfulness [43] and spirituality as a sense of connection to something greater, which may or may not be religious in nature [44]. Following, ethics is a framework of moral values that guide behavior, which may be derived from cultural or philosophical systems [45]. These distinctions are critical when considering how mindfulness can be both culturally sensitive and universally applicable.

While secular mindfulness may appear to strip away the traditional spiritual roots of the practice, it can also provide a neutral, accessible format adaptable to diverse populations, including those with no religious affiliation. This universality is especially important in pluralistic societies where shared public health interventions must remain inclusive [46]. Religious communities with existing mindfulness traditions may not necessarily need secular alternatives**,** and thus we temper the assumption of a universal applicability for secular MBIs in such contexts. Secularism can indeed serve as a practical and inclusive starting point for adapting mindfulness interventions across contexts. However, in communities where mindfulness is traditionally embedded in spiritual or ethical systems, adaptation may require reintegrating these dimensions—not to impose religiosity, but to align with the cultural meanings that make the practice resonant and effective [47]. While the clinical framing of mindfulness has made it more accessible and empirically measurable, it has also led to the commodification and decontextualization of the practice. This disconnect can be particularly problematic in non-Western societies where mindfulness is historically embedded within religious or communal systems of meaning [48].

The underrepresentation of certain populations, such as Indigenous communities, African diaspora groups, and non-English-speaking societies, in mindfulness research remains a critical gap. Their exclusion not only limits the generalizability of current findings but also perpetuates a narrow, Western-centric view of what mindfulness is and how it works. Future studies must therefore go beyond surface-level inclusion and invest in deep, culturally grounded explorations of how mindfulness is lived and transmitted in diverse contexts.

The widespread Western adoption of mindfulness has raised concerns about cultural appropriation. Critics argue that decontextualized mindfulness practices strip away the ethical and spiritual dimensions that are central to its original form [31]. This raises ethical concerns about authenticity, respect, and representation. Moreover, integrating culturally relevant values, such as compassion in Buddhist traditions or interconnectedness in Confucian cultures, can enhance the depth and acceptability of mindfulness practices. In Indigenous cultures, mindfulness is often aligned with nature-based spirituality, emphasizing harmony with the environment rather than

introspective awareness [11]. The cultural competency of mindfulness instructors also significantly influences outcomes. Instructors who are trained to understand the cultural contexts of their participants are more effective in delivering interventions that resonate on a personal and cultural level [17].

Additionally, the diversity of design methodologies across the included studies (e.g., RCTs, qualitative interviews, comparative analyses) reflects the richness but also the complexity of researching mindfulness across cultures. There is a need for methodological innovation that bridges Western scientific rigor with local ways of knowing. Mixed-methods approaches, community-based participatory research, and ethnographic methods may be particularly useful in capturing the nuances of cultural experience and embodiment.

Finally, the review supports a growing consensus that mindfulness should not be treated as a one-size-fits-all intervention. Instead, flexible, integrative frameworks that respect cultural traditions while maintaining therapeutic efficacy are essential. Such frameworks could allow practitioners and researchers to retain the psychological benefits of mindfulness while honoring the values, symbols, and stories that matter most to the communities they serve.

5. Future directions

Future research is definitely needed. First, with the investigation of mindfulness within underrepresented and marginalized populations, like Indigenous communities, ethnic minorities, immigrants, refugees, and populations in non-Western regions. These groups frequently possess spiritual and contemplative traditions that are either neglected or inadequately incorporated into conventional mindfulness practices. By expanding the range of investigation, scholars can reveal culturally rooted methods that may vary considerably from the standardized MBIs primarily created and evaluated in Western settings.

Moreover, it is essential to examine indigenous and non-Western mindfulness models that are rooted in local knowledge systems, languages, and worldviews. These models may provide distinct avenues to psychological well-being that diverge from the individualistic and clinical frameworks commonly found in Western psychology. Investigating these alternative paradigms can contribute to the decolonization of mindfulness research and guarantee that interventions are applied in a culturally sensitive way.

To advance this initiative, upcoming efforts should focus on creating adaptable, culturally sensitive frameworks that maintain the essential therapeutic advantages of mindfulness while permitting modifications. This entails considering cultural differences in the perceptions of self, spirituality, interdependence, and suffering. Engaging with community members, spiritual leaders, and cultural specialists throughout the design and execution of interventions can enhance cultural alignment and boost participant involvement and results.

Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that mindfulness practices are not only effective but also inclusive, respectful, and accessible across diverse cultural landscapes. Doing so will contribute to a more equitable and global understanding of mindfulness and its role in promoting psychological and social well-being.

6. Conclusions

Mindfulness is not a one-size-fits-all practice. The cultural context profoundly affects the implementation and effectiveness of mindfulness. From the language to the values of each society, culture influences the way mindfulness is perceived, practiced, and experienced. Although Western adaptations of mindfulness have expanded its accessibility, they may risk oversimplifying or misrepresenting its foundational meanings.

To promote inclusive and effective mindfulness practices, it is crucial to respect the cultural roots of mindfulness while permitting local adaptations. Instruction that is culturally competent, along with ethical awareness and inclusive research, are vital components of achieving this balance. As mindfulness continues to gain traction worldwide, fostering cultural sensitivity will improve its relevance, respect, and therapeutic efficacy.

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