Reviewing Application of Psychology in Social Work: Comparative Analysis of Global, South Asian and Nepalese Contexts

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Abstract

Despite being a complex process deeply shaped by cultural and socio-political contexts, integrating psychology in social work has become a fundamental concern for improving human well-being. This study reviewed empirical studies to examine the application of psychology in social work across global, South Asian, and Nepalese contexts. In doing so, the study used library-based research methods and reviewed peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and institutional reports. The literature was analyzed thematically to compare how psychological concepts are integrated into social work theories and practices. It seeks to identify common themes, contextual variations, and the specific challenges and opportunities present in Nepal. The study found that global literature demonstrates a well-established integration of psychology into social work, with increasing attention to humanitarian and cross-cultural applications. South Asian context reveals a critical movement towards decolonization and indigenization, emphasizing the centrality of family, spirituality, and community. Nepalese context, while emerging, shows promising developments in culturally adapting psychosocial interventions, yet grapples with challenges of professional identity, limited resources, and the dominance of Western models. In conclusion, application of psychology in Nepalese social work requires a thoughtful effort towards decolonized, culturally grounded approaches. This involves adapting interventions to local ethnopsychology, leveraging community-based resources, and addressing systemic barriers through policy integration and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Keywords: Psychology, Social Work, South Asia, Nepal, Decolonization, Cultural Adaptation, Psychosocial Intervention

Introduction

Integrating psychology in social work is becoming fundamental concern for improving human well-being. Psychology offers scientific study of behavior and mental processes for examining how individuals think, feel, and act. Social work applies this understanding within broader social contexts that helps to address problems and promote change at individual, family, and community levels. Applied psychological perspectives are, thus, essential for social workers to understand human development, behavior, and functioning within social environments, enabling them to move beyond surface-level issues to address underlying psychological needs (Misca & Unwin, 2017). However, application of psychology in social work varies significantly across cultural and geographical contexts. In global context, where both disciplines have long-established histories, the integration is often assumed and deeply embedded in practice frameworks, educational curricula, and professional standards. Kool and

Agrawal (2006) reveal that social psychology addresses universal human concerns, from cloning to gene banks to selective breeding, that have significant psychological and social implications worldwide, highlighting how psychological concepts remain crucial for grappling with modern, transnational ethical dilemmas.

In humanitarian settings globally, integration of psychological interventions has become increasingly recognized as essential. Psychological interventions in humanitarian crisis settings have been implemented through integration into programming outside formal healthcare delivery (Ndlovu et al., 2024). Besides, interventions targeting conflict-affected, displaced, and disaster-affected populations demonstrated moderate success in reducing psychological distress and enhancing disaster preparedness. However, social work and psychology operate within contexts marked by diverse cultural traditions, spiritual worldviews, family-centered social structures, and the legacies of colonialism in south Asian context. Das et al. (2023) argue that social work knowledge, as currently taught and practiced in South Asia, is a product of Western influence, which can be incongruent with the lived experiences and cultural contexts of South Asian communities. This recognition has spurred calls for decolonization, a conscious effort to move beyond imported frameworks toward practice models grounded in indigenous epistemologies.

Pulla, Das, and Nikku (2020) thus explore the potential for "blended" or indigenous models of social work that are better equipped to address the region's specific socioeconomic and psychological problems. Movement toward indigenization is evident across the subcontinent. A recent commentary on social casework in India documents efforts to create a uniquely Indian casework technique based on classical concepts such as *karma, ashramas, purusharthas, syadvada*, and *Ayurvedic* principles. This emergent paradigm emphasizes a decolonized, culturally embedded practice model rooted in Indian philosophical, spiritual, and ethical

traditions including *seva* (selfless service), *danam* (altruism), and *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (universal family). The authors argue for urgent need to transcend Western individualistic ideas and engage with the spiritual and community ethos inherent in Indian culture.

In Nepal, the situation is both similar and unique. Social work is a relatively young profession, with formal education programs established only in the 1990s. Yadav (2019) explicitly addresses this developmental stage by proposing a "decolonized and developmental" model of social work for Nepal, arguing that Western models with their psychological underpinnings often lack relevance in the Nepali context. This struggle for a distinct professional identity is echoed by Dangal, Khanal, and Pyakurel (2021) and Shrestha (2023), who note that social work in Nepal is still defining its scope and often borrows from disciplines like sociology and psychology without a clear, indigenous framework. Need for culturally appropriate psychological applications in Nepal is pressing. Nepal experienced decades of armed conflict (1996–2006), devastating natural disasters (notably the 2015 earthquakes), and ongoing rampant political instability. These events have created widespread psychological distress and trauma. Yet mental health resources remain severely limited. Sharma et al. (2024) estimate that there are only 250 psychiatrists, 37 psychologists, 75 psychiatric nurses, and approximately 1,300 para-professional counselors serving a population of 30 million, with most specialists concentrated in urban centers . In this context, social workers are often on the front lines of providing psychosocial support, yet they must do so with limited training and without the guidance of locally developed practice models.

Objectives and Methodology

Overall objectives of the study were to examine application of psychology in social work across Western, South Asian, and Nepalese contexts; to identify key themes, challenges, and innovations which can be applied in Nepalese context. In doing so, the study used library-based research design and systematic review method for

re/viewing application of psychology in social work across Global, South Asian, and Nepalese contexts. More so, academic databases were explored and studied, including PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. Search terms included combinations of psychology, social work, psychosocial intervention, mental health, cultural adaptation, decolonization in Global, South Asian and Nepalese contexts. The articles were also hand-searched to identify additional relevant studies. From each study, data were analyzed thematically, with themes emerging both deductively from the research questions and inductively. Themes were compared across the three contextual levels to identify convergences, divergences, and unique insights relevant to Nepal. This review is limited by its reliance on English-language publications, which may exclude relevant literature in Nepali or other South Asian languages. Additionally, the scarceness of empirical research specifically on psychology-social work integration in Nepal means that some findings are drawn from related fields such as mental health, counseling, or community psychology.

Discussions of Findings

The findings reveals distinct patterns in how psychology is applied in social work across Global, South Asian, and Nepalese contexts. This section thus discusses following key themes emerging from each context and draws comparative insights:

Global Context: Established Integration and Humanitarian Applications

Foundational Integration. Misca and Unwin (2017) provide complete framework for applying psychological perspectives essential for social work. They argue that understanding human development, behavior, and functioning within social contexts enables social workers to address psychological needs rather than merely surface-level issues. This foundational perspective is boomed across Western social work education, where psychology courses are standard components of curricula. Kool and Agrawal (2006) broaden this perspective

by situating applied social psychology within global concerns. Their work addresses universal human issues—cloning, gene banks, selective breeding—that have significant psychological and social implications worldwide. This highlights how psychological concepts remain crucial for grappling with modern, transnational ethical dilemmas that social workers increasingly encounter.

Humanitarian and Cross-Cultural Practice. Kagee (2018) identifies linkage between social work and community psychology in psychosocial humanitarian interventions. The author argues that for populations affected by conflict and disaster, both professions share concern for mental health and well-being. This involves applying psychological principles to design interventions addressing trauma, promoting resilience, and supporting community healing within specific cultural contexts. Ndlovu et al. (2024) again provide recent analysis of psychological intervention integration in humanitarian settings. Their review of eight studies found that interventions targeting conflict-affected, displaced, and disaster-affected populations demonstrated moderate success in reducing psychological distress and enhancing disaster preparedness. Key implementation outcomes investigated include acceptability, feasibility, and relevance—factors that become even more crucial during interventions cross cultural boundaries. The review also emphasized integration processes involving task shifting—training non-specialists to deliver psychological interventions—with emphases on adaptation, partnership creation, and capacity development. However, Ndlovu et al. (2024) argue that there is little rigorous research documenting the processes and experiences of integrating psychological interventions with non-health interventions. They call for urgent further research into integrated multi-sectoral interventions, particularly research that understands how social, cultural, and environmental contexts affect what is acceptable and feasible to deliver.

Contextualization within Global Realities. Global literature recognizes that effective application of psychology in social work is not a one-size-fits-all model. Palattiyil, et al. (2015) discuss challenges of redefining social work in global context, where service users often come from disenfranchised sectors of society. Understanding their psychological state—shaped by poverty, oppression, and marginalization—is paramount. Ornellas, et al. (2018) noted that the global definition of social work incorporates multiple ontologies, meaning that practice in any given setting may use a mixture of psychological and other theoretical approaches tailored to local realities. Ife (2001) also argues that repositioning social work as a human rights profession requires social workers to use skills rooted in psychological understanding of communication and empowerment to build community and validate human experience.

Historical Evolution. Historical evolution of social work as an international profession has always been intertwined with psychological concepts. Midgley (1997) notes that growth of international social work was boosted by the need to address psychological trauma experienced by soldiers and civilians during wartime. This historical link underscores long-standing recognition that social welfare problems are intrinsically linked to psychological well-being. Cox and Pawar (2006) provide comprehensive overview of international social work, framing it within a complex global context demanding that practitioners understand psychological impacts of global issues.

South Asian Context: Decolonization, Indigenization, and Cultural Embeddedness

South Asian literature presents a fundamentally different picture. It is characterized by critical examination of Western models and active efforts to develop culturally appropriate alternatives.

Imperative of Decolonization. Social work knowledge practicing in South Asia is often a product of Western influence, incongruent with lived experiences and cultural context (Das et al., 2023; Sharma, et al., 2024). This necessitates sensible effort to decolonize curriculum and practice. Call for decolonization goes beyond simple adaptation of Western models. It requires fundamental re-examination of assumptions about human behavior, well-being, and helping relationships. Pulla et al. (2020) explore potential for "blended" or indigenous models of social work better equipped to address region's specific socioeconomic and psychological problems. This move towards indigenization is not merely academic exercise but practical requirement for effective intervention. The recent commentary on social casework in India builds directly on this foundation, examining efforts to create unique casework techniques based on classical Indian concepts (Sehgal, 2025).

Centrality of Family, Spirituality, and Culture. Psychological well-being and social work interventions cannot be understood without acknowledging profound influence of family and spirituality. Whipple et al. (2015) highlight that for Southeast Asian refugee populations, culturally sensitive practice must incorporate teachings of Confucius and other spiritual traditions, applying these culturally significant resources as forms of support. Pandya (2015) makes compelling case for including spirituality in social work curriculum, noting that in South Asian context, spirituality is key resource for counseling, aging research, and positive psychology. This contrasts sharply with Western models that often separate spirituality from professional practice or treat it as private matter rather than communal resource. The family, as primary social unit, is another critical factor. Islam (2026) reveals that social workers in South Asia must engage with complex family dynamics. Shaligram et al. (2022) also emphasize that understanding these cultural contexts is essential for clinicians to effectively engage South Asian youth and address their psychological distress. The high rates of psychological distress among youth underscore need for culturally competent mental health services

Challenges in Cross-Cultural and Migrant Practice. Application of psychological principles has been becoming complex when working with

migrant or minority South Asian populations. Kwok et al. (2018) examine multicultural social work practice with South Asian migrants in Hong Kong, finding that application of such practice is often met with dilemmas and obstacles. This offers concrete example of challenges in cross-cultural contexts. Inman et al. (2014), in their content analysis of psychological research on South Asian Americans, encourage use of diverse South Asian samples and culturally focused theoretical frameworks, reinforcing idea that psychology must be contextualized to be valid and useful. This research highlights that even within diaspora communities, Western psychological frameworks may not adequately capture experiences of South Asian populations.

Addressing Specific Socio-Psychological Issues: South Asian social workers apply psychological understanding to wide range of specific issues. Sultana (2012), in comparison between West and Bangladesh, identifies that one core function of social work is "relief of psychological distress and material need"—a dual mandate particularly acute in developing countries. Social work in South Asia increasingly engages with systemic issues through psychological lens. Nikku and Rafique (2019) discuss role of "political social work" in South Asia, applying framework that considers psychological impact of domestic politics, institutional power, and disempowerment on individuals and communities. This signifies important expansion of psychological applications beyond individual clinical focus to address structural determinants of mental health (Shaligram et al., 2022).

Nepalese Context: Cultural Negotiation and Emergent Practice

Nepalese literature reveals a profession in formative stage, actively negotiating its identity and struggling to apply psychological principles in ways relevant and effective within country's unique socio-cultural landscape.

Challenge of Decolonization and Professional Identity. A central theme in Nepalese context is tension between Western-educated or influenced models and realities of Nepali society. Yadav (2019) explicitly addresses this by proposing "decolonised and developmental" model of social work for Nepal, arguing Western models with their psychological underpinnings often lack relevance. His work, based on interviews with Nepali social workers, utilizes rigorous bottom-up, grounded theory method to develop new model applicable to wide range of countries and cultures. Yadav's analysis reveals that unlike Western contexts where "heavy psychological base" is often assumed, social work in Nepal faces challenge of adapting and indigenizing concepts to fit local ethnopsychology, cultural norms, and resource-limited settings. Dangal et al. (2021) and Shrestha (2023) argue that social work in Nepal is still defining its scope and often borrows from disciplines like sociology and psychology without clear, indigenous framework. The lack of solidified identity directly impacts how—and how effectively—psychological knowledge can be integrated and applied.

Cultural Adaptation of Psychosocial Interventions: Counseling and trauma care, regarded as most significant determinants, focus on cultural adaptation of psychosocial interventions. Tol et al. (2005) provide seminal insights into cultural challenges of psychosocial counseling in Nepal due to Western counseling techniques that clash with local communication styles and help-seeking behaviors. Kohrt and Hruschka (2010) explore Nepali concepts of psychological trauma, demonstrating that local idioms of distress, ethnopsychology, and ethnophysiology offer less stigmatizing frameworks for understanding suffering than direct application of Western Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Their research highlights that effective psychological application requires practitioners to work with local belief systems rather than imposing external ones. Recent adaptation of Thinking Healthy Program (THP) for perinatal depression in Nepal provides exemplary model of cultural adaptation. Subba et al. (2026) applied mental health Cultural Adaptation and Contextualization for Implementation (mhCACI) framework. It

is a 10-step participatory process involving multidisciplinary team to adapt both content and implementation strategies. The key adaptations included; selecting female community health volunteers (FCHVS) as delivery agents—trusted community-based providers already embedded in Nepal's health system, reducing number of sessions from 16 to 8 to enhance feasibility, integrating additional 2.5-day foundational helping skills training, revising manuals with simplified language, cultural idioms, visual aids, and locally relevant examples and including referral pathways for gender-based violence, suicide, and severe mental illness. The adapted THP was well received by providers and recipients, demonstrating how global interventions can be contextually tailored for low-resource settings while preserving therapeutic integrity. This offers scalable model for community-based mental health care in Nepal.

Application in Specific Practice Areas. Vaidya (2017) argue that better outcomes are achieved when both psychological and social factors are addressed, requiring social workers to use current research to support students. In disaster contexts, Paudel (2017) addresses crucial but often neglected area of "emotional care," arguing that psychological injuries are as significant as physical ones and must be core component of social work practice, especially in disaster-prone Nepal. This aligns with global recognition of psychosocial needs in humanitarian settings. The Centre for Mental Health and Counselling-Nepal (CMC-Nepal) has been implementing four-year project titled "Psychosocial Counselling for Community Integration of Conflict Victims" since 2021. This intervention aims to restore psychosocial stability among conflict victims and enhance capacity of local and provincial governments to meet MHPSS needs. The project has expanded from pilot in two districts to 13 municipalities across three provinces, encompassing training health workers and psychosocial counselors, community awareness programs, advocacy efforts, and policy-level integration. Implementation of science

research accompanying this project examines acceptability, appropriateness, adoption, fidelity, feasibility, cost, penetration, and sustainability of community-based MHPSS interventions. This represents significant effort to generate local evidence. Furthermore, integration of psychology is inevitable for interdisciplinary coordination. Adhikari (2022) and Adhikari at al. (2022) envision future for Nepalese psychology involving meaningful collaboration with public health experts and social workers to apply psychology as integral part of national development and well-being of the people.

Fieldwork, Education, and Systemic Barriers. Practical application of psychology is hindered by challenges in social work education and fieldwork. Woli (2023) explores ethical issues arising in fieldwork practice, where students struggle to apply theoretical knowledge—including psychological theory—in complex real-world situations. Nikku (2010) identifies both opportunities and challenges in social work education, noting that professional landscape often requires social workers to be present alongside psychologists, but integration of their roles is not always seamless. Use of culturally applicable methods, such as rituals, is suggested as way to bridge gap and make psychosocial support more acceptable. The severe shortage of mental health professionals in Nepal—with most specialists concentrated in cities—means that social workers are often de facto mental health providers. Yet they receive limited training in psychological interventions and lack supervision and support systems available in Western contexts.

Comparative Analysis: Convergence, Divergence and Critical Reflection

Convergence. Despite differences in development and cultural frameworks; global, South Asian, and Nepalese contexts share fundamental convergences in how psychology is applied within social work. Owing to that importance of psychology for understanding and addressing human suffering, recognizing that effective social work intervention requires insight into individual and collective behavioral

and emotional processes. There is universal understanding that interventions must be contextually appropriate—whether adapting to Western humanitarian settings, South Asian family systems, or Nepali ethnopsychology—with cultural relevance emerging as a non-negotiable prerequisite for effectiveness. All these contexts also face persistent challenges in integrating psychological knowledge with social work for balancing clinical individual focus with structural, community-oriented approaches. Finally, each demonstrates increasing attention to humanitarian and disaster settings, reflecting global recognition that psychological injuries are as significant as physical ones and must be central to social work practice in conflict, displacement, and natural disaster situations.

Divergences. There are three levels of divergences in their primary concerns and developmental trajectories. First, global context assumes established integration of psychology into social work and focuses predominantly on refinement of existing models and their application in humanitarian settings. Second, South Asian context places decolonization and indigenization at the center of discourse, critically examining the relevance of Western frameworks and actively developing culturally embedded alternatives rooted in family systems, spirituality, and indigenous epistemologies. Third, Nepalese context reveals most acute tension between imported models and local realities, characterized by the least developed professional infrastructure alongside the most urgent need for culturally grounded approaches. This country is marked by the dual identity of a developing nation and a region scarred by prolonged conflict and recurring disasters. This unique combination of challenges requires mental health solutions that are tailored to its specific context, rather than simply adopting approaches from elsewhere.

Critical Reflection. This study highlights four fundamental issues in applying psychology to Nepalese social work. First, decolonization requires moving beyond theory to concrete actions—centering local knowledge, developing culturally grounded assessment tools, and challenging Western epistemic privilege. Second, the individualistic assumptions of Western psychology clash with Nepal's collectivist culture, requiring interventions that address relational, family, and spiritual dimensions of distress. Third, social work's unclear professional identity—oscillating between clinical, developmental, and psychosocial roles—shapes how psychological knowledge is applied. Fourth, severe resource shortages necessitate task-shifting to community workers, but scalability and quality maintenance remain uncertain. Implementation research (CMC-Nepal) addressing these sustainability factors is essential for building evidence-based, culturally appropriate services.

Conclusion and Policy Implication

The study concludes that psychology provides essential frameworks for understanding human behavior and addressing suffering, with increasing attention to humanitarian applications and cross-cultural practices globally. In South Asia, the dominant theme is decolonization—moving beyond Western frameworks towards practice models grounded in indigenous epistemologies, family systems, and spiritual traditions. In Nepal, social work as a young profession struggles with identity while facing urgent needs from conflict, disaster, and widespread psychosocial distress. Promising developments like the Thinking Healthy Program adaptation demonstrate cultural adaptation potential, yet persistent challenges remain including limited resources, Western dominance in education, and insufficient indigenous research. However, significant research gaps exist in empirical studies on psychology-social work integration in Nepal. Most available literature focuses on mental health interventions rather than broader social work practice, with limited research examining how social workers actually use psychological knowledge in daily practice, navigate tensions between Western and local frameworks. Effective application of psychology in Nepalese social work thus requires moving beyond uncritical adoption of

Western models toward decolonized, culturally grounded approaches. It works with local understandings, leverages community resources, and addresses both individual suffering and its social determinants.

Finally, the study highlights three levels of implications of the study. First, for educational level, social work courses must be decolonized by using fewer Western textbooks and more Nepali scholarship. Psychology classes should teach students the ways to adapt their skills to local culture using Nepali case studies. Fieldwork supervision must be strengthened to help students manage the conflict between Western theories and local realities. For practice level, culturally adapted programs like the Thinking Healthy Program should be expanded using community participation. Task-shifting to community workers must continue with strong training and support systems. Psychological services need to be integrated into health, education, and social protection sectors to address the root causes of mental health issues. For policy level, mental health services included in Nepal's universal health coverage must be enforced with enough staff and accountability. Government mechanism must support researching in these sectors to find out which mental health interventions work best in Nepal. Clear roles must be established for social workers, psychologists, and health workers to work together effectively.

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