

JSACP

Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology

Volume 18 | No. 1 | Summer 2026

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL ACTION IN COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGY (JSACP)

openjournals.bsu.edu/jsacp

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ISSN 2159-8142

Articles

Activism and Advocacy

- Asian American Women's Antiracist Solidarity during the COVID-19
Pandemic: Predictors and Mental Health Implications** 2
Hsiu-Lan Cheng; P. F. Jonah Li; Lou Felipe

Education and Training

- Self-Determination and Eco-Cultural Competence among Tribal Naga Students in Migration:
Pathways to Sustainable Homecoming** 27
Imlingangzuk Longkumer; Lijo Thomas
- The ABC Model of Resilience:
Middle Eastern and North African American (MENA) Counselor Educators Building Community** 42
Nouna Jalilzadeh; Christine Romano; Loubna Alkhayat; Shadin Atiyeh

Asian American Women's Antiracist Solidarity during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Predictors and Mental Health Implications

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Abstract

The year 2020 marked the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and racism targeting Asian and Black communities ravaged the United States, highlighting the urgency for antiracist solidarity. This study examined antiracist solidarity engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic among Asian American women, a group often fetishized and portrayed as submissive and apolitical. Pre-pandemic experiences with Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity were examined as predictors of antiracist solidarity engagement and anxiety symptoms during the pandemic. In a sample of 146 Asian American college women, a directed content analysis revealed the three most prevalent forms of solidarity engagement: collective activism, communicative advocacy, and financial activism. Regression analyses indicated that Asian fetishism positively predicted collective activism, financial activism, and communicative advocacy, while racial self-negativity positively predicted financial activism. A significant interaction between racial self-negativity and collective activism emerged when predicting anxiety symptoms. Contrary to assumptions of activism as a protective factor, this study found that partaking in collective activism worsened, rather than buffered, the longitudinal link between racial self-negativity and anxiety symptoms. Practice implications and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: Asian American women, solidarity, activism and advocacy, Asian fetishism, internalized racial self-negativity, anxiety

Asian American Women's Antiracist Solidarity during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Predictors and Mental Health Implications

The emergence of the coronavirus 19 (COVID-19) brought the devastation of a worldwide pandemic, killing millions worldwide; such widespread tragedy brought a spotlight to the inflamed racial tensions in the United States (U.S.), particularly for Black Americans, who were ravaged by ongoing police brutality, and Asian Americans who were systemically blamed for the rise and spread of COVID-19 (Pew Research Center, 2020). Anti-Asian hate crimes and racist incidents (e.g., verbal attacks to brutal acts of life-threatening violence) spiked to unprecedented heights with more than 1,800 racist incidents within the initial eight weeks (Borja et al., 2020) and about 3,800 racist incidents within the first year of the pandemic (Jeung et al., 2021). Concurrently, police brutality against Black Americans, including the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, intensified public demands for police accountability and strengthened the Black Lives Matters (BLM) movement (Buchanan et al., 2020), a movement that emerged following the 2013 acquittal of the man who killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin (Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018). By July 2020, the Pew Research Center's survey (2020b) showed that Asian and Black Americans experienced more racist discrimination than other racial groups in the U.S. during the outbreak of COVID-19. Cheng and colleagues (2021) proposed that racism outbreaks, such as the anti-Asian and anti-Black racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, presented an opportunity for increased critical consciousness of the fact that racial oppression is a common fate faced by racial minorities. This shared awareness of a common fate may have compelled antiracist solidarity to support one's ingroup (e.g., Asian Americans) and other oppressed groups (e.g., Black Americans). Moreover, antiracist solidarity may foster psychosocial resilience and empowerment against the harmful impact of racism (Cheng et al., 2021). In the present study, we examined antiracist solidarity engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic among Asian American women, a group often fetishized and portrayed as submissive and apolitical. Asian American women have a unique history of intersectional oppression (e.g., the fetishization of Asian American women; Keum et al., 2018), and during the COVID-19 pandemic, they also endured increased violence and social targeting (i.e. Borja et al., 2020; Jeung et al., 2021). During the same time period, the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum (Buchanan et al., 2020), resonating with many Asian American women who experienced adjacent forms of racial targeting. Taken together, these discriminatory incidents created increased opportunities for Asian American women to engage in antiracist solidarity in support of Black Americans. Recognizing the racist targeting of Black Americans and Asian American women during the COVID-19 pandemic, we wanted to better understand Asian American women's engagement with antiracist solidarity. We explored how Asian American women's pre-pandemic experience with Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity were associated with their antiracist solidarity engagement and anxiety symptoms during the pandemic.

Asian American Women and Activism

Asian Americans are often seen as disinterested in civic engagement (Park et al., 2008), non-confrontational, and avoidant of public demonstrations of discontent (Wang et al., 2008). Asian American women, compared to Asian American men, due to their intersectional minority status, face additional stereotypes regarding their sociopolitical participation. Often seen as submissive, unassertive, incapable of leadership, and sexually fetishized and objectified (Cheng & Kim, 2018; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017), portrayals of Asian American women as apolitical ignore a deep history of Asian American civil rights campaigning (Maeda, 2016) and solidarity with other Communities of Color. For example, Asian American women activists, Grace Lee Boggs and Yuri Kochiyama, supported Black liberation by joining the Civil Rights Movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Boggs, 2016; Kochiyama, 1994). Despite this committed sociopolitical engagement, Asian American women often face gendered and racialized discrimination. Asian fetishism – the sexual objectification and exoticization of Asian-descent women (Keum et al., 2018) – is a form of racial microaggressions commonly and specifically experienced by Asian American women, while other forms of racial microaggressions targeting Asian-descent people (e.g.,

alien in own land, ascription of intelligence, second class citizenship, invisibility) are experienced across genders (Sue et al., 2007). Additionally, the racialized contexts in the U.S. often insidiously socialize racial minority individuals to agree with White dominant narratives such that they adopt racist attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about themselves and their own racial groups, a phenomenon called internalized racism (Choi et al., 2017). An example of internalized racism is *racial self-negativity* among Asian Americans that manifests as devaluation of one's Asian descent, idealization of whiteness, and a dislike of other individuals of Asian descent (Choi et al., 2017). As such, Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity are uniquely, yet commonly, experienced by Asian American women and have important implications for psychosocial outcomes and mental health (e.g., Keum et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2025). The present study examined how Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity experienced before the COVID-19 pandemic were associated with antiracist solidarity engagement and anxiety symptoms during the pandemic.

Solidarity, Advocacy, and Activism

Solidarity has been defined as an active internal mindset and external behavioral engagement that builds coalitions among diverse groups and prompts collective action against oppression, combating White supremacy, and achieving racial justice (Araiza, 2009; Demanarig et al., 2024). Advocacy and activism are common strategies for solidarity among communities, including advocating for policies and rights for one's group and/or other minoritized groups and participating in activism against shared oppression (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021; Kiang et al., 2022). McKeever et al. (2023) recognized advocacy and activism as behaviors intended to influence decision making (e.g., antiracist movements), each being unique approaches to social change. Specifically, advocacy involved persuasion to shift ideology, whereas activism challenged oppressive ideologies, which created social pressure to influence ideological positions.

McKeever and colleagues (2023) proposed six domains to conceptualize advocacy and activism. The first three describe advocacy efforts, where an element of persuasiveness undergirds each domain. *Communicative advocacy* (also referred to as dialogical advocacy) involves active or passive forms of seeking and sharing information with others, giving expansive groups of people access to information to sway opinion. The second domain, *symbolic advocacy*, raises awareness of an issue to amplify the visibility of an oppressive system (e.g., using public displays of signs and symbols). The third domain, *political advocacy*, addresses the political or legislative processes underlying a social problem (e.g., voting, lobbying).

The latter three domains are forms of activism, in which pressure is used to challenge systemic injustices (McKeever et al., 2023). *Collective activism*, the fourth domain, seeks to improve the social, economic, or political circumstance of a collective group. The fifth domain, *financial activism*, involves intentionally moving or restricting the flow of money to impact social change. Finally, the last domain, *unconventional activism* (also known as adversarial or oppositional activism), incorporates high-cost, high-risk, unconventional behaviors. Property destruction, for example, is a form of unconventional activism (McKeever et al., 2023).

In the present study, we were interested in understanding the forms of advocacy and activism that Asian American college women used to engage in solidarity against anti-Asian and anti-Black racism during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Antiracist solidarity, whether combating anti-Asian or anti-Black racism, espouses the goal of resisting White supremacy through joint acts of advocacy and activism; such acts honor the uniqueness of a group's experiences with racism without assuming commonality of marginalization and oppression across racial groups (Demanarig et al., 2024; Mohanty 2003). The nature of oppression is upheld by the three mainstays of White supremacy: 1) slavery/capitalism, 2) orientalism/war, and 3) colonialism/genocide (Smith, 2006). Antiracist solidarity, whether resisting anti-Asian or anti-Black racism, is an important avenue of empowerment and resilience that may protect against the otherwise harmful mental health impacts of racism (Cheng et al., 2021). In the present study, we explored Asian American women's solidarity against anti-Asian and anti-Black racism separately to understand the frequency and forms of advocacy and activism in which they engaged. However,

we focused on examining the overall role of antiracist solidarity rather than differentiating between the two areas of solidarity (i.e., against anti-Asian and anti-Black) efforts when examining how solidarity engagement was associated with Asian fetishism, racial self-negativity, and anxiety symptoms. Theoretically, the two areas of solidarity (i.e., against anti-Asian and anti-Black) are interconnected, and conceptual models have not postulated different effects of the two areas of racial solidarity on mental health (e.g., Cheng et al., 2021).

Asian Fetishism, Racial Self-Negativity, and Engagement in Advocacy and Activism

Experiencing prejudice, unfair treatment, and oppression can compel engagement in advocacy and activism to confront inequities; in addition, encountering mistreatment can enhance one's awareness of group-based injustice and oppression, which, in turn, motivates advocacy (Duncan, 1999, 2012; van Zomeren, et al., 2008). Research with Asian Americans supports these thoughts. For example, Asian Americans with more experiences of racial/ethnic discrimination were: (a) more likely to engage in advocacy on issues such as racial equality and immigrant rights, and (b) more likely to report greater levels of awareness of systemic racism and inequality, which, in turn, was associated with stronger collective identity which further motivated advocacy (Tran & Curtin, 2017). Qualitative interviews with Asian American activists also revealed that awareness of racism was an impetus for solidarity with pan-Asian groups and investment in their activist identities (Rhoads et al., 2002). Moreover, Asian Americans who perceived linked fate with members of their own group and with other racial minorities were more likely to be aware of anti-Black racism in the U.S. and support the BLM movement (Merseeth, 2018). Data from a survey of 200 parents of Asian American adolescents indicated that greater awareness of anti-Asian discrimination post-COVID-19 was connected to greater racial-ethnic identity exploration and less minimization of the importance of race in their parenting practices. Moreover, Asian American parents who reported greater cognizance of discrimination against other Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) groups reported greater post-COVID-19 activism (Kiang et al., 2022).

No empirical studies have examined the connection between Asian fetishism and antiracist solidarity engagement. However, because previous studies have discovered linkages between racial discrimination awareness and activist engagement (e.g., Kiang et al., 2022; Rhoads et al., 2002; Tran & Curtin, 2017), it can be inferred that experiencing Asian fetishism may motivate antiracist advocacy and activism engagement. Specifically, experiences with Asian fetishism among Asian American women may facilitate increased awareness and recognition of other oppressive treatments, including anti-Asian and anti-Black incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, such awareness and recognition, according to the extant literature, may compel antiracist advocacy and activism. This inference is also consistent with research on *overlapping approximations* that describes the process where individuals draw upon their own marginalization-related experiences that are not necessarily race-based (e.g., due to gender, sexual orientation, ability status) to advocate for racial justice and other forms of justice for marginalized groups (Hogan & Netzer, 1993, as cited in Feagin & Vera, 1995).

In comparison, how racial self-negativity informs antiracist solidarity may not be as clear. One study (Yoon et al., 2024) found that Asian Americans with higher levels of global internalized racism and greater adherence to the model minority myth, reported more anti-Black attitudes. However, while higher levels of internalizing the model minority myth through achievement orientation (i.e., attribution of Asian Americans' success to hard work, cultural work ethic) was associated with less cross-racial solidarity *attitudes* with Black Americans, the relationship between global internalized racism and cross-racial solidarity attitudes was not statistically significant. That is, there was no connection between global internalized racism and cross-racial solidarity (Yoon et al., 2024). Notably, Yoon et al. measured cross-racial solidarity attitudes – not solidarity *actions* – as assessed in the current study. It is unknown if racial self-negativity is linked with solidarity actions. From one perspective, a desire to distance oneself from one's Asian American identity may prevent individuals with racial self-negativity from engaging in solidarity actions to support Asian American or other minoritized groups (e.g., Black Americans). Alternatively, racial self-negativity may function less as a genuine desire to

reject one's Asian American identity and more as a survival mechanism in response to racialized pressures (Chou & Feagin, 2015; Millan & Alvarez, 2014). Even when expressing such self-negativity, individuals may perceive a shared fate with other Asian and Black communities and may still participate in potentially more covert forms of solidarity.

Advocacy and Activism Engagement and Mental Health

Related research has demonstrated that engagement in protests, collective gatherings, or political advocacy was linked to greater self-esteem, positive emotions, a sense of purpose in life, perceived likeness with others, and strengthened shared group identity (Klar & Kasser, 2009; Páez et al., 2015). Integrating this with previously discussed findings suggests that awareness of discrimination can compel antiracist advocacy and activism, and such engagement can foster favorable psychosocial outcomes. Cheng et al. (2021) postulated that advocacy and activism serve as protective factors, buffering the relationships between racism stressors and adverse psychological outcomes.

Although research has suggested that experiences of Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity were associated with higher levels of psychological distress (e.g., Choi et al., 2017; Keum et al., 2018, 2023; Wong et al., 2025), participation in advocacy and activism against COVID-19 Asian- and Black-targeted racism may shield Asian American women from such distress (Cheng et al., 2021). That is, advocacy and activism may buffer the effects of racism on mental health. In this study, we examined whether advocacy and activism moderated the effects of Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity on anxiety symptoms among Asian American college women. We focused on anxiety symptoms because the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to being a health crisis, was a crisis of racial victimization and scapegoating (e.g., concerning the origin of the virus) that placed individuals of Asian descent in heightened discrimination-related stress and anxiety (Bhattacharyya et al. 2025; Sims et al., 2022). Qualitative interviews with Asian Americans indicated that fear of becoming a victim (for themselves or loved ones) of anti-Asian violence fueled constant hypervigilance and anxiety in their everyday life (Sims et al., 2022). Moreover, some studies suggested that Asian Americans, compared to other racial/ethnic groups, might be more susceptible to developing anxiety concerns in the face of racism. For example, despite reporting similar levels of racial/ethnic discrimination, Asian American college students were at higher levels of risk for trait anxiety than their Latinx counterparts (Hwang & Goto, 2009). Another study found that longitudinal trends for anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic declined over time among other racial/ethnic groups (e.g., White, Black, Latinx) but persisted among Asian Americans (Cheslack-Postava et al., 2024).

Research Question and Hypotheses

The aforementioned literature informed our research question and hypotheses. Our research question was: in which kinds of advocacy and activism did Asian American college women engage to resist anti-Asian and anti-Black racism during the COVID-19 pandemic? Because our first research question was exploratory and descriptive, we did not postulate a specific hypothesis. Instead, we used qualitative methods to explore how participants' responses mapped onto existing forms of advocacy and activism identified in prior scholarship. In addition to the research question, we investigated three hypotheses based on the foregoing literature. First, we predicted that pre-pandemic experiences of Asian fetishism would be positively associated with engagement in advocacy and activism during the pandemic. Second, we hypothesized that pre-pandemic racial self-negativity would be related to engagement in advocacy and activism; however, we did not specify the direction of this association (e.g., positively or negatively) because of contradictory literature concerning such relationships (e.g., Chou & Feagin, 2015; Yoon et al., 2024). And third, we predicted that engagement in advocacy and activism would buffer the effects of pre-pandemic experiences of Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity, respectively, on anxiety symptoms during the pandemic.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants included 146 Asian American college women ($M_{age} = 21.13$ years, $SD_{age} = 4.19$, range = 18-47) from a U.S. West Coast university. A portion of the study sample's data (i.e., only concerning racial self-negativity) was included in a previously published study (Cheng, 2023). Regarding ethnicity, the majority of the sample identified as Chinese (46.6%), followed by Filipina (25.3%), Vietnamese (18.5%), and other Asian American ethnicities (e.g., Korean, Indian, Japanese, Indonesian, multiethnic; 9.6%). Regarding generation status in the U.S., 65.1% of participants were second generation (i.e., U.S.-born individuals with at least one foreign-born parent), 18.5% were first generation (i.e., foreign-born individuals), 11.6% were third generation (i.e., U.S.-born individuals with two U.S.-born parents and at least one foreign-born grandparent), and 4.2% were fourth generation or above (i.e., self, parents, and grandparents all U.S.-born). When examining family socioeconomic status, most of the sample identified as middle-class (41.8%), followed by middle-upper class (24.7%), lower-middle class (22.6%), lower-class (9.6%), and upper-class (1.4%). In terms of relationship status, most were single (49.0%) or in a committed relationship (46.9%), with only 4.1% reported being married.

Following institutional review board approval, a recruitment email with a link to the study's survey was sent to an institutional listserv of 1,867 female Asian American students. Students were told that the purpose of the study was to understand Asian and Asian American students' interpersonal, cultural, and ethnic experiences and psychological wellbeing. To incentivize participation, twenty \$20 gift cards were raffled. A total number of 556 (30%) of the 1,867 students completed the surveys, but 126 respondents' data were unusable (i.e., 74 were entirely blank and 52 did not pass validity checks), resulting in 430 participants with valid, usable data at Time 1 (approximately 1.5 to 2 months before COVID-19 was declared a U.S. national emergency).

Time 2 data were collected approximately eight months after the Time 1 data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic. Again, students were told that the purpose of the study was to understand Asian and Asian American students' interpersonal, cultural, and ethnic experiences and psychological wellbeing. At Time 2, only 299 participants from Time 1 could be contacted (i.e., 119, or 28%, of the Time 1 participants graduated; 12 emails were returned as invalid). To encourage research participation, each participant was offered a seven-dollar gift card at Time 2. Initially, 156 respondents (52% of the 299 emailed) submitted surveys, but only 146 participants were retained for Time 2 because (a) eight submissions were entirely blank, (b) one respondent failed the validity check, and (c) one signified a multivariate outlier ($p < .001$) as indicated by their Mahalanobis-distance scores (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Procedures and Instruments

We used mixed-methods research (Creswell & Clark, 2007) to conduct the current study by incorporating quantitative questionnaires (i.e., to assess Asian fetishism, racial self-negativity, anxiety symptoms) and qualitative questions (i.e., to understand advocacy and activism). The following instruments were administered using an online survey created in Qualtrics. The order of the scales was randomized in Qualtrics.

Quantitative Measures

Asian Fetishism (Time 1). The Asian Fetishism measure was administered at Time 1 of the study's data collection. It is a four-item subscale of the *Gendered Racial Microaggressions Scale for Asian American Women* (GRMSAAW; Keum et al., 2018) which assesses microaggressions experienced by Asian American women with intersectional – gender and race – minority statuses. The Asian Fetishism subscale focuses on fetishization and stereotypical treatment of Asian women. One item reads, "Others express sexual interest in me because of my Asian appearance." Each item is accompanied by a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*) with higher scores indicating increased frequency of gendered racial microaggressions in the form of Asian fetishism. The construct of Asian fetishism as measured by the GRMSAAW has been found to be correlated ($r = .34$ to $.64$)

with similar constructs assessed by other scales (Keum et al., 2018) providing support for its convergent validity. Studies with Asian American women reported good internal consistency reliability for the total scale scores (.90; Keum et al., 2023; .91; Le et al., 2020) and the Asian Fetishism subscale scores (.90; Gamst et al., 2021). For this sample, the internal consistency (coefficient alpha) was .85.

Racial Self-Negativity (Time 1). The racial self-negativity measure was administered at Time 1 of the data collection. Racial self-negativity was measured using a subscale linked with the *Internalized Racism in Asian Americans Scale* (IRAAS; Choi et al., 2017). This subscale assesses the dimension of internalized racism involving an overall depreciation of one's Asian American identity, wishing to be a different racial identity than Asian, and displaying negative thoughts and feelings toward other Asian Americans. The Racial Self-Negativity subscale has four items, including, "I sometimes wish I weren't Asian." Items are evaluated on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*); higher scores indicate increased internalized racial self-negativity. Studies with Asian Americans indicated that internalized racism as measured by the IRAAS was negatively correlated with collective self-esteem ($r = -.21$ to $-.72$), providing evidence for its convergent validity (Choi et al., 2017). The IRAAS also has been found to have an internal consistency reliability of .90 for the total scale score (Keum et al., 2018). In this study, the Racial Self-Negativity subscale scores showed acceptable internal consistency (coefficient alpha = .76).

Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7; Time 2). The GAD-7 scale was administered at Time 2 of the current study's data collection. The GAD-7 is a measure of generalized anxiety disorder symptomatology, using seven self-report items on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*Not at all*) to 3 (*Nearly every day*); higher scores denote increased anxiety symptoms over the past two weeks (Spitzer et al., 2006). Total scores were used in the current study. There is evidence for the GAD-7 scale's convergent validity. Positive correlations have been discovered between generalized anxiety symptoms as measured by the GAD-7 and related anxiety constructs assessed by other measures ($r = .72$ to $.74$). The GAD-7 scores has been found to have an internal consistency of .92 among the general U.S. population (Spitzer et al., 2006). Previous studies with Asian Americans reported good internal consistency reliability for the GAD-7 scores (e.g., .91; Cheng et al., 2022) and also predictive validity as indicated by higher levels of GAD-7 scores significantly predicting higher levels of depression over time (Arora et al., 2017). In the current study, very good internal consistency (coefficient alpha = .93) was discovered for the GAD-7.

Qualitative Questions

The Time 2 survey included qualitative questions to explore participants' involvement in antiracist solidarity during the 8-month interval between Time 1 (early February 2020; before COVID-19 was declared a national emergency and a pandemic on March 11, 2020) and Time 2 (mid-October 2020). To assess solidarity engagement against anti-Asian racism, we asked, "Since taking our first survey in February 2020 until now, have you participated in any solidarity and/or racial justice work (e.g., activities, programs, gatherings, protests, petitions, webinars, initiatives, campaigns, etc.), in person or online, to challenge COVID-19 anti-Asian racism?" This question was followed by "Please specifically describe the solidarity and/or racial justice work that you have participated in, in person or online, to challenge COVID-19 anti-Asian racism." We repeated this same assessment pattern for solidarity engagement against anti-Black racism. We asked, "Since taking our first survey in February 2020 until now, have you participated in any solidarity and/or racial justice work (e.g., activities, programs, gatherings, protests, petitions, webinars, initiatives, campaigns, etc.), in person or online, to challenge anti-Black racism (or anti-Blackness)?" This was followed by "Please specifically describe the solidarity and/or racial justice work that you have participated in, in person or online, to challenge anti-Black racism (or anti-Blackness)." These qualitative questions were developed by the first author and sent to be reviewed by two Asian American scholars who suggested minor wording adjustments. The adjusted questions were then piloted with two Asian American graduate students who indicated the questions were clear and they did not provide further feedback. We used an

online survey to collect written responses to these qualitative questions. Since interviews were not conducted, no transcript procedures were required.

Data Analytic Strategy

Qualitative Data Analysis

Positionality of researchers. The positionality of researchers includes their worldviews and location within the sociopolitical context (Holmes, 2020). Taking a reflexive approach, we must examine how our positionality had a unique and undeniable influence on this research process (Holmes, 2020). We, the researchers, are of Asian descent and represent diverse Asian ethnicities: Hong Kong Chinese, Taiwanese, and Filipinx American. Among us, two of us are first-generation immigrants, while the third is second generation (parents are foreign-born). We were all educated in the U.S. with influences from Mid-western and Western universities. Regarding gender, two of us are cisgender (female and male) and one non-binary person, who was raised female. Notably, each of us has research interests in multicultural psychology with relative expertise on the mental health experiences of minoritized groups, particularly Asian Americans. Additionally, our cultural and ethnic backgrounds represent significant histories with colonization. This, taken together with our lived experiences as minoritized Asian-descent individuals in the U.S., prompts unique interests and motivations in exploring the impacts of racist oppression and the connected anti-racist activist and advocacy behaviors to address it. This conjecture aligns with suggested practice in qualitative research – that variables such as gender identity, race, educational background, and class status influence the research process and should be acknowledged (Bourke, 2014). As psychologists and researchers who recognize that the sociopolitical context has a meaningful impact on a person's mental health, our positions racially, ethnically, and educationally shaped the research questions, design, and data interpretation of this study. Additionally, we acknowledge that our specific intersections of identity may give us unique insider knowledge as Asian-identified individuals exploring the behaviors of other Asian Americans (Yip, 2024).

Directed content analysis. We used directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to understand participants' advocacy and activism experiences. Directed content analysis leverages "existing theory or prior research" to help researchers identify and operationalize "key concepts or variables as initial coding categories" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). Importantly, responses "that could not be categorized with the initial coding scheme would be given a new code" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281), allowing researchers to remain open to responses not previously captured in the literature. Although no theory had specified the forms of antiracist solidarity engagement among Asian American women during the COVID-19 pandemic, directed content analysis allowed us to draw on existing scholarship, while allowing us to remain open to exploring new findings not previously captured in the literature. Specifically, previous studies on solidarity and/or racial justice work (Corning & Myers, 2002; Kim & Grunig, 2011; McKeever et al., 2023), resistance against COVID-19 anti-Asian (e.g., Cheng et al., 2021, 2022; Lee et al., 2022) and anti-Black racism (e.g., Mosley et al., 2021) provided us with a theory-informed framework and also allowed us to remain open for new concepts to emerge from the data. This methodology fit our study well as we could consult the above literature to guide our analysis.

Coder background and training. Qualitative coding was conducted by the second author, with intercoder reliability checks performed by the third author and oversight by the first author. All coders hold doctoral-level training in counseling or clinical psychology and have knowledge of qualitative analysis, including content analysis. The second author has specialized training in directed content analysis and has prior peer-reviewed publications involving the use of coding manuals. Prior to data coding, the second author provided a one-hour training to the third author on using the coding manual, which included operational definitions, decision rules, and example responses for each category. In addition, all authors met to review the study aims, qualitative prompts, relevant literature, and the initial coding framework. This structured and collaborative training process ensured consistent understanding and application of the coding categories across coders throughout the coding process.

Steps taken in conducting directed content analysis. Following Hsieh and Shannon (2005), we took several steps when conducting our qualitative analysis. As a first step, all authors met to review and discuss the qualitative data to identify the main categories of advocacy and activism experiences reported by the participants. Second, based on our discussion and the literature on solidarity and/or racial justice work against COVID-19 anti-Asian and/or anti-Black racism (or anti-Blackness), the second author developed a detailed coding manual with an initial list of theory-informed categories (also known as “predetermined codes;” Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281) to organize participants’ reported advocacy and activism experiences. These categories included (1) unconventional activism, (2) collective activism, (3) financial activism, (4) symbolic advocacy, and (5) communicative advocacy, each with distinct operational definitions and example responses (see Table 1). The first and third authors subsequently reviewed and provided feedback on the coding manual, collaborating with the second author to collectively refine all details of the categories in the coding manual. As a third step, after revising the coding manual, we initiated the qualitative data coding process using an online Excel spreadsheet. In this data coding process, we assigned only one category to each meaning unit of a response. To illustrate, we present two scenarios. In scenario one, a qualitative response --“signing petitions” -- has one meaning unit; we coded “1” for collective activism and “0” for all other categories. In scenario two, we coded a response to multiple categories because it contains several meaning units (indicated by commas, conjunctions, or other relevant indicators), meeting the definition of multiple categories. For instance, a qualitative response --“...I have signed petitions, donated money, and attempted to spread awareness online” -- has three meaning units: regarding “signed petitions,” we coded “1” for collective activism; as for “donated money,” we coded “1” for financial activism; with respect to “attempted to spread awareness online,” we coded “1” for communicative advocacy; all other categories were coded “0.” Hence, for all qualitative responses corresponding to our open-ended questions, we coded “1” for a particular category if a unit met the definition of that category and “0” if the unit did not meet that category’s definition. For participants who did not provide qualitative responses to the open-ended questions ($n = 11$ and 22 , respectively, for anti-Asian racism and anti-Black racism), their missing values were coded as “0” (i.e., did not meet any category’s definition of advocacy or activism).

Intercoder reliability. Consistent with recent studies applying directed content analysis (e.g., Cheng et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021), the second and third authors independently coded 10% of a randomly selected subset of qualitative responses based on the coding manual. Using SPSS, we computed the Cohen’s Kappa coefficient to assess intercoder reliability. The intercoder reliability was high ($\kappa = .87$), and discrepancies were resolved by subsequent discussion and consensus. The second author then coded the remaining data. Throughout and at the end of the data coding process, the first author audited the coding of the data and reviewed all codes using both the Excel spreadsheet and the SPSS. Our coding strategy aligned with the conventional practice of intercoder reliability in qualitative research as discussed by O’Connor and Joffe (2020, p. 5): “...there is little consensus regarding the proportion of the data set that facilitates a trustworthy estimate of [intercoder reliability in qualitative research]” due to reasons such as “resource constraints.” It is “typical” to have 10% of data coded by two researchers and the remaining data coded by one researcher.

Because the qualitative data consisted of brief, open-ended survey responses rather than in-depth interviews, we did not conduct participant member checking, which is more commonly used in interview or focus-group-based studies to verify interpretive accuracy of narratives (Motulsky, 2021). In this study, we established trustworthiness by using a theory-informed coding manual, high intercoder reliability, and iterative discussion to resolve coding discrepancies.

Quantitative Data Analysis

We used point biserial correlations to examine the associations of Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity, respectively, with advocacy and activism engagement. We then used hierarchical multiple regressions (HMR) to examine whether advocacy and activism moderated the relationships of Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity,

respectively, with anxiety symptoms. Upon encountering significant moderation effects, we used PROCESS (an SPSS macro) and the Johnson-Neyman's analysis to probe the meaning of significant moderation effects (Hayes, 2018).

Results

The descriptive characteristics of the current data are summarized in Table 2, showing the means, standard deviations, values of kurtosis and skewness, as well as bivariate correlations among the study constructs. As shown in Table 2, other than symbolic advocacy and unconventional activism (both had very low frequency; see Table 1), the remaining variables demonstrated reasonable descriptive characteristics.

Results for Research Question 1

Our first research question explored the forms of advocacy and activism with which Asian American women engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 1 shows the frequency count for solidarity against anti-Asian and anti-Black racism, respectively, as well as the combined frequency count. Only the combined frequency count was reported in the main text and used for subsequent quantitative analyses (i.e., for testing hypotheses 1 to 3). A combined frequency count was used because we were primarily interested in the overall role of antiracist solidarity, not the distinction between solidarity against anti-Asian and anti-Black racism, in mental health. For our research question, we identified the prevalence of advocacy and activism as follows. Collective activism was most common ($n_{\text{combined}} = 68$; $n_{\text{anti-Asian racism}} = 22$; $n_{\text{anti-Black racism}} = 64$; e.g., “attended BLM protests,” “signed petitions”). This was followed by communicative advocacy ($n_{\text{combined}} = 52$; $n_{\text{anti-Asian racism}} = 24$; $n_{\text{anti-Black racism}} = 42$; e.g., “Posting anti-Asian racism propaganda,” “spread awareness on social media”) and financial activism ($n_{\text{combined}} = 31$; $n_{\text{anti-Asian racism}} = 6$; $n_{\text{anti-Black racism}} = 28$; e.g., “donations,” “donating to bail funds”). Symbolic advocacy ($n_{\text{combined}} = 4$; $n_{\text{anti-Asian racism}} = 1$; $n_{\text{anti-Black racism}} = 4$; e.g., “created posters,” “reposted infographics”) and Unconventional activism ($n_{\text{combined}} = 2$; $n_{\text{anti-Asian racism}} = 0$; $n_{\text{anti-Black racism}} = 2$; e.g., “I am trying to change my family's racism and discrimination towards the Black community”) were reported infrequently.

Results for Hypotheses 1 and 2

Our first hypothesis concerned the associations of Asian fetishism with engagement in advocacy and activism. Results from point biserial correlations revealed that experiencing Asian fetishism at Time 1 was positively correlated with collective activism ($r_{pb} = .19$, $p = .020$), financial activism ($r_{pb} = .24$, $p = .003$), and communicative advocacy ($r_{pb} = .19$, $p = .025$) at Time 2. Our second hypothesis focused on the relationships between racial self-negativity and engagement in advocacy and activism. Results indicated that experiencing racial self-negativity at Time 1 was positively linked to financial activism at Time 2 ($r_{pb} = .19$, $p = .026$). The results showed partial support for our first and second hypotheses because although Asian fetishism was positively linked to some forms of solidarity engagement as hypothesized, it was not significantly associated with all forms of solidarity engagement. Similarly, racial self-negativity was only associated with financial activism, but not all forms of solidarity engagement.

Results for Hypothesis 3

Our third hypothesis examined whether engagement in solidarity would moderate the relations between experiencing Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity (i.e., predictors) at Time 1 and anxiety symptoms (i.e., criterion variable) at Time 2. We used HMR to address this hypothesis. The predictors entered at each step are listed in Table 3. To understand whether Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity predicted anxiety symptoms, each predictor was entered at Step 1 in separate regression models. At Step 2, the three most frequent forms of solidarity (collective activism, financial activism, and communicative advocacy) were entered to examine their contributions to the regression model, after accounting for the effects of Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity in

Step 1 in their respective regression models. Symbolic advocacy and unconventional activism were not examined as moderators because of their low frequency count (see Table 1). At Step 3, the interaction terms (i.e., Asian fetishism $\times$ forms of solidarity, racial self-negativity $\times$ forms of solidarity, respectively) were entered in separate regression models to understand whether these variables significantly predicted anxiety symptoms above and beyond the predictors in Step 1 and the moderators in Step 2. As significant interaction effects emerged, we used an SPSS macro, PROCESS, and the Johnson-Neyman's analysis to probe the meaning of significant moderation effects (Hayes, 2018). The Johnson-Neyman's analysis specifies the precise region of significance of the interaction effect. Using the simple slopes method (Frazier et al., 2004), we examined the moderation effect at one standard deviation above and below the mean of the predictor to depict higher (1 = participation) and lower levels (0 = no participation) of the moderator (Frazier et al., 2004).

Subsequently, two HMR analyses were performed and the results are reported in Table 3. In the first HMR, at step one, Asian fetishism was entered as the predictor and it contributed significantly to the regression model, $F(1, 144) = 8.95$, $p = .003$; $R^2 = .06$. At step two, the three most frequent forms of solidarity (i.e., collective activism, financial activism, and communicative advocacy) were added to the regression model and they explained an additional 5% of the variance in anxiety, $F(4, 141) = 4.08$, $p = .004$; $R^2 = .10$, $DR^2 = .05$. Financial activism was the only form of solidarity that was significantly and positively related to the anxiety symptoms ($B = .44$, $SE = .18$, $p = .017$) at this step. At step three, the interaction terms (i.e., Asian fetishism $\times$ forms of solidarity) were added to the model and they explained an additional 2% of the variance in anxiety, $F(7, 138) = 2.90$, $p = .007$; $R^2 = .13$, $DR^2 = .02$. However, none of the specific interaction terms involving Asian fetishism as the predictor were statistically significant at step three in the HMR (see Table 3).

In the second HMR, racial self-negativity was entered at step one as the predictor and it contributed significantly to the regression model, $F(1, 144) = 7.18$, $p = .008$; $R^2 = .05$. At step two, collective activism, financial activism, and communicative advocacy were added to the regression model and they explained an additional 5% of the variance in anxiety, $F(4, 141) = 3.61$, $p = .008$; $R^2 = .09$, $DR^2 = .05$. As in the first HMR, financial activism was the only form of solidarity that was significantly and positively related to the anxiety symptoms ($B = .45$, $SE = .18$, $p = .014$). At step three, the interaction terms (i.e., racial self-negativity $\times$ forms of solidarity) were added to the model and they explained an additional 7% of the variance in anxiety symptoms, $F(7, 138) = 3.72$, $p = .001$; $R^2 = .16$, $DR^2 = .07$. Of the tested moderation effects, only the racial self-negativity $\times$ collective activism moderation effect was significant ($B = .44$, $SE = .18$, $p = .010$; see Table 3). The Johnson-Neyman analysis indicated that racial self-negativity was significantly and positively associated with the anxiety symptoms only for participants who partook in collective activism ($B = .49$, $SE = .13$, $p < .001$), but not for participants who did not engage in this form of activism ($B = .02$, $SE = .12$, $p = .862$; see also Figure 1). No other significant moderations were found ($ps > .05$). Therefore, our third hypothesis was not supported in that (a) there was no moderation effect for advocacy or activism engagement on the link between Asian fetishism and anxiety symptoms, and (b) although a moderation effect was discovered for collective activism on the link between racial self-negativity and anxiety symptoms, the direction of this finding was the opposite of our prediction.

Discussion

This study examined Asian American college women's antiracist solidarity and how pre-pandemic experiences with Asian fetishism and internalized racial self-negativity impacted their engagement with antiracist solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research question focused on the forms of advocacy and activism that Asian American college women used in their solidarity work. Results indicated that the three common forms utilized were collective activism, communicative advocacy, and financial activism. According to McKeever et al. (2023), collective activism (e.g., joining a BLM protest) and financial activism (e.g., donating money) involve committed, direct, and vigorous actions that are more high-cost and high-risk because they require more effort, money, and/or time. Comparatively, communicative advocacy (e.g., talking to others about BLM) is lower-

risk and primarily reflects behaviors aimed at amplifying, promoting, or dialoguing about an issue. Contrary to the stereotypes of Asian American women being submissive and apolitical (Leigh et al., 2021), our findings suggested otherwise: high-risk and high-cost behaviors of collective activism and financial activism were the top one- and third-most-used forms of solidarity in the women's efforts to resist anti-Asian and anti-Black racism during the pandemic. Overall, this result subverts the stereotypes of Asian American women being acquiescent on sociopolitical issues and suggests a need for future research to better understand their experiences.

Our first and second hypotheses concerned the influences of pre-pandemic experiences with perceived Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity, respectively, on engagement in antiracist solidarity. Our findings indicated that Asian American women who experienced more Asian fetishism before the pandemic were more likely to engage in collective activism, financial activism, and communicative advocacy during the COVID-19 pandemic to resist anti-Asian and anti-Black racism. This result is consistent with related theoretical (e.g., Cheng et al., 2021; Duncan, 1999, 2012; van Zomeren et al., 2008) and empirical (e.g., Kiang et al., 2022; Rhoads et al., 2002; Tran & Curtin, 2017) literature, indicating that experiencing prejudice and injustice can motivate racial advocacy and activism. Asian fetishism is a group-specific, intersectional form of gendered and racialized oppression targeting women of Asian descent, denigrating them to the hypersexualized and conniving "Dragon Lady" or as the docile "Lotus Blossom" (Espiritu, 2008)—long-held stereotypes contributing to the underrepresentation of Asian American women in sociopolitical research. To our knowledge, the present study was the first empirical endeavor to demonstrate that increased experience with Asian fetishism predicted higher levels of antiracist activism and advocacy, signifying Asian American women rechanneled the effects of Asian fetishism toward collective empowerment.

Compared to Asian fetishism, pre-pandemic experiences of racial self-negativity were only positively linked to financial activism but not to other forms of solidary engagement. One previous empirical study (Yoon et al., 2024) examined internalized racism and solidarity attitudes. This study found that global internalized racism was not associated with solidarity attitudes in supporting Black Americans, although higher levels of internalized model minority myth in the form of achievement orientation (i.e., attribution of success to Asian Americans' hard work, cultural work ethic) was associated with lower levels of solidarity attitudes. It should be noted that Yoon et al. (2024) examined solidarity attitudes – not actions – as done in the current study. As such, our study was the first to discover that – contrary to the logic that racial self-negativity drives Asian Americans away from supporting other Asians or BIPOC groups – higher levels of racial self-negativity were actually linked to greater financial activism in resisting anti-Asian and anti-Black racism among Asian American women. It may be because racial self-negativity can be both a desire to distance oneself from one's Asian identity (Choi et al., 2017) and a survival mechanism within a White supremacist environment (Chou & Feagin, 2015). Perhaps racial self-negativity curbed overt forms of solidarity (e.g., collective activism, communicative advocacy) for fear of being negatively associated with other Asians or minorities – and, hence, a more visible target for oppression – but it did not deter them from financial activism (e.g., donating money), a relatively covert way of showing solidarity.

Our third hypothesis posited that antiracist solidarity engagement would moderate the effects of pre-pandemic experiences of Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity, respectively, on anxiety symptoms (mental health) during the pandemic. Our findings (see Table 3) indicated that higher levels of pre-pandemic experiences of Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity predicted higher levels of anxiety symptoms during the pandemic, consistent with prior research indicating that gendered racial microaggressions and internalized racism were positively associated with psychological distress (e.g., Choi et al., 2017; Keum et al., 2018, 2023). Unexpectedly, Table 3 showed that financial activism was positively associated with anxiety symptoms, while the other forms of solidarity engagement were not. This result contradicts related literature suggesting that solidarity engagement (e.g., protests, collective gatherings, political advocacy) is linked to favorable outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, positive emotions; Pérez et al., 2015).

Moderation analyses further revealed that collective activism (e.g., serving at an anti-racist organization, joining a BLM protest) significantly moderated the association between pre-pandemic racial self-negativity and anxiety symptoms during the pandemic. However, the direction of the moderation was contrary to the theoretical literature (e.g., Cheng et al., 2021), which postulated that advocacy and activism engagement may buffer the effects of racism on adverse mental health. Instead, we found that racial self-negativity was significantly and positively associated with anxiety symptoms only when participants engaged in, not refrained from, collective activism (see Figure 1). In other words, collective activism worsened, rather than mitigated, the effects of pre-pandemic racial self-negativity on anxiety symptoms during the pandemic. Perhaps engaging in antiracist solidarity, while personally and collectively empowering (Páez et al., 2015), also can involve facing pushback, opposition, vicarious victimization (Joscelyne et al., 2015) as well as activism-related stress, guilt, and exhaustion (Conner et al., 2023) which can potentially trigger stress and apprehension, intensifying the association between racial self-negativity and anxiety symptoms. It is also possible that collective activism (i.e., collective efforts to enhance the status, power, or influence of Asian and/or Black Americans) runs against one's beliefs of racial self-negativity (i.e., devaluation of one's Asian identity with the idealization of Whiteness) such that a psychological dissonance (i.e., between one's beliefs and activism actions) further triggered, rather than alleviated, anxiety symptoms. However, this speculation should be examined in future research before any further assumptions are made. So far, no known empirical studies have investigated the moderator role of collective activism (and related constructs) in the relationships between racism and mental health outcomes; future research in this area is sorely needed.

Limitations

Our study has several limitations. First, our sample was from a racially diverse student body from U.S. West Coast, so the findings have limited generalizability to Asian American women from other universities or U.S. regions with less racial diversity. Also, the use of a college student sample likely has further limited the current study's external validity, particularly findings concerning advocacy and activism. Statistics show that college students are more likely to engage in advocacy and activism than other demographic groups (United Way NCA, 2024), so our findings may not be generalizable to non-college student populations. Second, our sample had mostly (65.1%) second-generation students (i.e., born in the U.S. with at least one parent from another country) and nearly half (46.6%) identified as ethnically Chinese, implying that our findings may have limited generalizability to Asian American women of other generation statuses or ethnic origins. Relatedly, our small sample size prevented the examination of potential sub-group differences (e.g., by generation status in the U.S., ethnicity, etc.) to reflect the diverse and broad Asian American population.

A strength of our study was its longitudinal design, though there was significant attrition from Time 1 to Time 2 data. It should be noted, however, that about 28% of the attrition was due to student graduation (see the Procedures section). If looking at the survey response rate based on available emails for Time 2 contact, the response rate of 52% is markedly higher than previous longitudinal research with college students using similar incentives (e.g., 22.7% response rate after 13 months in Wang et al., 2012). Also, data was collected based on self-report and may be susceptible to social desirability (e.g., social expectations to portray oneself as an antiracist). Relatedly, mono-method (e.g., self-report as sole source of data) and mono-operation bias (e.g., limited questions to operationalize advocacy and activism) were also threats to the study's design (Heppner et al., 2008). Further, it should be noted that the COVID-19 shelter-in-place context of the Time 2 data collection (i.e., mid-October 2020) may have impacted participants' solidarity engagement in that more online forms of solidarity activities – than in-person activities – may have been accessible to them. In our assessment, we asked participants to report their solidarity activities without specifically asking them to differentiate between online versus in-person engagement, preventing us from examining potential differences between the forms of solidarity engagement.

Another limitation of our study concerns the sample size and effect size. Specifically, according to Soper (2020), our sample size ($N = 146$) was adequate to detect a medium-sized moderation effect, but not a small

moderation effect. Hence, the null moderations between the predictors (Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity) and two of the solidarity engagement variables (financial activism or communicative advocacy) may be due to the small sample size rather than real null findings. Yet, the significant interaction found between racial self-negativity and collective activism added 7% of additional variance in the anxiety symptoms (see Table 3), larger than the 1% to 3% added variance in the criterion variable of moderator effects typically observed in non-experimental studies (McClelland & Judd, 1993). However, this moderator effect is still considered small according to Cohen (1992) and should be tested and replicated in future research.

Another limitation was that we used combined frequency counts of advocacy and activism across the areas of anti-Asian and anti-Black racism because of our focus on understanding the overall role of antiracist solidarity; however, results in Table 1 suggest potential limitations of this approach. The frequency counts were notably higher in the area of solidarity against anti-Black than anti-Asian racism (see Table 1) and combining the two areas of solidarity may mask potential differences — though theoretically the two areas of solidarity are interconnected, and conceptual models have not postulated different effects of the two areas of solidarity on mental health (e.g., Cheng et al., 2021). Our small sample size, low non-combined frequency counts, and Type-I error concerns (e.g., doubling the number of analyses performed) prevent us from performing ad-hoc analyses separately for solidarity against anti-Asian and anti-Black racism to examine our hypotheses in more nuanced ways. Likewise, we were only able to include the three most frequent forms of solidarity in our interaction analyses (see Table 3) because the frequencies of symbolic advocacy and unconventional activism were too low. Future studies with larger samples are needed to determine whether our findings are replicable or are sample-specific.

It is unknown whether the higher frequency count in the area of resisting anti-Black racism than the area of resisting anti-Asian racism reflects real differences in regard to interest in combatting anti-Black racism compared to anti-Asian racism, or if it was due to other factors. For example, could the high-profile killings of George Floyd and other Black Americans in 2020 have prompted our participants to engage more in antiracist solidarity against anti-Black racism than anti-Asian racism because the latter comparatively received less media attention? Is it possible that our Asian American women sample may have felt that anti-Asian racism was not “as bad” as anti-Black racism, such that they were less likely to engage in solidarity against the previous area of racism than the latter (e.g., *“I’ve always felt guilty speaking about anti-Asian racism because Black Americans have it way worse”* reported by Wang & Santos, 2023, p. 352)? Could the participants have harbored an internalized invisibility of anti-Asian racism—that is, internalizing society’s tendencies to minimize, overlook, or even deny the racist experiences of Asian Americans (Kim, 2018; Wang & Santos, 2023) such that they minimized the existence of COVID-19 anti-Asian racism and, thus, did not engage in solidarity efforts to confront anti-Asian racism? Alternatively, could it be that the frequency count difference in Table 1 did not indicate real differences in interest in resisting anti-Asian versus anti-Black racism? Other research exploring Asian Americans’ experiences with anti-Asian racism and discrimination during COVID-19 also revealed that standing up against anti-Black racism was an important theme for demonstrating one’s commitment to antiracist activism (Bhattacharyya et al. 2025). The complexity of these possibilities needs to be examined in future research to advance anti-racist solidarity scholarship.

We also acknowledge that history effects may have influenced participants’ advocacy, activism, and anxiety symptoms. Historical contexts (e.g., the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic as U.S. national emergency) may have affected participants’ antiracist solidarity engagement and mental health that our analysis could not capture. We also cannot rule out maturation effects because participants’ mental health and antiracist solidarity engagement may have changed over time due to external factors unrelated to our variables.

Finally, we note some limitations regarding our qualitative analysis. Our qualitative data analysis was based on two brief, open-ended survey questions, instead of in-depth interviews or focus groups. Although we were able to identify the prevalence of participants’ advocacy and activism work, our approach limited the depth

and contextual richness of participants' narratives (e.g., intensity, duration, ongoing challenges, or other related experiences) and missed the opportunity to conduct member checking of our findings (Motulsky, 2021).

Practice Implications

When working with Asian American college women, particularly within racially charged climates, it may be important to explore their engagement in racial solidarity, including collective activism, communicative advocacy, and financial activism as common channels for expressing solidarity. Such an approach pushes practitioners to challenge potentially held stereotypes about Asian American women being apolitical (Leigh et al., 2021). Practitioners also should attend to Asian American college women's experiences with unique forms of racial oppression, including Asian fetishism and internalized racial self-negativity, and how these gendered/racialized experiences may shape their solidarity engagement.

The current findings that Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity were associated with anxiety symptoms also encourages practitioners to assess anxiety concerns when working with Asian American women who may have racially fetishized and minoritized experiences. Although prior studies on diverse communities suggest that activism is linked with favorable outcomes (e.g., positive affect and self-esteem; Klar & Kasser, 2009; Páez et al., 2015), practitioners should not assume that such outcomes would necessarily apply to Asian American women because the present study revealed a connection between financial activism and greater anxiety symptoms. This does not imply that activism engagement should be discouraged to curb potential anxiety symptoms, but it suggests that practitioners should support Asian American women clients in their anti-racist efforts, including financial activism, by helping clients address potential preexisting or ensuing anxiety concerns. Relatedly, the finding that racial self-negativity was significantly and positively associated with anxiety symptoms *only* for participants partaking in collective activism, but not for those refraining from such activism, suggests that practitioners should provide additional support to their Asian American women clients harboring negative racial attitudes about being Asian while engaging in collective antiracist activism. Encouraging clients to explore potentially conflicting values between their internalized racist attitudes (i.e., racial self-negativity) and their antiracist solidarity engagement (i.e., collective activism) from a lens of critical consciousness (the critical awareness of systemic racism, one's place in perpetuating it [including internalized racial self-negativity], and actions to confront systemic racism and oppression; Freire, 1970) may help externalize the internalized self-oppression and resolve the potential values conflict to alleviate anxiety symptoms.

Future Research Directions

Our study is the first known longitudinal investigation of how Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity can predict anti-racist solidarity engagement. Building on this study's strengths, future studies could employ longitudinal designs with three waves of data collection to deepen the understanding of the moderation effects revealed in the present study. Future research also could examine how gendered, racialized, and intersecting minoritized experiences affect solidarity engagement among other Asian American subgroups (e.g., men, LGBTQ individuals). Future research can replicate the present study with a particular demographic group (e.g., a specific Asian ethnicity) or conducting subgroup comparisons within large samples (e.g., comparing across generation or nativity statuses, levels of acculturation) to tap into the diversity within the Asian American population and provide nuanced understandings of specific communities.

Our study focused on the overall role of antiracist solidarity, rather the differential roles of solidarity against anti-Asian versus anti-Black racism, in connection with Asian fetishism and racial self-negativity in understanding mental health (i.e., anxiety symptoms). Extending the current study, a valuable direction for future research is to compare participants' solidarity in resisting these two areas of racism and examine whether there are potentially meaningful differences. Future research also could compare in-person versus online antiracist solidarity engagement and how the type of engagement relates to individuals' prior experience with marginalization and subsequent mental health and psychosocial outcomes. For example, could experience with the perpetual foreigner

stereotype (a form of xenophobia) increase Asian Americans' potential to engage in online versus in-person anti-racist solidarity for fear of being viewed as "foreigners" at in-person events? Finally, other research designs and methodologies are needed to replicate and extend the current study. In-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups may complement the short-answer questions used in the current collection of qualitative data. Future studies employing diverse methodologies will significantly complement the dearth of empirical research around Asian American women's anti-racist solidarity and represent a form of justice for this understudied population in the scholarship of sociopolitical collective action.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this research or the publication of this manuscript.

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Table 1***Content of Respondents' Qualitative Responses to the Open-Ended Question***

Q: Solidarity and/or racial justice work that the respondents participated in, in person or online, to challenge COVID-19 anti-Asian and/or anti-Black racism (or anti-Blackness).

Coding category	Definition	Verbatim Example	Anti-Asian racism (n)	Anti-Black racism (n)	Combined (n) ^a
1. Collective activism	One's engagement in collective efforts to enhance the status, power, or influence of Asian Americans and/or African Americans and to enact changes on COVID-19 anti-Asian racism and/or anti-Black racism (or anti-Blackness) (McKeever et al., 2023)	Signing petitions; attended BLM protest	22	64	68
2. Communicative advocacy	One's behaviors related to a variety of communication activities, involving information sharing and elaboration, performed online and/or in person (McKeever et al., 2023)	Posting anti-Asian racism propaganda; spread awareness on social media	24	42	52
3. Financial activism	One's behaviors such as providing monetary donations, raising money for sociopolitical issues or organizations, purchasing or boycotting products or companies related to COVID-19 anti-Asian racism and/or anti-Black racism (or anti-Blackness) (McKeever et al., 2023)	Donations; donating to bail funds	6	28	31
4. Symbolic advocacy	One's behaviors such as using symbols or public displays of support (McKeever et al., 2023)	Created posters; reposted infographics	1	4	4
5. Unconventional activism	One's engagement in "active and unconventional behaviors" (Corning & Myers, 2002, p. 704) related to COVID-19 anti-Asian racism and/or anti-Black racism (or anti-Blackness) that "could compromise a relationship with family or friends" (McKeever et al., 2023, p. 585)	I am trying to change my family's racism and discrimination towards the Black community	0	2	2

^aNote. The n of the "Combined" column is not necessarily equal to the sum of the ns of the anti-Asian racism and anti-Black racism columns. This is because for participants who reported solidarity and/or racial justice work in both the anti-Asian and anti-Black racism areas, their combined frequency for a given coding category would be 1 instead of 2.

Table 2***Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations Among Study Variables***

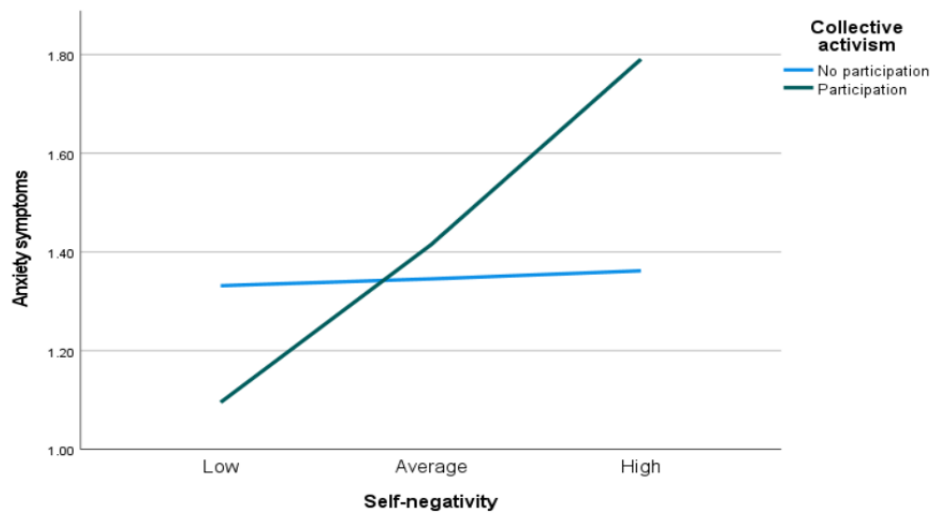
Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Collective activism†	--							
2. Communicative advocacy†	.31***	--						
3. Financial activism†	.36***	.17*	--					
4. Symbolic advocacy†	.10	.14	.02	--				
5. Unconventional activism†	.01	.16	-.06	-.02	--			
6. Asian fetishism	.19*	.19*	.24**	-.01	-.04	--		
7. Racial self-negativity	.07	.04	.19*	.04	-.06	.28***	--	
8. Generalized anxiety disorder symptoms	.06	-.04	.23**	.16	.07	.24**	.22**	--
<i>M</i>	.47	.36	.21	.03	.01	1.54	1.65	1.39
<i>SD</i>	.50	.48	.41	.16	.12	1.10	.77	.85
Skewness	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	.56	1.30	.55
Kurtosis	N/A 1	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	-.21	1.15	-.81

Note. $n = 146$. †binary variable (coded 1 = “Yes” and 0 = “No”); * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. N/A = Not applicable.

Multiple Regression Models Predicting Severity of Generalized Anxiety Symptoms

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2
Model 1							
Step 1					.24	.06**	
Asian fetishism	.19	.06	.24**	2.99			
Step 2					.32	.10**	.05**
Collective activism	-.04	.15	-.03	-.28			
Financial activism	.44	.18	.21*	2.41			
Communicative advocacy	-.19	.15	-.11	-1.25			
Step 3					.36	.13**	.02**
Asian fetishism $\times$ Collective activism	.24	.14	.20	1.78			
Asian fetishism $\times$ Financial activism	.05	.16	.03	.30			
Asian fetishism $\times$ Communicative advocacy	-.06	.14	-.05	-.42			
Model 2							
Step 1					.22	.05**	
Racial self-negativity	.24	.09	.22**	2.68			
Step 2					.31	.09**	.05**
Collective activism	-.01	.15	-.01	-.09			
Financial activism	.45	.18	.22*	2.49			
Communicative advocacy	-.14	.15	-.08	-.94			
Step 3					.40	.16**	.07**
Racial self-negativity $\times$ Collective activism	.44	.18	.27*	2.44			
Racial self-negativity $\times$ Financial activism	.40	.22	.18	1.84			
Racial self-negativity $\times$ Communicative advocacy	.06	.19	.03	.31			

Note. *n* = 146. **p* < .05; ***p* < .01.

Figure 1***A Simple Slope of the Moderation Effect***

Note. A visual depiction of the moderating role of collectivism activism on the relation between racial self-negativity and anxiety symptoms. Racial self-negativity was significantly and positively associated with anxiety symptoms only for participants who engaged in – not for those refraining from – collective activism.

Self-Determination and Eco-Cultural Competence among Tribal Naga Students in Migration: Pathways to Sustainable Homecoming

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Abstract

This study examined how Indigenous practices of community care and mentoring informed culturally grounded counseling and psychological well-being among Naga tribal students from Nagaland in Northeast India. Guided by Indigenous Psychology and Self-Determination Theory, the research explored how the students navigated their educational migration through community-based counseling systems. These systems provided culturally grounded spaces of care and mentoring, enabling students to sustain their socio-cultural adaptation, strengthen their eco-cultural competence, and prepare them for a sustainable homecoming while maintaining their ancestral identity and ecological belonging. Using qualitative methods rooted in Indigenous methodologies, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and talking circles that foreground collective knowledge. Participants included students, community elders, and Naga mental health practitioners. Findings revealed that student unions and Church fellowships functioned as Indigenous mentoring and counseling systems that integrated ethics of reciprocity, intergenerational narrative practices, and contemporary psychosocial support, thereby fostering empowerment and ecological consciousness. Migration offered a perspective that deepened awareness of cultural and ecological heritage, reinforcing commitment to stewardship and community advocacy. The study demonstrated how Indigenous counseling frameworks could enhance culturally responsive mental health practices by providing contextually relevant approaches that support equity, community well-being, and environmental justice in higher education contexts.

Keywords: Indigenous psychology, eco-cultural competence, self-determination, community counseling, Naga students, migration, social justice

In an increasingly mobile and interconnected world, questions of identity, belonging, and well-being have become central to the work of counselors, psychologists, and educators (Arthur & Collins, 2010; Sue & Sue, 2016). Migration, whether driven by opportunity or circumstance, often brings both expansion and disruption, inviting individuals to reimagine who they are in relation to place, people, and purpose (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). For those who cross cultural or linguistic boundaries, the experience of relocation can reshape not only their sense of self but also their sources of meaning and support. Understanding how people sustain their psychological well-being amid such transitions remains an important concern for contemporary counseling psychology (Gerstein et al., 2009; Moodley, 2011).

This concern becomes especially significant for Indigenous and tribal communities, whose sense of identity and health is deeply rooted in collective, spiritual, and ecological relationships (Gone, 2013; Smith, 2012). When members of these communities move for education or work, they carry with them traditions of care and mutual responsibility that often differ from the individual-centered approaches emphasized in mainstream psychology (Duran, 2006). Exploring these cultural forms of resilience and connection can expand current understandings of counseling practice by highlighting the ways well-being is nurtured within communities rather than apart from them (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

This article focused on the experiences of Naga tribal students from the state of Nagaland in Northeast India who pursued higher education in other parts of the country. Their journeys reflect both the promise of academic advancement and the challenge of negotiating cultural continuity in unfamiliar settings (Ao, 2020; Longchar, 2016). Drawing from Indigenous Psychology (IP) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the study examined how these students sustained their eco-cultural competence, identity, and well-being through Indigenous frameworks of care and mentoring (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kim et al., 2006). The study highlights how traditional community networks such as student unions, Church fellowships, and peer groups functioned as living systems of counseling and support that bridged cultural heritage and contemporary psychosocial needs (Ozukum & Golmei, 2025). In doing so, the study contributes to counseling psychology's ongoing effort to understand and respond to human adaptation in a way that honors cultural knowledge, collective healing, and social inclusion and justice (Gerstein & Ægisdóttir, 2012; Moodley & Palmer, 2006).

Educational migration among Naga tribal students from Nagaland reflects both historical necessity and evolving social aspiration. Since the formation of Nagaland as a state in 1963, the region has witnessed prolonged political negotiations and intermittent insurgency. The ongoing enforcement of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958, has profoundly influenced civic life and public confidence in state institutions (Kikon, 2019; McDuie-Ra, 2012). These political and structural challenges, combined with limited infrastructure and higher education opportunities, have led many young Nagas to seek educational and professional advancement in Indian cities such as Delhi, Bangalore, Pune, and Hyderabad (Ao, 2020; Ozukum & Golmei, 2025).

The decision to migrate, however, extends beyond economic motivation. For many Naga youth, it represents an act of aspiration, responsibility, and self-determination as they pursue education as a means to uplift both themselves and their community (Longchar, 2016). This movement is shaped by collective memories of social and political uncertainty as well as the desire to contribute to communal renewal through education and social participation (Kikon, 2019). Migration, therefore, is a personal, collective, and social action project, reflecting the Naga ethos of interconnectedness and responsibility to one's people.

For students navigating new academic and social environments, adaptation often requires negotiating between institutional norms and Indigenous values of interdependence, humility, and reciprocity. Many encounter subtle forms of stereotyping or exclusion, which can affect their self-concept and belonging (Hazarika, 2017; McDuie-Ra, 2012). Yet these experiences also highlight the enduring strength of Naga social organizations and cultural capital. Away from home, Naga student unions, Church fellowships, and peer networks have become vital spaces of belonging, functioning as community-led systems of mentoring, counseling, and mutual support (Kikon, 2019; Ozukum & Golmei, 2025).

These networks mirror traditional structures such as the *morung* which is the traditional men's dormitory that historically served as a community school of moral instruction, skill learning, and storytelling (Ao, 2020). In contemporary settings, they continue this function by providing guidance, advocacy, and emotional care for young people navigating institutions and intercultural relationships. The persistence of such Indigenous systems of care demonstrates how community-oriented approaches can sustain mental and emotional well-being even in migration contexts.

Understanding these Indigenous forms of counseling and mentorship is especially relevant to counseling psychology, which increasingly seeks to integrate culture-specific frameworks into theory and practice (Arthur & Collins, 2010; Gerstein & Ægisdóttir, 2012). The Naga experience reveals that community-based care and mentoring can operate as a culturally responsive counseling model that strengthens both psychological resilience and collective empowerment. Exploring these frameworks offers valuable insights into how counseling psychology can evolve beyond its conventional individual-centered paradigms toward approaches that honor relational, ecological, and communal dimensions of human well-being (Gone, 2013; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). This perspective aligned the study with counseling psychology's ongoing attention to culturally grounded understandings of adaptation, collective healing, and social inclusion (Gerstein & Ægisdóttir, 2012; Moodley & Palmer, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of the study was situated at the intersection of IP and SDT. The integration offered a culturally grounded understanding of motivation, adaptation, and well-being among Tribal Naga students as they navigate educational migration and community belonging.

IP provides a framework that recognizes the contextual, relational, and collective dimensions of human behavior. It challenges the universalizing assumptions of Western psychological models by situating meaning within the cultural and ecological realities of specific communities (Kim et al., 2006; Smith, 2012). Within this framework, knowledge is relational rather than individual, emphasizing the interconnectedness of people, land, spirituality, and community life (Duran, 2006; Gone, 2013). For Naga students, well-being and selfhood are not merely personal achievements but extensions of kinship, ancestral continuity, and communal responsibility. An Indigenous approach to counseling and care, therefore, aligns with community participation, storytelling, and collective mentoring, rather than individual-centered interventions.

SDT complements this framework by offering a motivational lens through which to understand agency, growth, and psychological resilience. SDT posits that human flourishing depends on the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When interpreted through an Indigenous worldview, these needs are not isolated experiences but are sustained within social and ecological systems. For instance, autonomy among Naga students often reflects the ability to make educational and moral choices while honoring communal values; competence involves not only academic achievement but also the ability to represent one's community with integrity; and relatedness is nurtured through ongoing engagement with peer networks, family, and cultural traditions (Ao, 2020; Longchar, 2016).

This study therefore employed IP not as a critique but as a complement to mainstream counseling frameworks. It foregrounded the epistemological stance that knowledge arises from within the lived experience of a people and that healing, resilience, and adaptation are deeply relational acts (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Integrating SDT within this Indigenous paradigm allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how self-determination manifested in collective societies where autonomy was exercised through interdependence rather than isolation.

By connecting these two frameworks, the study sought to expand counseling psychology's capacity to engage with cultural contexts that valued community and ecology as integral to human development. It invited practitioners, educators, and social justice professionals to consider how Indigenous systems of mentoring,

faith-based community support, and peer networks could inform culturally responsive counseling practices that affirmed both individual and collective well-being.

Purpose and Rationale

This study addressed a critical gap in counseling psychology research by exploring how Indigenous counseling and mentoring models operated among migrant Naga students. The study bridged theory and practice in pursuit of social and ecological justice (Case & Hoxsey, 2023). By documenting community-based support systems, it demonstrated how Indigenous knowledge could inform counseling practice within higher education and community settings. The primary objectives of the study were to: (1) examine how Naga students developed and sustained their eco-cultural competence during their educational migration; (2) identify community-based counseling and mentoring frameworks that supported their psychological well-being; and (3) explore implications for culturally responsive counseling psychology practice that advanced social justice and community empowerment.

Literature Review

Contemporary counseling psychology increasingly recognizes the need for culturally responsive approaches that move beyond Western-centric frameworks (Rogers-Sirin, 2017). Rogers-Sirin's critical analysis of mainstream psychotherapy highlighted how the dominance of empirically validated treatments, particularly cognitive-behavioral therapy, often marginalized culturally diverse and socially just approaches essential for serving Indigenous and marginalized populations effectively. This critique is particularly relevant for understanding the counseling needs of Naga students, whose experiences of migration, identity negotiation, and collective trauma require frameworks that acknowledge the systemic, collective, and ecological dimensions of their mental health.

Research on Indigenous counseling models emphasizes the importance of community-based approaches that integrate cultural values, traditional knowledge, and collective healing practices (Gone, 2013; Duran, 2006). These models challenge the individual-focused orientation of mainstream psychology by recognizing that well-being is fundamentally relational and embedded within cultural and ecological contexts (Smith, 2012). For Indigenous communities, healing and support occur through storytelling, ceremonial practices, and intergenerational knowledge transmission rather than through formal clinical interventions alone (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

The concept of eco-cultural competence extends ecological psychology's understanding of human-environment relationships by incorporating Indigenous perspectives on the inseparability of cultural identity and connections to the environment (Longchar, 2016). For Naga communities, this connection is not metaphorical but lived through agricultural practices, land-based rituals, and the collective stewardship of natural resources (Ao, 2020). When students migrate for education, maintaining this ecological consciousness becomes both a challenge for them and a source of resilience.

SDT provides a useful framework for understanding motivation and well-being in migration contexts, but its application to Indigenous populations requires cultural adaptation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In collective societies, autonomy is expressed through interdependence rather than independence. Competence involves both academic achievement and culturally grounded knowledge, while relatedness extends beyond interpersonal relationships to include land, ancestors, and future generations (Kim et al., 2006).

These culturally situated understandings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness have important implications for how counseling and support practices are conceptualized in Indigenous and collective contexts. Recent work on community engagement in counseling psychology underscores the importance of participatory approaches that position communities as partners rather than recipients of services (Baranowski et al., 2016; Case & Hoxsey, 2023). These approaches align with Indigenous methodologies that prioritize the community's voice, reciprocity, and collective benefit over individual outcomes. The development of advocacy competencies among

counselors working with marginalized populations requires understanding how systemic oppression, historical trauma, and ongoing marginalization shape their mental health and well-being (Edwards et al., 2017; Kozan & Blustein, 2018).

Method

Research Design

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews and Indigenous talking circles to explore how community support systems facilitated eco-cultural competence and self-determination among Naga students. The research design was informed by decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 2012), emphasizing community partnership, Indigenous knowledge validation, and reciprocity. The primary researcher, himself a member of the Naga community, worked collaboratively with student union leaders and community elders throughout all phases of the research design, data collection, and analysis.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The primary researcher's dual positioning as both community insider and academic researcher created unique opportunities and challenges. As a Naga individual who had experienced a similar migration for education, the researcher possessed cultural knowledge, linguistic fluency, and established community relationships that facilitated trust and deeper conversations. Participants in the study frequently expressed relief at speaking with someone who understood their experiences without extensive explanation, and who used culturally specific references and code-switching between English and tribal languages. However, this insider positioning also carried the risk of overlooking assumptions or taking certain experiences for granted. To address these challenges, reflexivity was approached through multiple layers of scholarly and ethical engagement. The study was conducted by an Indigenous Naga primary researcher, with analytic and methodological oversight provided by a non-Indigenous co-author and supervisor with formal training in qualitative research and counseling psychology.

In addition to these safeguards, the research process was supported through the oversight of a doctoral-level Research Advisory Committee (RAC), which included one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous faculty member. While RAC members were not directly involved in data collection or coding, their role was to provide ethical guidance, methodological review, and critical feedback at key stages of the research process. Professional consultations with mental health practitioners and ongoing scholarly dialogue with Naga researchers further contributed to the reflexive awareness and interpretive rigor of the study. Regular reflexive journaling was undertaken by the primary researcher to document their emotional responses, assumptions, and evolving interpretations throughout data collection and analysis. Periodic analytic discussions with the co-author and supervisory feedback created structured opportunities to examine how positionality, disciplinary training, and lived experience shaped the data interpretation.

Prior to the study, the primary researcher held assumptions that community support systems would be universally experienced as positive and beneficial. However, engagement with participant narratives and supervisory dialogue revealed more nuanced realities, including tensions between individual aspirations and community expectations, generational differences in cultural practices, and varying levels of engagement with traditional support systems. These insights strengthened the analysis process by moving beyond idealized representations toward more contextually grounded accounts of lived experience.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Conduct and Ethics Committee, CHRIST (Deemed to be) University, Bengaluru, India. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary, that their confidentiality would be maintained, and that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences.

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants who could provide in-depth, experience-based insights relevant to the study's focus on migration, community support, and eco-cultural competence among Tribal Naga students. A total of 30 Naga students (18 female, 12 male), aged 19–28 years ($M = 23.40$, $SD = 2.60$), participated in the study. This age range reflects a developmental period characterized by higher education attendance, identity negotiation, and increasing independence, making it particularly salient for examining self-determination and psychological well-being in migration contexts.

Participants were pursuing undergraduate ($n = 17$) and postgraduate ($n = 13$) degrees in two major urban destinations for Naga students: Delhi National Capital Region ($n = 16$) and Bangalore ($n = 14$). Academic disciplines were diverse and included the social sciences and humanities ($n = 10$), commerce and management-related fields ($n = 8$), science and technology disciplines ($n = 7$), and professional programs such as education and allied health fields ($n = 5$). Participants also varied in their duration of residence outside Nagaland, ranging from 6 months to 5 years, allowing for reflection across different stages of migration and adjustment.

Recruitment occurred through Naga student union networks, Church fellowships, and snowball sampling. When the study was promoted, potential participants were informed that the research aimed to understand Naga students' experiences of migration for higher education, including sources of support, cultural identity negotiation, Indigenous practices of community care, and psychological well-being in urban contexts. It was emphasized that participation was voluntary and that the study sought to contribute knowledge that could inform culturally responsive counseling and mental health practices relevant to Naga and other Indigenous students.

During the informed consent process, the purpose of the study was explained in greater detail, including its focus on Indigenous practices of community care and the broader goal of contributing research that could benefit future Naga students navigating higher education migration. Many participants reported being motivated by the opportunity to share their experiences, contribute to community-relevant research, and engage in collective reflection on migration, identity, and belonging. Several participants also noted that the research process itself functioned as a space for mutual support and community connection.

In addition to student participants, talking circles included eight community elders and four mental health practitioners from Naga backgrounds. The practitioners were professionals engaged in counseling and psychological services within hospital, educational, and community mental health settings. Among them, two were licensed counseling psychologists and two were licensed clinical psychologists. These individuals were included because of their professional experience supporting student well-being, their familiarity with the cultural and relational contexts of Naga communities, and their involvement in community leadership or mental health practice. Their participation enabled the inclusion of intergenerational perspectives and professional insights into Indigenous practices of community care within the context of student migration and urban adaptation.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred in two phases over a six-month period. Phase one involved individual semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by participants, including university campuses, Churches, and community centers, to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Interview topics included migration experiences and adaptation challenges, sources of support and coping strategies, cultural identity negotiation, connections to homeland and community, experiences of discrimination or exclusion, academic and career aspirations, and perceptions of mental health and well-being. Sample questions included, “How has moving away from Nagaland shaped your understanding of your cultural identity?” and “What role do student unions and Church fellowships play in your life here?”

Phase two consisted of four talking circles, each lasting approximately 90–120 minutes. Talking circles were employed as a culturally resonant method that facilitated collective knowledge construction and community dialogue. A total of 12 participants (8 community elders and 4 mental health practitioners) took part across the

four circles, with some individuals participating in more than one circle. Each circle included between 6 and 8 people, reflecting overlapping participation rather than distinct groups. Talking circles were facilitated by the primary Indigenous researcher, with the support of a community elder when appropriate, following Indigenous protocols such as opening prayers, the sharing of traditional food, and consensus-based discussion. These circles explored themes emerging from the individual interviews and allowed for collective sense-making and validation of experiences. Topics included traditional and contemporary support systems, intergenerational perspectives on migration and identity, community responses to student mental health needs, and visions for culturally responsive counseling approaches.

All interviews and talking circles were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher. Transcripts were checked against audio recordings to ensure their accuracy and completeness. Field notes were maintained by the primary researcher to document non-verbal observations, contextual factors, and reflexive insights throughout the data collection process.

Prior to data collection, the primary researcher had received formal training in qualitative research methods through doctoral coursework and supervision. In addition, a two-day orientation was conducted in consultation with the research supervisor and Indigenous community advisors, focusing on Indigenous research ethics, culturally responsive interviewing, reflexive practice, and protocols for facilitating talking circles. Guidance on talking circle facilitation was informed by Indigenous community practices and mentorship from elders familiar with this method. Ongoing supervisory support and periodic consultation ensured consistency in data collection while allowing flexibility and responsiveness to cultural and contextual considerations.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed and it followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, though it was intentionally adapted to align with Indigenous analytical principles emphasizing relational accountability, reflexivity, and community validation. Data from individual interviews and talking circles were analyzed in relation to one another rather than treated as separate datasets, as both methods explored overlapping experiential domains of migration, community support, cultural continuity, and well-being. While the formats differed, the analytic focus across methods was consistent, allowing for triangulation and deeper contextual interpretation rather than analytic distortion. Method-specific nuances were retained during coding through memoing and attention to the interactional context in which data were generated.

Initial familiarization involved repeated reading of all interviews and talking circle transcripts while listening to corresponding audio recordings to preserve tone, emotion, and narrative emphasis. This phase was conducted by the primary researcher, who maintained detailed analytic memos documenting early observations, contextual reflections, and emerging questions.

Inductive coding was then undertaken, attending to both semantic content and latent meanings. Coding was led by the primary researcher, with a subset of transcripts independently reviewed by the co-author as part of an analytic accountability and reflexivity process. The research team consisted of two Indigenous and two non-Indigenous members with training in qualitative research and counseling psychology. Not all team members coded every transcript. Instead, transcripts were strategically distributed to allow for comparative review across positionalities while maintaining analytic coherence. When overlapping transcripts were coded by more than one researcher, discrepancies were discussed in team meetings and resolved through dialogue grounded in the data, Indigenous ethical principles, and alignment with participants' intended meanings rather than through consensus scoring.

Theme development involved identifying patterned meanings across the full dataset while remaining attentive to divergent accounts and minority perspectives. This stage was carried out through iterative team discussions that examined coherence, conceptual boundaries, and cultural relevance of emerging themes. Defining and naming themes was led by the primary researcher, with input from the research team to ensure

that analytic categories reflected participants' worldviews and Indigenous conceptual frameworks rather than externally imposed constructs.

Preliminary themes were shared with a subset of participants ($n = 8$) for member checking, resulting in refinement of theme labels and deeper contextualization of the cultural concepts. This collaborative validation process strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings while honoring Indigenous principles of knowledge co-creation.

Results

The analysis revealed five interconnected themes that illuminated how Naga students navigate migration while sustaining their cultural identity and well-being through community support systems.

Migration as Self-Determined Cultural Resilience

The first theme, migration, emerged as more than an academic pursuit; it represented an assertion of self-determination intertwined with cultural preservation. Students described leaving home as simultaneously challenging and transformative, offering new perspectives on their heritage. One participant reflected: "It was only when I left home that I truly began to appreciate what I had taken for granted like our land, the forests, our customs, and way of life. Being away made me long for it, and that longing made me want to preserve it."

This geographic distance paradoxically strengthened students' cultural connections. They reported heightened awareness of their tribal identity when encountering difference, transforming potential experiences of marginalization into opportunities for cultural pride. As one student explained: "People assume things about us. They call us 'chinky,' ask if we eat dogs, or think we are foreigners. It gets tiring, but over time, I have learned to assert myself. I now tell them exactly who I am and where I come from."

The migration journey involved extensive preparation through community networks. Senior Naga students already enrolled in universities and alumni who had previously completed their studies in these cities provided practical guidance on accommodation, academic navigation, and cultural adjustment. This mentorship system, rooted in Indigenous values of intergenerational knowledge transfer, continued post-migration through orientation programs and ongoing peer support. A student recounted: "Before I came here, my seniors told me everything. They told me what to expect, how to find a place to stay, and how to handle the initial culture shock. Without that, I would have been completely lost." These preparatory interactions functioned as informal counseling relationships, where emotional reassurance was offered through shared lived experience rather than clinical framing.

Cultural resilience manifested through active engagement with heritage practices. Many students reported discovering deeper appreciation for traditional attire, food, and customs while away from home. Participation in cultural festivals and student union events became ways to maintain and share their cultural identity. One person noted: "At home, I never cared about wearing traditional attire. But here, at our student union events, when I wore my traditional shawl for the first time, I finally understood what it meant. The colors, patterns, and symbols all told a story." These practices acted as grounding resources supporting students' emotional well-being and continuity of identity.

Student Unions as Contemporary Morungs

The Naga student unions functioned as contemporary expressions of the traditional *morung* system, offering structured spaces for learning, leadership development, and the transmission of cultural knowledge. In adapting these communal practices to urban educational contexts, the unions established institutional frameworks for collective care that remained grounded in Indigenous values while responding to the demands of migration and higher education. A student leader explained: "Our union feels like a family. Those who are able to help take on responsibilities. Seniors look out for juniors, we organize study groups, celebrate festivals, and support one

another when someone is going through a difficult time.” This structure reflected Indigenous ethics of communal responsibility rather than individual obligation.

The unions facilitated multiple forms of support including counseling and guidance, academic mentoring through peer tutoring and resource sharing, emotional support during homesickness and adjustment challenges; practical assistance with accommodation and financial management; cultural programming that maintained connections to heritage; and advocacy when students faced discrimination or institutional barriers. These activities reflected traditional morung functions while addressing contemporary needs. However, here they occurred in culturally fluent, peer-led environments where students did not need to explain their background or identity before receiving care.

Beyond immediate support, these collective spaces also served as sites for leadership formation and skill development. Leadership development occurred through graduated responsibilities, with newer students observing and learning before taking on organizational roles. This apprenticeship model mirrored traditional knowledge transmission while developing professional skills. As one participant observed: “In our union, you start by helping with small tasks, then gradually take on more responsibility. By the time you’re a senior, you know how to organize events, manage budgets, and support younger students. It’s training for life, not just university.”

Church fellowships complemented student unions by providing spiritual grounding and moral guidance. Services conducted in native languages created spaces of cultural familiarity, while prayer groups offered intimate settings for sharing struggles and receiving support. One student expressed: “Going to Church on Sundays and hearing the sermon in my language makes me feel at home, even when I am far away. It’s not just about religion; it’s about community and belonging.” These settings also hosted informal counseling dialogues with pastors, elders, and peers, illustrating how psychological support is embedded in spiritual and relational life.

Eco-Cultural Competence Through Community Engagement

Eco-cultural competence through community engagement emerged as a central process through which students sustained connections to land-based knowledge while adapting to new environments. This involved translating traditional ecological wisdom into contemporary contexts through activities like organizing Indigenous food festivals that showcased traditional cuisine and agricultural products; creating rooftop gardens using traditional farming techniques; and facilitating knowledge exchanges about medicinal plants and sustainable practices.

Through these forms of collective participation, students moved beyond cultural maintenance toward deeper reflection on the social and environmental significance of their knowledge systems. Community engagement fostered critical consciousness about environmental issues affecting their homeland. Students studying environmental sciences, agriculture, and related fields explicitly connected their education to community needs. One individual shared: “Being here has made me realize that our tribal way of life is not something outdated. It’s something that can be strengthened, evolved, and even made into something that benefits our people economically and environmentally.”

The development of eco-cultural competence involved negotiating between Indigenous knowledge systems and academic disciplines. Students described learning to articulate traditional practices in scientific terms while maintaining respect for Indigenous epistemologies. This bilingual competence, speaking both Indigenous and academic languages, positioned them as cultural brokers capable of bridging knowledge systems. As Perez and Marsico (2021) described in their work on the Mapuche people’s connection to ancestral lands, this reflected the strengthening of semiotic ties during displacement, where physical distance enhanced symbolic and emotional connections to homeland. These engagements also served therapeutic functions by reducing students’ isolation, providing continuity with their home environments, and supporting their meaning-making across life transitions.

Pathways to Community-Centered Counseling

Pathways to community-centered counseling emerged through Indigenous support systems that functioned as culturally grounded approaches to mental health and well-being. These Indigenous counseling models operated through narrative practices where elders shared stories that provided guidance and perspective; collective problem-solving in talking circles and community meetings; prayer meetings and Church services that facilitated healing and transition; and mentorship relationships that combined practical support with emotional care. Students emphasized that support was most effective when grounded in shared cultural understanding.

Within this landscape of community-based care, some practitioners navigated roles that bridged Indigenous healing traditions and formally trained mental health practices. Mental health practitioners from Naga backgrounds described working at the intersection of traditional and clinical approaches. A counseling psychologist from the Naga community explained: “I integrate and use what I learned in my training with our traditional ways of healing. Sometimes, connecting a student to their Church community or organizing a traditional meal together is more therapeutic than individual counseling sessions.”

Students identified specific elements that made community-based support effective including shared cultural understanding that eliminated the need for extensive explanation; collective approaches that normalized struggles and reduced isolation; holistic support addressing spiritual, social, and practical needs simultaneously; and flexibility to adapt support based on individual and situational needs. These elements aligned with Indigenous counseling principles that prioritize relational healing over symptom reduction.

Challenges within these support systems included generational differences in understanding mental health; stigma around seeking formal counseling services; limited resources for addressing severe mental health concerns; and tensions between traditional approaches and clinical interventions. Despite these challenges, community support remained the primary source of psychological care for most students.

Sustainable Homecoming and Future Aspirations

Sustainable homecoming and future aspirations emerged in participants’ accounts as collective orientations toward return and long-term community well-being, rather than as markers of individual success. Students described plans that emphasized cultural revitalization and shared responsibility, including establishing social enterprises that could generate local employment, initiating sustainable development projects rooted in local ecologies, documenting and preserving traditional knowledge, and developing culturally responsive educational and mental health services.

The concept of “sustainable homecoming” emerged as a framework for understanding how education could serve community development without perpetuating brain drain. Students described feeling responsibility to apply their education for collective benefit while maintaining personal fulfillment. One participant articulated: “My education is not just for me. It’s an investment my community has made. I want to return and create opportunities so future generations don’t have to leave to succeed.”

This orientation toward community benefit reflected Indigenous values of reciprocity and collective responsibility. Students viewed their education as creating obligations to contribute to community well-being, whether through direct return or remote support. The sustainability of homecoming depended on creating conditions where educated youth could apply their skills while maintaining quality of life.

Discussion

The current findings illuminated how Indigenous frameworks of community care and mentoring functioned as powerful resources for psychological well-being and cultural continuity among Naga students navigating educational migration. These community-based systems offered alternatives to individualistic counseling models by embedding care within collective structures that honored cultural values, ecological connections, and intergenerational relationships. When interpreted through SDT, the findings suggested that autonomy,

competence, and relatedness were enacted relationally and collectively rather than through individualized self-assertion. In this way, the study extends dominant interpretations of self-determination by demonstrating that psychological needs may be fulfilled through communal responsibility, cultural continuity, and future-oriented collective aspiration.

Naga student unions operated as contemporary rearticulations of the traditional morung system, maintaining its core functions of guidance, cultural transmission, and collective care while adapting to modern educational contexts. This supports Smith's (2012) argument that Indigenous knowledge systems remain dynamic rather than static. By sustaining mentorship, leadership development, and shared responsibility, these organizations embodied what Watkins and Shulman (2008) described as critical psychology's emphasis on community-level intervention. The current finding also aligns with community engagement models that position communities as sources of strength rather than deficit (Case & Hoxsey, 2023). Within these community structures, participants' experiences suggested that relatedness was fostered through structured belonging, competence through peer mentoring and leadership apprenticeship, and autonomy through guided involvement in communal decision-making. Autonomy, therefore, emerged not as separation from community but as responsible participation within it.

The development of eco-cultural competence through migration challenges assumptions of inevitable cultural loss. Physical distance from ancestral land often intensified students' appreciation and intentional engagement with their heritage. This resonates with Perez and Marsico's (2021) concept of strengthened semiotic ties to ancestral land during displacement. The students in this study's efforts to preserve and reinterpret cultural practices echo Gone's (2013) view of cultural revitalization through education, in which contemporary spaces become sites for sustaining traditional knowledge. For counseling psychology, this suggests that well-being must be understood as culturally and ecologically grounded rather than solely as individual emotional adjustment. Competence and relatedness were reinforced through collective cultural action, while autonomy was expressed through deliberate commitment to sustaining identity across contexts.

Community support systems also operated as *de facto* counseling frameworks. Storytelling, collective problem-solving, and ritual practices addressed psychological needs through culturally congruent approaches (Duran, 2006). At the same time, tensions between traditional practices and formal clinical models highlight the importance of thoughtful integration rather than replacement. The findings supported Rogers-Sirin's (2017) critique of the dominance of standardized treatments in psychotherapy and align with arguments for expanding conceptions of evidence-based practice, particularly for populations affected by historical trauma and ongoing marginalization (Keast et al., 2025). These Indigenous approaches met psychological needs through relational and ecological practices that differ from Western individual-centered models.

The articulation of sustainable homecoming further demonstrates how self-determination operated collectively. Students framed success not as individual mobility detached from community, but as preparation for future contribution. Aspirations to establish social enterprises, strengthen local systems, and develop culturally responsive services reflected autonomy oriented toward communal well-being. This challenges dominant Western career development frameworks and supports alternative counseling models with collective-oriented populations (Kozan & Blustein, 2018). The negotiated balance between personal fulfillment and communal responsibility suggests that SDT's construct of autonomy requires cultural contextualization when applied within Indigenous communities.

Taken together, these findings offer several theoretical contributions to SDT in Indigenous and collectivist contexts. While autonomy, competence, and relatedness appear culturally relevant, their manifestation was distinctly communal and ecologically situated. Autonomy emerged not as individual self-separation but as collective self-determination expressed through meaningful participation in community life and future-oriented responsibility. Competence extended beyond academic mastery to include cultural knowledge, ecological literacy, and the capacity to contribute to communal sustainability. Relatedness operated not only interpersonally but

temporally and spatially, linking students to ancestors, future generations, and their ancestral land. These patterns suggest that SDT's psychological needs may be fulfilled through systemic and collective structures rather than primarily through individual mechanisms. In this respect, the study expands the dominant interpretations of SDT by demonstrating that motivational processes among Indigenous youth navigating migration are sustained through communal continuity and anticipated community contribution, rather than solely through individual goal attainment.

Faith-based organizations also played a significant role in sustaining well-being. Churches provided emotional support, belonging, and practical assistance, reinforcing relatedness and meaning. This aligns with research on spirituality in Indigenous mental health and underscores the importance of engaging faith-based resources in culturally responsive counseling practice (Edwards et al., 2017). The integration of prayer, worship, and pastoral care within community systems demonstrates how Indigenous communities create multidimensional networks of support.

Implications for counseling psychology practice and training are substantial. Effective counseling with Indigenous students must engage with existing community systems rather than replace them with standardized clinical approaches. This may involve training community leaders in mental health support, building collaborative partnerships between clinical services and community organizations, and developing funding models that sustain community-based interventions (Baranowski et al., 2016). Counselor education programs must expand curricula to include Indigenous and non-Western healing approaches, while questioning assumptions embedded in mainstream theory. Incorporating Indigenous methodologies and community-based learning aligns with advocacy competencies essential for addressing systemic inequities affecting Indigenous mental health (Hill et al., 2022).

The findings also highlight ecological and place-based dimensions of mental health. Connections among land, identity, and well-being indicate that counseling approaches must attend to environmental and spatial contexts. Supporting clients' ties to ancestral lands and recognizing environmental justice as integral to mental health work reflects broader commitments to decolonizing practice (Flores et al., 2022). Rather than assuming expert authority, mental health professionals may act as collaborators who support community-led healing processes.

This study demonstrates that Indigenous frameworks of community care and mentoring remain vital within contemporary educational migration contexts. By documenting these community-based counseling systems, the research contributes to growing recognition of diverse approaches to mental health that operate beyond Western clinical paradigms. The persistence and adaptation of these systems underscore the need for counseling psychology to move beyond individual-centered interventions toward collective, ecological, and culturally grounded approaches that honor Indigenous knowledge and advance social and environmental justice.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study warrant consideration. The study focused on Naga students in two major cities. Therefore, experiences may differ elsewhere or among other Indigenous groups. Voluntary participation may have drawn students already connected to community support systems, potentially overlooking those who felt more isolated. The primary researcher's insider position, while enabling deeper engagement and cultural understanding, also may have influenced what participants felt comfortable sharing and how certain experiences were interpreted during analysis.

Future research should examine the experiences of students who return to their communities after completing their studies, particularly how they apply their learning during reintegration. Comparative studies with other Indigenous student populations, as well as attention to gender differences in accessing support systems, could provide more nuanced insights. Further inquiry into collaborations between Indigenous support networks and formal mental health services may help inform integrated and culturally responsive care models and

assist when examining how community-based systems support autonomy, competence, and relatedness within Indigenous contexts.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how Indigenous frameworks of community care and mentoring provide essential psychological support for Naga students navigating educational migration. By documenting these community-based counseling models, the research contributes to growing recognition of diverse approaches to mental health that operate outside Western clinical frameworks. The findings challenge counseling psychology to expand beyond individual-centered interventions toward collective, ecological, and culturally grounded approaches that honor Indigenous knowledge and support community well-being.

The persistence and evolution of Indigenous support systems in contemporary educational contexts revealed their ongoing relevance and effectiveness. As counseling psychology continues to grapple with its colonial history and work toward decolonization, learning from Indigenous communities becomes essential. The Naga student experience offers valuable insights into how education, culture, and mental health intersect in complex ways that require sophisticated, culturally responsive approaches to support. For counseling psychology, this means forming partnerships with Indigenous support networks and recognizing these community-based systems as legitimate and necessary forms of psychological care. Moving forward, the profession must commit not just to cultural competence but to fundamental transformation that centers Indigenous knowledge, supports Indigenous self-determination, and advances social and environmental justice for all communities.

Author Note

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Funding Acknowledgment

This research was supported by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), Government of India (File No. ICSSR/RFD/24-25/PSY/ST/399). The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of ICSSR.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this research or the publication of this manuscript.

AI Disclosure Statement

Claude AI (Anthropic) was used as an assistive tool for language refinement, including improving clarity, grammar, and readability during the preparation of this manuscript. The software was not used for content generation, data analysis, or interpretation of findings. All intellectual and analytical contributions are entirely the work of the author(s), who take full responsibility for the final version of the article.

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The ABC Model of Resilience: Middle Eastern and North African American (MENA) Counselor Educators Building Community

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Abstract

Counselor educators of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent remain underrepresented in counselor education in the United States. Consequently, there is limited scholarship addressing how these educators maintain their professional identities and wellness and foster resilience amid volatile politics and institutional invisibility. In this collaborative autoethnography, four MENA counselor educators undertook rotating peer interviews, kept reflective journals, and collected identity artifacts, which they then analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Findings revealed that resilience occurred as a relational, contextual, and politicized process comprised of (1) adaptive resilience, (2) belonging and community, and (3) cultural accountability and professional responsibility, which countered systemic erasure and silencing and supported persistence. Across the themes that emerged, the results illustrate the MENA counselor educators' journey of navigating between invisibility and hypervisibility, managing wellness labor, and transforming surveillance and scrutiny into academic clarity, mentorship intentionality, and coalition-building. Implications are presented for resilience-informed supervision, mentorship, and institutional policy to advance equity, identity, and multicultural and social justice counseling competency-aligned training. Suggestions to reinforce cultural responsiveness, broaching and advocacy within the counselor education programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs are also offered.

Keywords: Middle Eastern and North African, resilience, counselor education, professional identity, collaborative autoethnography, qualitative analysis

Introduction

Contemporary scholarship has repositioned resilience as dynamic, relational, and context-dependent, rather than an individual trait. For counselor educators with Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) American backgrounds, this distinction has explicit professional ramifications. Resilience emerges from interactions between people and the systems they inhabit, shaped by available resources, protective relationships, and the very structures that generate risk in the first place (Ungar et al., 2013). In the United States (U.S.), MENA individuals are officially classified as White under federal census race categories, which means they are granted none of the legal protections or data visibility extended to other racial minority groups despite lived experiences of racialization, surveillance, and discrimination (Awad et al., 2019, 2022). However, while research on MENA faculty experiences remains limited (Awad et al., 2022), even less examined are the ways in which MENA counselor educators sustain themselves within this dichotomy, that is, what personal, relational, and institutional resources make professional persistence possible (Awad et al., 2022; Thacker & Barrio Minton, 2021). This contradiction between formal classification and lived experience compounds the invisibility described above and paradoxically intensifies the hypervisibility of MENA individuals through racialized geopolitics and Islamophobia.

Existing scholarship on minoritized counselor educators has documented cultural toll, representational burden, and structural barriers in tenure, teaching, and service (Thacker & Barrio Minton, 2021), yet MENA-specific dynamics, particularly regarding the resilience processes that support persistence, identity integration, and ethical teaching and supervision are undertheorized. These gaps constrain the development of resilience-informed models, mentorship, and institutional policy for MENA counselor educators that align with the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP) standards and multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2015). In response to these gaps, this study employed a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) methodology to examine how counselor educators of MENA descent have mobilized their personal, relational, cultural, and institutional resources to sustain their resilience, wellness, and professional identities as tenure-track counselor educators amid politicized and often hostile academic and geopolitical climates.

The study's purpose described above is consistent with research showing that protective factors (e.g., ethnic identity and resilience-related capacities) can serve as a barrier to the psychological effects of racial microaggressions among people of color (Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2023). Scholarship on resilience also has highlighted that coping and protection are shaped by sociocultural context; for example, qualitative work with Black university students documented the varied "culturally compelled" coping strategies that they employed to manage racism-related stress and aid this group to remain academically engaged (Stoll et al., 2026).

For MENA counselor educators, resilience may include navigating surveillance and scrutiny, cultivating teaching practices that are identity-safe, finding and/or building community, and transforming marginalization into advocacy and meaning-making. Deficit-only framings of MENA counselor educators' experiences can inadvertently reproduce erasure by documenting harm without also highlighting the protective practices that sustain MENA educators in these positions and the structures that could better support them. Such practices underscored the importance and necessity of centering identity in a positive light in research, training, and institutional policy (Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2023; Ungar et al., 2013). Yet centering identity as a protective resource first requires understanding how MENA identity is racialized and misrecognized in the first place.

MENA Identity, Racial Misrecognition, and Resilience Under Racialized Geopolitics

MENA identity development is complex and fluid, shaped by racialization, religion, gender, and class. Orientalist stereotypes and the "perpetual foreigner" trope predated the September 11, 2001, attacks ("9/11"), but post-9/11 surveillance and securitized discourse have intensified stigma and geopolitical scrutiny for MENA individuals while also enhancing their reliance on community, faith, and collective identity as protective resources (Awad et al., 2019; Jamal & Naber, 2008). Research has consistently shown that stronger ethnic identities and

resilience-related capacities can buffer the psychological effects of racial microaggressions, meaning the same identities that attract scrutiny can simultaneously anchor adaptive capacity (Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2023). However, this protective function depends on how MENA individuals are permitted to identify: Many MENA individuals have rejected “White” as their sole identity, instead identifying along multiple, intersecting dimensions of race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion. Within these dimensions, religious affiliation carried particular weight. Muslim affiliation often heightened both stigma and in-group identification (Alsaïdi et al., 2023), illustrating how a single dimension of identity can simultaneously invite discrimination and deepen belonging. These identity dynamics take on added complexity in professional spaces. Negotiating these identities in academic settings is of particular significance, as nationalist scrutiny has produced vigilance, self-monitoring, and pressure for MENA counselor educators to “perform” legitimacy. That is, they are pressured to continually demonstrate competence and belonging in ways not required by their non-MENA colleagues, mirroring patterns identified in racial minority populations in higher education settings (Arday, 2022; Stoll et al., 2026).

Nonetheless, MENA- and Muslim-focused research has underscored culturally grounded protective factors that support resilience despite discrimination and marginalization. For example, a scoping review of Arab-speaking immigrants and refugees from the MENA region across North America identified risk factors for wellbeing (e.g., migration-related stressors) alongside protective factors such as social support and religious and ethnic identity. The review also detailed structural barriers that prevented help-seeking, highlighting how resilience was shaped by systems and access to resources, not only individual coping (Childress et al., 2024). Similarly, qualitative work with Arab American Muslim adolescents described a range of coping responses to perceived discrimination that were anchored in religion, social support, and self-preservation. These coping responses can foster belonging, emotional support, and agency (Balaghi, 2021). Another qualitative study of Muslim American college students with immigrant origins documented their experiences of discrimination, the emotional impacts of these experiences, and the coping strategies subsequently implemented, highlighting how identity visibility and post-9/11 climates have shaped both the stress and adaptive responses of these students (Colgan et al., 2025).

Muslim couples also have been found to display relational resilience. Carter (2010) examined how Muslim American couples were affected by religious discrimination and how their relational strengths and processes supported their coping and connection; thus reinforcing resilience as relational rather than solely intrapsychic. Finally, research on second-generation Arab Americans illustrated how these individuals integrated their Arab and American identities and resisted discrimination while navigating mental health stigma. This integration, claiming both identities rather than suppressing either, highlighted a strengths-based lens relevant to counselor education with a focus on identity and wellness (Green et al., 2024).

Resilience in Counselor Education: Why a Faculty Lens Matters

MENA counselor educators face both invisibility and political scrutiny while navigating ambiguous racial classification, strained collegial dynamics, and disproportionate service burdens (Barber & Ting, 2025). Scholarship on minority faculty have suggested that racism-related stressors and institutional climate, such as barriers to help-seeking and isolation, can directly shape the wellness and professional sustainability among this academic group (Arday, 2022). Similarly, research on underrepresented minority faculty has highlighted pathways for surviving and thriving in academic settings, emphasizing the importance of mentors, peer support, and leadership in recognizing and countering structural inequities (Hassounah et al., 2014).

Strength-based interpretations also have underscored that resilience includes the cultivation of meaning, joy, and belonging, not just the endurance of stress. Louis's (2023) counter-narratives of Black faculty members at predominantly White research universities illuminated how experiences of happiness and retention offered actionable implications for institutional leaders seeking to support professional persistence. Ferguson et al. (2023) demonstrated that within counselor education specifically, community and collective meaning-making could function as a tool for navigating the decolonization of academic spaces and oppression, thus demonstrating its

relevance to resilience as a relational process in counselor educators' lives and wellbeing. Taken together, this literature establishes resilience as relational, culturally grounded, and shaped by institutional context, yet it leaves the resilience of MENA counselor educators themselves largely unexamined. The current study addressed that gap.

Study Aims

The purpose of this research was to examine relational, cultural, and institutional resources that counselor educators of MENA descent mobilize to sustain their professional resilience as tenure-track assistant professors amid shifting and politicized contexts. Our research question inquired into the following: How do MENA American counselor educators mobilize personal, relational, cultural, and institutional resources to sustain wellness, teaching practice, scholarship, and professional identity under conditions of geopolitical stress and institutional misrecognition? Our intention in conducting this research was to provide a model for counselor educators, supervisors, program leaders, and policymakers as they develop resilience-informed structures and practices in various institutions and to identify how collective resistance and identity-affirming mentorship can advance MSJCC-aligned training in cultural responsiveness, broaching, and advocacy (Ratts et al., 2015).

Method

Relying on a CAE methodology, we examined how our identities shaped our professional practice, focusing on resilience in this practice as lived and relational. This design is well-suited to linking lived experiences with institutional, cultural, and sociopolitical power dynamics (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020; Chang et al., 2016). CAE has been used successfully and effectively by counselor educators navigating acute contextual stressors and pre-tenure demands (Peters et al., 2022). The method is also well-positioned to reveal relational protective processes, such as community and shared meaning-making, which are relevant to resilience in academic life (Ferguson et al., 2023).

Participants and Setting

The research team was composed of four counselor educators who (1) self-identified as MENA American, (2) held tenure-track appointments in CACREP-accredited programs, and (3) had more than 1 year of counselor education teaching experience. The cultural heritages of the participants encompassed Arab, Persian/Iranian, and American identities. This composition was essential to access and analyze embodied, context-specific knowledge.

Researcher Positionality

The research team consisted of four counselor educators who also served as the study's participants. This strategy was consistent with a CAE methodology, an approach in which researchers have the dual role of investigator and participant (Chang et al., 2016). This dual role supported deep reflexivity and authentic engagement with the data (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), as each author reflected on their positionality in relation to the study.

Author 1 is an assistant professor in a counselor education program at a private university in the Northeastern U.S., teaching master's-level students in clinical mental health and school counseling. She holds a doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision and maintains an active clinical practice. Her clinical and scholarly work centers on intersectionality, trauma, reproductive and perinatal mental health, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities in counselor education and practice. Author 1 is committed to advancing culturally responsive and socially just counselor education through advocacy and decolonizing frameworks. As a first-generation Iranian American, Author 1's MENA identity informs her dedication to amplifying underrepresented voices. Her lived experience of navigating cultural identity and migration shapes her emphasis on broaching intersectionality and fostering inclusive clinical and academic spaces.

Author 2 is an assistant professor in a psychology and mental health counseling department at a private university in the Northeastern U.S., teaching master's- and doctoral-level students. To date, she has several years of experience teaching in graduate counseling programs and mentoring future clinicians to integrate cultural

humility, critical consciousness, and clinical excellence into their professional identities. Author 2 is a licensed mental health counselor with diagnostic privilege and an Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing-trained therapist, who is also certified in sex therapy and supervision. Prior to academia, she developed multidisciplinary experience in human resources and law in corporate, nonprofit, and small business settings, which informs her systems-level understanding of power, policy, and workplace culture. She also maintains a private practice and undertakes consulting work focused on supporting individuals and organizations in navigating cultural barriers and identity development. Born to a bicultural family with MENA heritage, Author 2 brings a deeply embodied understanding of intergenerational trauma, migration, and bicultural identity development. Her work centers on amplifying MENA voices and advancing multicultural competence within counselor education and clinical training.

Author 3 is a tenure-track assistant professor in a counselor education program at a large public university in the Midwestern U.S., where she teaches and mentors master's and doctoral students. Her work is informed by her background as a practicing counselor and clinical supervisor with trauma-focused training. Author 3 is of Middle Eastern descent, spent part of her childhood in the Middle East, and later immigrated to the U.S., where she completed her graduate training and established her clinical and academic career. Her research focuses on culturally responsive mental health care for refugee and immigrant communities, with an emphasis on applied, community-engaged work. She has extensive experience working with refugees and asylum seekers, including in international contexts, and has contributed to community-based initiatives supporting displaced populations through mental health services and educational opportunities.

Author 4 is an assistant professor in a counselor education department within a college of education at a public university in the Midwestern U.S., teaching master's-level students in clinical mental health and rehabilitation counseling programs. To date, she has multiple years of experience teaching in graduate counseling programs. She holds a doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision, along with graduate training in community counseling and she has an undergraduate education in psychology and area studies related to the Middle East. Author 4 has extensive experience working within refugee resettlement contexts, providing and supervising employment and counseling services for refugees, immigrants, and individuals impacted by trauma. Raised in immigrant communities in the U.S. as the child of an immigrant parent and now married to an immigrant partner, her personal and professional experiences inform her research focus on the mental health needs of refugee and immigrant populations. Her scholarship emphasizes qualitative inquiry, traditional healing practices, and culturally responsive, community-based counseling approaches within MENA communities.

Consistent with reflexive autoethnographic practice (Lapadat, 2017; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023), we treated our own subjectivities as data rather than as contaminants to be minimized. Our team included two researchers at the same institution and two at different institutions, two of whom were non-U.S. born and two U.S. born, with all holding the rank of assistant professor with no prior mentoring or supervisory relationship among us. All of us are active members of an ethnic concerns group for MENA identities affiliated with the Association of Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD), which was the basis for the team's formation. As researcher-participants, we all identify as women, which limits our ability to address gender-based variation in the resilience and coping processes, a limitation we revisit in the Limitations and Future Directions section of the article. Entering the study, our differing religious visibilities, national origins, and immigration histories shaped our differing assumptions concerning identity disclosure and resilience, and we anticipated more overlap in experience than the interviews ultimately revealed. For example, one researcher-participant entered the study assuming that resilience was best expressed through open cultural visibility, writing that she wanted to see MENA culture "celebrated in some way" rather than being forced into an either/or choice with professional identity. Another researcher-participant entered with a more protective assumption, describing MENA identity as something "many of us protect... by keeping it to ourselves" as a matter of self-preservation. These differing initial assumptions shaped how the team members interpreted moments of identity disclosure in our interviews and journal data analysis processes.

We addressed our positionality through reflexive journaling after each interview session and structured team debriefings before and after each session, which allowed us to track how our own reactions to shared political topics or identification with a co-author's account might otherwise have shaped our listening, questioning, or coding. For example, after serving as interviewer in the first session, one researcher wrote that she "felt hesitant to ask more probing or follow-up questions, prioritizing [the interviewee's] sense of safety and emotional comfort," thus, identifying a live tension between curiosity and care. This tension was raised in the team's post-interview debrief, in which the team collectively named that we did not have the privilege of approaching identity-related questions "neutrally," since our own identities, politics, and histories entered the room regardless of our intent. Naming this dynamic explicitly informed how subsequent interviewers approached follow-up questioning in later sessions, allowing for slightly more direct probing once the team had acknowledged that hesitation itself was not a neutral choice.

During the analysis stage of the study, our journals also served as a supplementary analytic check, helping us distinguish our own reactions from participant meaning-making and guarding against our premature consensus arising from our shared identities. For example, one researcher's journal entry reflecting on a co-author's account of institutional support, "That contrast made me reflect on my privilege and the role mentorship and department culture play in shaping one's sense of belonging," prompted the team to attend explicitly to variations in institutional contexts during coding, rather than treating belonging as a uniform experience for the participants.

Methodological Integrity

Due to the nature of this research, which involved our own collaborative autoethnographic exploration and no external participants, institutional review board approval was not required by our institutions to conduct this study. Our methodology aligned with guidance on ethical practice in reflexive qualitative and autoethnographic research, in which co-authors make informed decisions about participation, representation, and risk (Lapadat, 2017; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Ethical considerations, however, remained a priority for us. We attended to several concerns in particular: how the narratives of others were represented within our accounts, the political sensitivity surrounding MENA identities, the tension inherent in occupying the dual role of researcher and participant, and the professional vulnerability we possessed as tenure-track faculty. We collectively determined the boundaries for our disclosure, de-identification of the data, and representation of the data in publications.

To remain aligned with a resilience-oriented approach that addressed safety and access to support, we established protocols for mutual support and conducted regular check-ins regarding the emotional impacts of the research process. We implemented clear agreements for how the narratives would be shared, analyzed, and included in joint deliverables, and also found the process observer role to be supportive of psychological safety during the interviews. Obtaining consent from each researcher-participant was continuous during data collection, analysis, and dissemination, with emphasis on opportunities to revise, withhold, and further de-identify excerpts throughout the stages of the process.

To enhance the trustworthiness of our findings, several strategies were enlisted. Our data collection spanned one academic semester, which aided in capturing experiences in different professional contexts, and the analysis phase spanned an additional semester, ensuring prolonged engagement. We triangulated emerging codes and themes across the interviews, journals, and artifacts, and documented analytic decisions in an audit trail. Multiple data sources were used to triangulate the data. We also reviewed and checked the findings through multiple analysis meetings. All the details of the researchers' identities and contexts are presented in this report to enhance the transferability of the findings.

Design Rationale

The CAE methodology was employed to illuminate how resilience was enacted in everyday academic life while also generating practice-relevant insights for pedagogy, supervision, mentorship, and policy. Positioning the researchers as participants enabled emotionally grounded insights and context-specific accounts of protective

processes, such as meaning-making, boundary-setting, community support, and identity safety, which are often missed by designs distanced from this first-hand approach. Using multiple data sources alongside team-based reflexive analysis provided deeper transparency and methodological rigor for this study,

Data Collection

As stated earlier, data sources for this project included interviews, journal entries, and professional artifacts. The researchers conducted rotating peer interviews (four sessions), in which each researcher-participant cycled through four roles. The roles included an interviewer, who facilitated a semi-structured protocol; an interviewee, who shared experiences tied to the research questions; a process observer, who was responsible for documenting group dynamics, emotional responses, and nonverbal communication; and a transcriber, who monitored the recording and reviewed the automatic transcription for accuracy. Rotating through these roles in the four interview sessions provided multidimensional insights and accountability. The second source of data was journal entries from each researcher, including a reflective journal after each interview session. Debriefing was performed with the team after each interview, and each author completed an individual journal entry (> 16 entries total). Finally, the third source of data included professional artifacts such as teaching statements, research statements, CVs, and evaluations. All materials were stored in a secure, access-restricted folder.

Analytical Strategy

Following Chang et al. (2016), we conducted iterative, team-based analysis, which involved familiarization; collaborative coding; reflexive thematic analysis with memoing to track meaning-making as researcher-participants; constant comparison across data types; negative-case review; and theme consolidation. We maintained an audit trail throughout the analysis, documenting analytic decisions and using member confirmation in which each researcher reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of their own transcribed interview and journal entries, to enhance the credibility of our interpretations and the coherence of emerging themes in the full dataset.

The analysis procedure began with an initial stage of familiarization, which is necessary to ground each researcher's coding in a close, first-hand understanding of their own data before those data were brought into dialogue with the rest of the team: Each researcher read and re-read their own interview transcript, journal entries, and reviewed artifacts closely before individual coding began. Each researcher then independently coded their own transcript for key themes and patterns. These individually developed codes were then brought to three collaborative, one-hour team coding sessions. In each session, every researcher shared their codes with the full team, who reviewed and discussed each code to identify shared experiences, diverging perspectives, and contextual factors. When necessary, the team reconciled the codes across all four transcripts until reaching agreement, with no unresolved disagreements regarding either the codes or the subsequently developed themes. This process culminated in the development of thematic categories through reflexive thematic analysis, with explicit attention to both adversity and resilience processes (e.g., meaning-making, boundary-setting, identity-based resources, relational support, and community strategies). This analytic framing was aligned with resilience scholarship in which resilience is conceptualized as dynamic, relational, and context-dependent (Ungar et al., 2013) and it also aligned with research recognizing ethnic identity, coping, and social support as protective factors in racially minoritized and MENA/Muslim populations (Balaghi et al., 2021; Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2023; Childress et al., 2024). Further, this framing addressed collective resilience in collaborative processes (Ferguson et al., 2023).

Theoretical Lenses

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) oriented our analysis toward how mutually constituting identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, gender, nationality, immigration) can shape risk and protection within institutional contexts. We drew on Collins's (2019) perspective of "shifting" identities to examine how MENA individuals are classified as "White" within U.S. racial systems yet simultaneously experience discrimination, hypervisibility, and cultural marginalization (Awad et al., 2019; Awad et al., 2022). We integrated a social-ecological understanding to frame resilience, conceptualizing resilience as dynamic, relational, and context-dependent, shaped by identity-

based support, access to resources, and systems that either constrain or enable wellbeing (Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2023; Childress et al., 2024; Ungar et al., 2013). Additionally, Middle Eastern feminist and decolonial perspectives (Mohanty, 2003) were incorporated to situate our resilience processes within the broader geopolitical and historical circumstances (e.g., Orientalism, Islamophobia, surveillance, conflict). Finally, we prioritized agency, community protection, and collective resistance as culturally grounded resilience practices (Balaghi et al., 2021; Ferguson et al., 2023; Green et al., 2024).

Results

Employing the CAE methodology led to a coherent set of resilience-oriented themes drawn from our interviews, reflective journals, and professional artifacts to surface. Findings center on the areas of resilience we identified in our data and the actions we took to actively build resilience and coping as a community of counselor educators. These themes are organized around a model we label ABC for (1) Adaptive resilience, (2) Belonging and community, and (3) Cultural accountability and professional responsibility.

Theme 1: Adaptive Resilience

Adaptive resilience captured how participants developed deliberate, self-preserving responses to the pressures of navigating MENA identity within academic and clinical contexts. Rather than simply enduring these identity-related tensions, participants described active choices regarding how to manage their identities, which served as protective practices. Two subthemes were identified for this theme: social hesitation and strategic disclosure.

Social Hesitation

Social hesitation emerged as one of the earliest and most pervasive adaptive responses. Respondents described an internalized caution and a learned attunement to social contexts that shaped whether and how they disclosed aspects of their identity in professional settings. Importantly, participants framed this hesitation not as defeat but as a form of self-aware navigation and self-preservation. One person reflected on messages she absorbed growing up:

I was very scared and hesitant to disclose this about myself and people just, like, assumed whatever I was, whether I was Italian or they thought I was Latina ... my parents didn't explicitly say, like, don't tell people, but they were just, like, you know, just be mindful.

This early socialization into identity management was carried forward into professional life, shaping how respondents navigated their disclosure in clinical and academic contexts. Another individual described directly encountering this uncertainty in supervision, reflecting on the absence of culturally grounded frameworks for self-disclosure in clinical training:

I wasn't sure how much of my ethnic background to share with my clients. And that was something that I don't think I've ever actually had ... I don't have, like, a framework of how do I even decide that and when do I ... when do I tell my clients about my ethnicity?

The absence of such frameworks underscored how counselor training has historically failed to address self-disclosure experiences of MENA clinicians. Rather than experiencing this management as suppression, participants described it as a practiced awareness, an ongoing reading of social context that protected them from misrepresentation and misrecognition.

Another person discussed this hesitation not as a single decision but as a recurring internal debate that preceded any actual disclosure:

There's a persistent internal debate about when to disclose my identity, how much to say, and how it will be received ... Disclosing can be empowering but also opens the door to assumptions—particularly political ones. My existence is too often read as a statement.

Here, disclosure decisions carried a political weight that was independent of intent: Respondents anticipated they would be perceived as making a statement before they had said anything at all, which intensified the vigilance already required for professional self-presentation. Notably, disclosure was not always a matter of individual choice: One individual reflected on becoming “more aware of how I'm perceived—what assumptions are made about me based on my name, appearance, accent, or research interests.” For participants whose names, accents, or physical presentation already signaled a MENA identity, hesitation could not function as concealment; instead, it shaped how they anticipated and prepared for assumptions they could not prevent others from making.

Strategic Disclosure

The second subtheme, strategic disclosure, encompassed the intentional, context-sensitive choices participants made about when and how to reveal their identities in professional settings, attuned to the reality that divulging a MENA identity is never politically neutral. One person reflected,

I've always had this battle of back and forth, back and forth, like, how I feel about disclosing my identity, who I am, and then what are the assumptions and perceptions of who you are ... there was always a political conflict: If I would say who I am and where I come from, there is this political view of you're representing a political belief.

Participants noted that strategic disclosure required not only self-awareness but a sophisticated reading of how MENA identity was politically received, and a deliberate choice about when visibility served connection versus when it invited unwanted positioning. However, in the classroom, disclosure became a pedagogical act. Respondents described opening class using their full identities on the first day as a way to inspire students, thereby reclaiming visibility as agency rather than risk.

Participants also revealed weighing whether disclosure served a purpose beyond the personal, then disclosing when it could educate or connect and withholding when it could not. One individual reflected, “I noticed that sharing [my] identity was done when it was helpful for others—to educate or to engage others. On its own, it's confusing and isolating.” This distinction between disclosure-as-service and disclosure-for-its-own-sake further differentiates strategic disclosure from social hesitation: Where hesitation reflected caution about how visibility might be read, strategic disclosure reflected a calculated judgment about whether visibility would be useful.

Theme 2: Belonging and Community

The second theme moved outward from individual adaptation to the relational and institutional conditions that either constrained or sustained participants. Where Theme 1 focused on what respondents did to protect and sustain themselves, Theme 2 captured the spaces, relationships, and recognitions that made wholeness possible. Two subthemes were linked with this theme: invisibility, hypervisibility, and safety; and mentorship and fostering belonging.

Invisibility, Hypervisibility, and Safety

Participants consistently discussed a paradoxical position in which they were simultaneously rendered invisible as MENA professionals within institutional structures and hypervisible through political scrutiny and racialized assumptions. This tension shaped how they related to community and belonging. One person described the burden of this dynamic: “Sometimes I feel myself overcompensating ... I avoid the topic just to make it a little more socially acceptable.” The word “overcompensating” reflected an awareness of being watched and evaluated, and the subsequent calibration of self-presentation in response. These experiences of being read through a political

lens, rather than being seen as complete professionals, underscored the community-seeking in which respondents engaged as a counter-practice.

Safety within formal institutional settings was just as often absent as it was present. One individual stated, “I don’t feel like I have safe places to talk about my identity in my department, in my classrooms ... in meetings, in greater settings, I’m definitely scared.” The word “scared” was not used to describe a passing anxiety but rather a sustained relational condition that shaped professional engagement. In response, participants have built alternative sites of safety through peer community and the autoethnographic research process itself. Simple acts of recognition carried significant weight: One person discussed a professor’s matter-of-fact acknowledgment of her layered identity as “the first time someone didn’t make a stupid comment,” pointing to how rarely MENA identities are regarded with care in institutional contexts and how meaningful it is when they are.

This paradox generated an ongoing internal calculus about self-expression. As one individual revealed, “This tension between invisibility and hypervisibility feels like a constant undercurrent—when do I speak up, and when do I stay silent? Who benefits from my silence, and who is harmed by it?” Framing silence as something that could benefit or harm others, not only the self, reflected how respondents experienced this paradox as a relational and ethical burden as much as a personal one.

Mentorship and Fostering Belonging

The second subtheme, the absence of formal mentorship, was named directly in the data, and its naming functioned as a call to action as much as a description of experience. One person stated, “I don’t have any teaching mentors.” Yet participants did not remain passive in the face of this absence. They built lateral peer-based mentorship structures and became the mentors their students needed. Central to this were years of collective work to establish an ethnic concerns group for MENA identities in the AMCD. One individual described its impact: “That ethnic concern group has been the best part of my journey. If I didn’t have those safer spaces, I don’t think I’d feel as whole as I do now.”

The language of wholeness used in this quote was significant: Belonging was not merely supportive but constitutive of identity and professional wellness. Participants also named collectivist values as both a cultural resource and a structural challenge within hyper-individualistic tenure processes, describing collaborative research as essential to sustaining professional identity and wellbeing in ways that dominant academic models do not consider. Continued scholarly productivity amid institutional pressure also was named as its own form of resilience, reflecting a refusal to fold under conditions of stress.

However, the absence of formal mentorship carried a relational cost that respondents cited directly. One wrote, “It’s isolating—this sense that we are expected to be bridges, to educate and hold space, without always having that support returned.” Belonging, then, was not simply present or absent for participants; it had to be actively constructed, as reflected in the collective effort behind the AMCD ethnic concerns group described above, to offset the real cost of continuing to progress without institutional mentorship.

Theme 3: Cultural Accountability and Professional Responsibility

The third and final theme revealed how respondents translated their adaptive strategies and relational belonging into professional practice, enacting resilience as a form of accountability to their students, their communities, and their fields. This theme captured the outward-facing dimension of resilience: How MENA counselor educators transformed their own experiences of marginalization into intentional pedagogical and scholarly commitments. Four subthemes comprised this theme: multiple worldviews, neutrality and positionality, role modeling and promoting connection, and research as identity.

Multiple Worldviews

Participants described a sustained commitment to expanding the cultural landscape of their classrooms, which was grounded in both professional values and lived experience. One person articulated this practice directly: “I share, like, examples from working with my clients ... so that they understand the different cultural

perspectives and cultural values.” Rather than treating multicultural content as supplemental, respondents wove it into the fabric of their teaching, drawing on personal and clinical experience to model what culturally responsive practice looks like in action. Another individual framed the political climate not as a threat to be avoided but as a pedagogical opportunity: “I’m thinking about how do I get students to have the types of conversations that I think are helpful for them to be better counselors?” This orientation of turning toward difficulty rather than away from it reflected the resilience embedded in professional responsibility.

Participants described this resilience as inseparable from their full professional presence rather than an added instructional technique. One explained, “As a counselor educator, I bring my full self into the classroom—my multicultural lens, my commitment to social justice, and the hard conversations that come with that.” She characterized this presence as meaningful but effortful, positioning multicultural teaching as an extension of professional identity rather than a neutral technique, an extension that required her to remain visibly and personally invested rather than instructing from a distance.

Neutrality and Positionality

One of the most analytically rich subthemes involved respondents’ critical engagement with the construct of neutrality in counseling, a concept they described as both a professional expectation and a form of cultural erasure. One individual directly challenged this expectation: “It’s this assumption that I’m going to come in with a blank slate, a neutral position ... that’s all nonsense anyway. You’re not coming in neutral at all.” This direct challenge to the myth of counselor neutrality reflected a positionality-informed practice grounded in social justice frameworks. Another person discussed the tension of navigating institutional expectations of restraint while retaining a sense of professional obligation toward underserved students: “Or should I be trying to do more until I bridge this gap? It just feels like students don’t have an understanding of the context enough to even engage in it.” Naming and challenging neutrality was regarded as a resilient professional act.

For at least one participant, this challenge to neutrality was inseparable from a broader question about professional obligation: “When neutrality feels like complicity, what is our role?” Posed as an open question rather than a resolved stance, this conundrum captured how rejecting neutrality remained an ongoing negotiation for respondents rather than a settled position.

Role Modeling and Promoting Connection

The next subtheme captured deliberate practices for making participants’ identities visible as a form of relational and professional responsibility, particularly in the classroom. One individual offered the following:

I would like to see our culture to be celebrated in some way. And not have it be this, like, you have to pick one or the other ... We have some space where we can influence the culture here, just like other groups have. In a positive way.

These statements reflected the refusal of the either/or positioning that MENA counselor educators often face, that is, the pressure to choose between professional legitimacy and cultural authenticity. Instead, respondents modeled integration, visibility, and pride as professional acts. When the political context demanded a response, participants brought it into the classroom: “When the ICE raids were starting ... I brought it up the next class and let my students talk about it.” This aspiration to influence academic culture, not simply survive it, signals a generative, future-oriented form of resilience.

When this visibility was well received, participants described it as reinforcing rather than depleting. One person recalled a job interview in which authenticity was met with acceptance: “Being myself—sharing my cultural background, speaking from my truth—was met with support and openness. It’s a breath of fresh air when that happens.” However, she noted that such moments felt “rare and fleeting” rather than being the norm; a reminder that respondents continued to choose visibility and authenticity despite inconsistent institutional reception, not because that reception was reliably positive.

Research as Identity

The fourth subtheme extends the outward-facing orientation of Theme 3: Participants treated their scholarship as an act of accountability to their communities and to the counseling field, not merely as an individual career requirement. They described their scholarly work as inseparable from their MENA identities, positioning research not as a tenure requirement separate from self but as a form of cultural accountability and identity expression. One individual reflected on the deep alignment between personal origin and professional calling: “I became a counselor because of how I saw people in my community, the way that they interacted with each other, the way that we support each other.” The cultural value of service, explicitly named as such by another person, further grounds scholarly work within a communal ethic that contrasts with the individualistic productivity metrics of academic institutions:

I think that’s a cultural value for me too, is, like, to be of service. And that’s the part that being on the tenure track is really difficult ... to me, teaching, being in service of students, that’s also not valued anymore as much in this position.

In naming this tension between institutional priorities and cultural values, respondents illustrated how research and teaching as identity work function as forms of resilience, acts of repudiation against systems that ask MENA scholars to leave themselves at the door. Nonetheless, such acts involved a professional cost that participants directly cited. One wrote, “I find myself wanting to write about the things that matter most to me—political issues, displacement, oppression—but fear they’re too ‘controversial’ to be published ... we censor ourselves to survive.” Naming self-censorship as a survival strategy rather than a preference situates this scholarly choice as a tension between cultural accountability and institutional risk.

Discussion

The CAE methodology utilized in this study illuminated resilience as a relational, contextual, and politically situated process for the four MENA American counselor educators who participated. Extending existing scholarship, the ABC model of resilience centered the agentic and collectively enacted dimensions of MENA counselor educator experience. Rather than an individual trait or a passive response to adversity, resilience emerged as a dynamic set of practices the educators mobilized across personal, relational, and institutional domains. The three themes that were identified traced how these faculty navigated invisibility and hypervisibility, built community where institutions proved inadequate, and transformed their lived experiences of marginalization into intentional pedagogy and scholarship. Each theme is discussed below and analyzed in relation to previous studies.

Adaptive Resilience

The first theme, Adaptive Resilience, encompassed two subthemes, social hesitation and strategic disclosure. Together, these subthemes reflected what Ungar et al. (2013) described as context-dependent resilience, in which individuals navigate systems that simultaneously produce risk and constrain their wellbeing. The participants’ careful calibration of identity visibility grew out of internalized cultural messages and the political weight of their MENA identity in post-9/11 contexts. This calibration mirrored the adaptive coping Colgan et al. (2025) documented among Muslim American students responding to a hostile sociopolitical climate. The four faculty in the current study also named the absence of culturally grounded self-disclosure frameworks in their clinical training, a gap in counselor education that this study highlighted. Nonetheless, when the disclosure of these educators became a pedagogical act in the classroom, it aligned with Balaghi’s (2021) account of self-preservation and social connection as anchors of resilience, reframing visibility as a resource for both educator and student.

This pattern of purposeful disclosure extended Jamal and Naber’s (2008) account of how Arab American identity has been negotiated through contested forms of visibility since 9/11. For our participants, disclosure

was rarely a neutral act of information-sharing but a decision they anticipated would be read politically. This is consistent with one person's observation that her existence was "too often read as a statement." Similarly, respondents distinguished between their disclosure that served a purpose (to educate or connect) and their disclosure that did not. This distinction echoed Stoll et al.'s (2026) documentation of "culturally compelled" coping strategies among Black students. In that study, coping was selectively deployed to support engagement rather than applied uniformly as a form of self-protection. Taken together, the parallels between the current study with prior scholarship suggested that adaptive resilience for our MENA counselor educators functioned less as avoidance and more as strategic, purpose-driven engagement with a hostile sociopolitical landscape. This pattern also was visible in Green et al.'s (2024) account of second-generation Arab Americans who integrated rather than concealed their identities as a means of resisting discrimination.

Belonging and Community

The second theme, Belonging and Community, captured how participants actively constructed belonging in the absence of institutional support. Their efforts reflected what Hassouneh et al. (2014) identified as critical pathways to professional persistence for underrepresented minority faculty, including peer support, mentorship, and structures that counter structural inequities. This paradox of invisibility and hypervisibility was consistent with Collins's (2019) perspective on shifting identities and with Awad et al.'s (2019, 2022) account of how classification of MENA Americans as "White" rendered this community simultaneously overexposed and under protected. When confronting this paradox, the four faculty in the current study turned to collective spaces of their own making. The significance they placed in the AMCD ethnic concerns group resonates with Ferguson et al.'s (2023) finding that community and collective meaning-making served as tools for navigating oppression in academic spaces. It also extends Louis's (2023) counter-narratives of faculty resilience by centering MENA coalition-building as proactive and relational practice. The collectivist orientation the participants brought to scholarship and mentorship further contests the hyper-individualism of tenure structures, indicating that for the MENA counselor educators in this study, resilience operated as an inherently communal process.

The relational cost of the lack of mentorship also was named directly by the participants. They described being expected to serve as a bridge for others "without always having that support returned;" a phrase that suggested relational resilience depended not just on relational connection but on reciprocity. This finding extends Carter's (2010) discovery, which showed that resilience among Muslim American couples operated relationally rather than as an individual attribute. In the current study, relational reciprocity was experienced in the academic community rather than the family, and the absence of reciprocal support from colleagues and institutions was experienced as isolation rather than merely as a gap in career support. This cost also is consistent with Barber and Ting's (2025) documentation of the representational burden carried by Black women faculty in counselor education, whose professional persistence similarly required navigating institutional expectations to educate and represent without commensurate structural support. This dynamic is not unique to MENA counselor educators; it reflects a broader pattern facing minoritized faculty who are asked to perform relational labor that is rarely institutionally reciprocated.

Cultural Accountability and Professional Responsibility

The third theme, Cultural Accountability and Professional Responsibility, captured the participants' commitment to promoting multiple worldviews, challenging counselor neutrality, modeling integrated identity, and anchoring research in MENA community experience. Together, these commitments constituted what we understand as culturally accountable practice and they aligned with MSJCC frameworks calling for active advocacy and broaching (Ratts et al., 2015). Our participants' direct challenge to neutrality as a form of cultural erasure drew on decolonial feminist perspectives (Mohanty, 2003) and reflected the applied intersectional consciousness that Crenshaw (1989, 1991) described. By reframing the political climate as a pedagogical opportunity, the four faculty in this study illustrated what Barrita and Wong-Padoongpatt (2023) identified as ethnic identity functioning as a

protective factor. For these individuals, identity was not a liability in the classroom but a generative resource for student learning and counselor development.

Our participants' refusal to be neutral was captured in one respondent's question, "When neutrality feels like complicity, what is our role?" This finding extends Barrita and Wong-Padoongpatt's (2023) protective-factor framing concept beyond individual coping. It positions ethnic identity as a resource for taking a professional and pedagogical stance rather than only enacting personal resilience. However, the self-censorship our participants described in their scholarship like avoiding topics they considered too "controversial" to publish, pointed to a systemic barrier. This barrier was consistent with Childress et al.'s (2024) documentation of structural obstacles that shaped how MENA communities sought help from and engaged with the institutions meant to serve them. In the present study, the institution in question was the scholarly publishing apparatus of the counseling field itself, a knowledge production barrier in addition to the help-seeking one just mentioned. Therefore, the current educators experienced a bind in that the identities that grounded their scholarship also raised the cost of publishing about their identities. This tension between authentic identity expression and institutional risk further was consistent with Green et al.'s (2024) account of second-generation Arab Americans integrating rather than compartmentalizing their identities. This suggested that our respondents' professional cost of visibility did not deter their integration so much as shape where and how that integration was expressed.

Implications

The ABC model of resilience has direct implications for counselor education programs, supervisors, and institutional leaders. Supervisors and counselor educators may lean on this culturally grounded framework to support identity-related self-disclosure, thus equipping MENA trainees to navigate when and how to disclose their identities without defaulting to assimilationist or universalized approaches. Professional organizations should formally recognize and structurally support community-building efforts such as the AMCD ethnic concerns group, rather than leaving coalition work to emerge in the face of institutional inaction. At the institutional level, CACREP-accredited programs should examine how tenure and promotion structures reproduce the hyper-individualism that conflicts with the collectivist values held by many MENA counselor educators. This would allow such programs to meaningfully value service, mentorship, and community-engaged scholarship in the tenure and promotion review processes. Finally, counselor education curricula should explicitly address MENA identity, racialization, and the intersection of geopolitics and clinical practice to prepare future counselors to competently and responsively serve MENA clients and their communities.

Limitations and Future Directions

As this study involved a CAE methodology conducted by only four researcher-participants, the findings reflect specific positionalities and institutional contexts and are not intended for broad generalization. This small sample size ($N = 4$) limits the transferability of the results and precludes claims about MENA counselor educators in general. Additionally, because the same four researcher-participants were responsible for all aspects of data collection, analysis, and data interpretation, the study is vulnerable to threats to internal and external validity. Such threats stem from the researcher-participants shared blind spots and the possibility that our collective positionality shaped both what we disclosed and how our team interpreted those disclosures. The reflexivity practices described earlier were intended to mitigate, though not eliminate, this risk. The diversity of our team's MENA identities across national origins, religions, generations, genders, and immigration status also was not fully captured, and future research could address these intersectional dimensions with greater breadth. Future studies using phenomenology, narrative inquiry, or focus groups with a more diverse MENA counselor educator population would deepen the empirical base. Additionally, longitudinal designs tracking MENA counselor educators across pre- and post-tenure and promotion phases would illuminate how resilience processes evolve over time and with shifting political climates.

Conclusion

This CAE study offers the first structured resilience framework grounded in the lived experiences of MENA American counselor educators. The study focused on “How do MENA American counselor educators mobilize personal, relational, cultural, and institutional resources to sustain wellness, teaching practice, scholarship, and professional identity under conditions of geopolitical stress and institutional misrecognition?” The ABC model of resilience that emerged from the data reframes MENA counselor educators’ experience by transforming that experience from a deficit narrative of challenge and survival to a strengths-based account of agency, coalition, and advocacy. It appears that our MENA counselor educators did not simply endure the conditions of academic life; they transformed them, building community where their institutions promoted erasure. They also modeled identity integration where the field demanded neutrality, and they grounded their scholarship in a cultural ethic of service. As counselor education in the U.S. continues to grapple with questions of equity and social justice, centering the resilience of MENA counselor educators through the ABC model of resilience discovered in this study can serve to challenge institutions to dismantle structures that produce unnecessary strain and provide a resource for these educators as well as MENA supervisors and program leaders who seek language and a community for their ongoing work of professional persistence.

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Data Availability Statement

The data collected in this study consists of collaborative autoethnographic materials (peer-interview transcripts, reflective journals, and identity artifacts) that contain inherently identifiable information. To protect author-participants’ privacy and confidentiality, these materials are not publicly available.

Funding Statement

This research received no external funding. No sponsor influenced the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, writing, or the decision to submit the article for publication.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this work. There are no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be perceived to influence the findings. All relevant institutional affiliations have been disclosed; these affiliations did not shape the analysis or interpretations presented.

Ethical Approval Statement

This study followed the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2014) for research and publication. Because the researchers were the sole participants and no identifiable data about individuals beyond the authors were collected, the project did not require institutional review board approval under our institutions’ guidance for autoethnography; therefore, formal approval was not sought. All co-authors provided informed consent to participate, reviewed their own transcripts and materials, and approved the inclusion of de-identified excerpts. Throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting, the team safeguarded confidentiality of any third parties, removed potentially identifying details, and stored all materials on secure, access-restricted drives.

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