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COMMENTARY

Culture as Wind: Aligning the Direction of Mental Health Interventions with Cultural Values

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Abstract
Mental health problems represent a major global challenge, affecting over one billion people worldwide. Although interventions are increasingly used across diverse settings, their implementation and effectiveness often depend on how well they are adjusted to local culture: a process still under-evaluated. This paper proposes the Culture as Wind analogy, a new conceptual lens to visualise how the implicit values and philosophies of interventions align (or misalign) with the prevailing cultural "wind." When interventions move with this wind, their reach and impact are amplified; when they move against it, even well-evidenced approaches may falter. The analogy's strengths and limitations are discussed, including its capacity to capture cultural evolution, vertical (generational, political, and technological) shifts, and local variation. Future directions include operationalising the analogy through the Cultural Distance Index and Cultural Compass. The paper concludes that acknowledging cultural wind direction can enhance the global effectiveness and personal relevance of mental health interventions.

Keywords Culture · Metaphor · Cross-cultural psychology · Mental health · Intervention adaptation · Philosophy of wellbeing

Global Scale of Mental Health Problems

Mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and other common mental disorders now represent a major global challenge. Over one billion people were affected around the world in 2016 (Rehm & Shield, 2019). The burden of mental and addictive disorders is rising rapidly across both high- and low-income settings (Iemmi, 2019). In many countries, a large proportion of adults and adolescents experience symptoms of common mental disorders, yet access to services remains severely limited. For example, more than 75% of people with a serious mental disorder in low- and middle-income

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countries (LMICs) do not receive adequate treatment (van Ginneken et al., 2013). The treatment gap magnifies the societal, economic, and human costs of untreated mental illness, from lost productivity to increased morbidity and mortality (Arias et al., 2022; Stelmach et al., 2022). What was once seen as a problem mainly of high-income nations is now unequivocally global (Henking et al., 2023). In addition, the sheer variety of contexts (cultural, economic, structural) means that interventions that work in one setting may not translate seamlessly to another (Kotera et al., 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). The result is a pressing need for global mental health action that is sensitive to context and culture.

Mental health interventions rarely exist in isolation from culture (Kirmayer et al., 2020). Culture is commonly defined as the shared patterns of meaning, values, and practices that shape how members of a group perceive, interpret, and respond to the world (Kirmayer, 2012; Matsumoto & Juang, 2016). Programmes developed in one country often reflect the assumptions, values, and worldviews of that context (Kotera et al., 2025). When exported elsewhere, they can succeed, fail, or even cause harm depending not only on their evidence base but on how well they resonate with the host culture's deeper orientation toward self, others, and society (Heine, 2020; Watters, 2011). Conventional approaches to cultural adaptation tend to focus on surface modifications such as language, examples, or symbols (Harper Shehadeh et al., 2016; Schaechter et al., 2025). Yet the invisible layer beneath, involving moral and philosophical direction, is equally crucial (Corpus-Espinosa et al., 2025). Some interventions carry implicit messages about what it means to be well or empowered (Kotera, Miyamoto, et al., 2024). If these messages flow with the prevailing cultural current, they are reinforced. If they flow against it, they face resistance.

Rise of Global Mental Health Interventions and Challenge of Cultural Fit

In response to the global burden, mental health interventions, such as psychological, psychosocial, and community-based ones, are increasingly used around the world. For example, scalable psychological interventions delivered by lay health workers and peer workers have become a key strategy in low-resource settings (Kotera et al., 2024a, 2024b, 2024c; Patel et al., 2010; Puschner et al., 2025). Digital and mobile interventions are also gaining traction as a way to increase reach (Cuijpers et al., 2022; Slade et al., 2024). However, the implementation and effectiveness of these interventions are not straightforward. A major challenge is cultural adaptation (Fendt-Newlin et al., 2019). Recent reviews have emphasised that simply translating language or providing superficial adjustments is not sufficient; deeper adaptation to cultural values, metaphors, and philosophies is required (Corpus-Espinosa et al., 2025; Mishu et al., 2023). While culturally adapted interventions do show promise, methodological heterogeneity and weak reporting mean it remains unclear exactly which adaptation components drive improved outcomes (McDermott et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2023).

In recent years, the idea of cultural co-creation has emerged: the notion that interventions should not just be adapted for a culture, but developed with local stakeholders (service users, community representatives, cultural experts) to ensure alignment and ownership (Gama et al., 2024). This idea reaffirms the need to optimise interventions for each cultural context, rather than simply transplanting models developed elsewhere.

Need for a New Conceptual Framework: The Culture as Wind Analogy

Despite the increasing global recognition of mental health problems and the corresponding growth of interventions delivered both in person and digitally, one persistent challenge remains: ensuring that these approaches work effectively across diverse cultural contexts. The global burden of mental ill health is immense, yet many evidence-based interventions struggle to translate beyond the cultures in which they were originally developed. At the same time, current approaches to cultural adaptation, though valuable, often remain superficial, overlooking deeper philosophical and value-based alignment. To address these three realities, there is a need for a fresh conceptual lens to understand how interventions and cultures interact. I propose the Culture as Wind analogy, a metaphorical way of understanding how the direction of a culture's values and worldviews can either accelerate or resist the impact of a mental health intervention depending on their alignment. Analogical reasoning has long been used in psychology and cultural theory to illuminate abstract relationships through familiar imagery (Gentner & Holyoak, 1997). The Culture as Wind analogy serves this function by offering a simple yet powerful visualisation of cultural alignment.

In this analogy, culture is like the wind: invisible yet pervasive, directional, and continuously shaping the trajectory of any object (or intervention) that moves through it. If a ball is hit in baseball, for example, when the wind blows from right to left, hitting toward the left increases distance; hitting into the wind reduces distance. Similarly, an intervention whose values and philosophies align with the cultural "wind" of a setting will travel further, gain momentum, and have a greater impact. Conversely, if it moves against the wind (i.e., when its underlying values are in tension with the cultural orientation), even an evidence-based intervention may struggle to gain traction.

For example, I have witnessed many cases where a company employee undertook an assertiveness-training programme developed in the West and delivered by Western trainers, then applied the learning in a Japanese organisation. Rather than being praised, the employee received a negative evaluation, as directly transferring Western assertive communication into a Japanese organisational context was perceived as overstepping expected roles and showing insufficient awareness of hierarchy. What worked effectively in one cultural "wind" failed when transplanted to another without adaptation. Mental health interventions are not global fast-food chains (though those international chains make efforts to fit their products to local tastes and customs).

Cultural wind direction refers to the predominant values, worldviews, metaphors, relational norms, and expectations within a cultural setting. Intervention sail alignment refers to the degree to which the intervention's implicit or explicit values (e.g., autonomy, self-expression, communal harmony, spiritual meaning) are congruent with that cultural wind. When alignment is strong, the intervention catches the wind, facilitating uptake, engagement, and sustainability. When alignment is weak, or when the intervention "hits into the wind", greater adaptation or structural support is needed for success. This analogy emphasises directionality rather than mere difference. The question is not simply "How is this culture different?" but rather "In what direction is its cultural wind blowing, and how can the intervention be oriented accordingly?".

Strengths of this analogy include, first, being simple and intuitive, aiding communication with practitioners, policymakers, and planners (Hildenbrand, 2021). Second, it emphasises value orientation and philosophical fit, dimensions often under-recognised in conventional cultural adaptation work (Bernal & Adames, 2017). Third, it encourages proactive adaptation:

rather than waiting for misalignment to emerge, developers can ask, "Which way is the wind blowing here?" Fourth, it recognises that wind changes direction over time: a reminder that cultures evolve. As generational norms shift, or as globalisation and migration reshape collective identities, the cultural wind may subtly or dramatically change course. Interventions aligned with today's cultural wind may therefore need re-orientation in the future. Finally, while wind usually blows horizontally, it can also move vertically, rising or descending. Metaphorically, this can represent intergenerational, hierarchical, or infrastructural cultural change: the upward movement of new ideas from younger generations or technological innovation, and the downward influence of authority, institutions, or tradition. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and the widespread use of social media can accelerate these vertical winds, rapidly redistributing values, norms, and information across age and status boundaries. Political change can also generate powerful cultural shifts, as seen in societies that have undergone independence or regime transformation, where new policies, freedoms, and national identities redirect the prevailing cultural wind. Both upward and downward movements can alter the overall airflow in which interventions operate.

Several limitations need to be noted. First, the analogy should not overshadow structural and resource determinants, such as infrastructure, workforce capacity, and policy environments, which also shape whether interventions succeed (Bulthuis et al., 2020). Culture is one wind among several forces (e.g., economic, political, and material) that together influence implementation. Moreover, operationalising "wind direction" is challenging. While cultural metrics such as Hofstede's dimensions (Hofstede et al., 2010) or Gelfand's tightness-looseness (Gelfand et al., 2021) can describe broad cultural tendencies, applying these frameworks to intervention design requires further empirical work. Similar to these established theories, the Culture as Wind analogy must be interpreted within clearly defined boundaries, such as an organisation, community, or region, rather than assumed to describe all entities in one nation or culture uniformly. Even within an individualistic cultural region, collectivism-oriented organisations can exist; likewise, within a generally "tight" culture, some groups or institutions may operate with looser norms. Because such frameworks are inherently "cross"-cultural, clarity is also needed regarding the reference point: "compared to what?" Without specifying the comparative context (for example, comparing Japan to the UK, or a particular group to its national culture), interpretations of "wind direction" risk becoming too abstract. This is, in fact, consistent with the nature of wind itself. Even when a prevailing national wind blows from east to west, a park or valley within that same country may experience a wind moving in the opposite direction. Likewise, within a broader cultural pattern, local organisations or communities may generate their own micro-winds, shaped by history, leadership, or shared purpose. Recognising these layers of variation is essential for interpreting the analogy accurately and for applying it to real-world contexts. Finally, although the analogy assumes interventions can be "re-oriented", in reality, some elements are fixed. Just as a ship's sail has a maximum angle before losing integrity, interventions include core evidence-based components that cannot be changed without compromising fidelity. The fit–fidelity balance must be maintained (Bernal & Domenech Rodríguez, 2012).

Future Research Agenda

To advance the Culture as Wind analogy, several research pathways are proposed. First, empirical validation is required. Future studies could develop instruments to (a) assess cultural wind direction, examining values, metaphors, and relational norms in different

settings, and (b) evaluate the degree of sail-wind alignment for interventions. This would allow researchers to test whether alignment predicts uptake, engagement, adherence, and outcomes across diverse cultural contexts. Second, component analysis of adaptation strategies is needed. Using meta-analytic methods, researchers could identify which adaptation elements (e.g., language, conceptual metaphors, delivery format, or relational framing) most contribute to effective sail-wind alignment and improved outcomes, as recent reviews have highlighted that this area remains under-examined (McDermott et al., 2024). Third, mixed-methods co-creation studies can explore how cultural wind is mapped in practice, how interventions are re-oriented accordingly, and how this affects implementation metrics such as reach, fidelity, and sustainability. Fourth, structural considerations must also be examined. Future research should investigate how cultural alignment interacts with resource and system variables, such as workforce capacity, policy support, or stigma, to determine whether strong cultural alignment can mitigate structural constraints or whether supportive infrastructure remains necessary. Fifth, longitudinal research is required to examine how cultural wind changes over time. Generational, migratory, political, or digital forces can shift collective orientations, requiring interventions to be periodically re-aligned with emerging cultural conditions.

Further, researchers could connect this analogy to existing quantitative and conceptual tools. For example, a Cultural Distance Index using Kogut and Singh's formulation (1988), could measure the magnitude and direction of the difference between cultural contexts, offering an empirical indicator of where interventions may encounter resistance or support. Complementarily, a Cultural Compass (a term introduced here) could identify the key cultural components, such as relational orientation, autonomy, or connectedness to nature, that practitioners can use to orient their interventions within local winds. This tool would help determine one or two principal directions for cultural adjustment, corresponding to the most influential cultural dimensions in a given context, thereby providing practical guidance for adaptation without oversimplifying cultural complexity. Together, these tools would help translate the Culture as Wind analogy from a conceptual metaphor into a practical and testable framework for cross-cultural mental health science.

It is also important to distinguish between the aims of theoretical generalisation and clinical personalisation. The Culture as Wind analogy belongs to the domain of theory building, where the goal is to identify broad regularities and tendencies that can guide understanding across contexts. In contrast, clinical and medical approaches rightly prioritise tailoring interventions to individual needs. These perspectives are complementary rather than opposing: general principles offer a navigational map, while personalised care determines the precise route. Far from ignoring individuality, cross-cultural generalisations prepare practitioners to recognise patterns that may shape each person's experience. In this sense, the analogy bridges theory and practice, offering a conceptual compass to support culturally sensitive, personalised mental health care.

Conclusion

The global burden of mental health problems and the growing international use of psychological, psychosocial, and digital interventions highlight the need not only for evidence-based design but also for culturally attuned implementation. The Culture as Wind analogy offers a fresh way to conceptualise how interventions interact with cultural values, emphasising directionality, alignment, and philosophical fit rather than mere difference. This

analogy invites researchers and practitioners to "check the wind": to ask which way culture is blowing and how interventions can be oriented accordingly. By integrating tools such as the Cultural Distance Index and the Cultural Compass, future work can translate this metaphor into measurable and practical frameworks. Ultimately, recognising and working with the cultural wind may enhance the reach, resonance, and sustainability of mental health interventions worldwide, bridging theory and practice to support culturally sensitive, personalised care.

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