PENNSYLVANIA COUNSELING ASSOCIATION
A Branch of the American Counseling Association

Journal of the Pennsylvania Counseling Association

Volume 29, Number 1 Article 5

Spring, 2026 DOI: https://doi.org/10.71463/EXHE8650

Narrative Therapy: A Culturally Responsive Tool for Counseling International Students

Aazi Ahmadi[1]
Jessica Gerthe[2]
Elizabeth A. Prosek[3]

[1]Department of Counseling and Higher Education, University of North Texas
[2] Department of Counseling, Montana State University
[3]Department of Educational Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education, The Pennsylvania State University

Author Note

Author Note: We have no known conflict of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Aazi Ahmadi. University of North Texas, Welch Street Complex 2, Denton, TX 76203. Email: azadeh.ahmadi@unt.edu

PENNSYLVANIA COUNSELING ASSOCIATION
A Branch of the American Counseling Association

Journal of the Pennsylvania Counseling Association

Narrative Therapy: A Culturally Responsive Tool for Counseling International Students

Aazi Ahmadi[1]
Jessica Gerthe[2]
Elizabeth A. Prosek[3]

[1]University of North Texas
[2]Montana State University
[3]The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract

International students constitute a diverse population in higher education whose experiences are shaped by cultural transitions, academic demands, immigration policies, discrimination, and language-related challenges. These factors may increase psychological distress while contributing to underutilization of mental health services. This conceptual article examines international students' mental health concerns and advances narrative therapy as a culturally responsive framework for college counseling centers. Core narrative practices, therapeutic documentation, language considerations, and a case illustration are presented, with implications and limitations discussed for counseling practice.

***Keywords*:** international students, narrative therapy, acculturation, multicultural counseling, college counseling

Narrative Therapy: A Culturally Responsive Tool for Counseling International Students

The number of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities has increased substantially over the past several decades, mirroring global mobility trends in higher education (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2024; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023). Worldwide, more than 6 million students now pursue postsecondary education outside their home countries (OECD, 2023). Approximately 15% of these students choose to study in the United States, where international students account for 5.9% of the total student body (IIE, 2024). This growth is historically significant; international enrollment in U.S. institutions expanded from 26,433 students in 1949–1950 to 1,126,690 in 2023–2024 (IIE, 2024). However, this upward trajectory was disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to steep declines in new international enrollment and heightened student attrition due to travel bans, embassy closures, online learning transitions, as well as health and safety concerns (Prado et al., 2024). Although enrollment has begun to rebound, the pandemic left lasting effects on patterns of student mobility and perceptions of the United

States as a study destination. In addition, increasingly restrictive immigration policies have introduced additional uncertainty for prospective and current international students (Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Prado et al., 2024; Zong & Batalova, 2018).

Despite these challenges, international students continue to represent a diverse population in terms of nationality, language, racial and ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, and educational background (OECD, 2023; Zong & Batalova, 2018). Their contributions enrich academic environments, enhance institutional finances, and foster cross-cultural engagement and global competence among domestic peers (Prieto-Welch, 2016; Zong & Batalova, 2018). Simultaneously, international students must navigate complex academic, linguistic, cultural, and immigration-related transitions that influence their overall well-being and engagement with higher education systems (Misra et al., 2003; Mori, 2000; Poyrazli, 2015; Sandhu, 1995).

Stressors and Adjustment Experiences of International Students

International students often experience stressors that overlap with those of domestic students, such as academic pressure, financial strain, interpersonal difficulties, and questions about identity development (Bradley, 2000; Galván et al., 2024; Ginter & Glauser, 1997; Luyckx et al., 2013). However, their experiences are also shaped by factors unique to living and studying in a different cultural context. Many students must learn to navigate an unfamiliar educational system, adapt to new instructional styles, and respond to different expectations for class participation and independent work (Khawaja et al., 2018; Misra et al., 2003; Poyrazli, 2015). At the same time, students may experience changes in social support as they separate from family members and community networks in their home countries (Lee et al., 2004; Misra et al., 2003; Tseng & Newton, 2002). These adjustment challenges are closely connected to the process of acculturation that many international students experience while adapting to a new cultural environment. Acculturation is a central process in many international students' lives and involves negotiating new cultural norms and practices while maintaining connections to one's culture of origin (Lui, 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2010). For students from collectivist cultural backgrounds, entering a predominantly individualistic academic environment can introduce tensions around autonomy, interdependence, and responsibility (Lui, 2015; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Collectivist cultures tend to emphasize interdependence, family responsibility, and group harmony, which can shape expectations about authority relationships, academic collaboration, and decision-making. For example, students accustomed to deference toward authority figures may initially feel uncertain about expressing disagreement in class or advocating for themselves with faculty (Mori, 2000; Sandhu, 1995). While some students experience these differences as opportunities for growth, others may experience confusion, role conflict, or stress as they attempt to reconcile previously learned cultural norms with new expectations for independence, self-advocacy, and classroom participation (Han et al., 2013; Kono et al., 2015; Misra et al., 2003).

Experiences of prejudice, racism, or discrimination may also further complicate adjustment (Farrell & Gibbons, 2019; Wei et al., 2008). International students may be perceived as outsiders, encounter microaggressions related to language or accent, or face hostile rhetoric around immigration (Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Zong & Batalova, 2018). Such experiences can contribute to feelings of social exclusion, heightened self-consciousness about language or cultural identity, and uncertainty

about belonging within the academic community, which may increase anxiety or depressive symptoms (Han et al., 2013; Kono et al., 2015; Wei et al., 2008). Despite these challenges, many international students develop adaptive coping strategies, such as building new social networks, seeking academic support, and gradually developing confidence in unfamiliar environments, which may buffer mental health challenges (Lee et al., 2004; Misra et al., 2003; Tseng & Newton, 2002).

Language proficiency constitutes another important dimension of variability within the international student population. Some students arrive with advanced English fluency and do not experience language as a barrier. Others confront difficulties expressing complex ideas, asking questions in class, or understanding culturally embedded nuances in communication (Cadieux & Wehrly, 1986; Khawaja et al., 2018; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Yeh & Inose, 2003). For these students, second-language use in academic and social contexts may lead to cognitive fatigue; the mental exhaustion associated with sustained effort to process and produce language in a non-native tongue. Cognitive fatigue may be compounded by information overload as students process novel cultural, institutional, and social information (Mori, 2000; Williams, 2012). Over time, these linguistic demands can interact with academic and cultural adjustment challenges, further contributing to stress and fatigue among international students navigating unfamiliar environments.

Stressors such as cultural adjustment, discrimination, academic demands, financial uncertainty, and language challenges can contribute to psychological and somatic symptoms among some international students. Empirical studies have documented elevated distress in certain groups, including depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, headaches, and gastrointestinal complaints (Cheung et al., 2011; Han et al., 2013; Kono et al., 2015; Mori, 2000; Poyrazli, 2015; Sandhu, 1995). Not all international students develop such symptoms, and those who do may exhibit them in specific ways (Lee et al., 2004; Liu, 2009; Wei et al., 2008). These variations reflect differences in acculturation experiences, exposure to discrimination, language proficiency, academic expectations, and availability of social support. Recognizing these intersecting factors underscores the importance of individualized and contextually informed mental health counseling approaches.

Barriers to Mental Health Service Utilization

Although international students may experience multiple stressors, they often underutilize mental health services (Galván et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2017; Yakushko et al., 2008). Barriers to help-seeking may include cultural stigma associated with mental health concerns, limited familiarity with counseling as a resource, fears about immigration or academic consequences, mistrust of institutions, and concerns about communicating effectively in a second language (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011; Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Hyun et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2014; Yi et al., 2003). Research indicates that when international students do seek help, they frequently turn first to family members, friends, or faculty rather than professional counselors (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011; Yakushko et al., 2008). Several factors contribute to this pattern. For example, in some cultural contexts, mental health concerns are highly stigmatized, and counseling may be associated with severe pathology rather than normative coping support (Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Liu, 2009; Mori, 2000). Students may worry that acknowledging psychological difficulty will disappoint family or reflect poorly on their home communities.

Institutional and systemic factors also play a role. International students may worry that disclosure of distress could jeopardize their visa status or academic standing (Galván et al., 2024; Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Wu et al., 2017). Concerns about confidentiality and mistrust of institutional systems can further fuel reluctance to engage with counseling centers (Buizza et al., 2017; Hyun et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2017). Some students perceive counselors as lacking cultural understanding or assume that counseling models will not be relevant to their cultural or religious frameworks (Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Lee et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2017).

Language-related concerns can be significant for some students. Even those with strong English proficiency may worry about being misunderstood, unable to express complex emotional experiences, or judged for speech patterns (Khawaja et al., 2018; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Yeh & Inose, 2003). The use of interpreters, while sometimes helpful, introduces additional complexities, including concerns about privacy, potential changes in meaning, and cost or availability (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011; Miller, 2005; Paone & Malott, 2008). Together, these factors underscore the need for counseling models that are linguistically and culturally attuned, emphasize collaboration, and avoid pathologizing students' experiences.

Intersectional Mental Health Needs of International Students

Given the diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and structural challenges, international students do not form a monolithic group. Their experiences are shaped by intersecting identities and contexts, including nationality, race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, and prior exposure to international environments (Lui, 2015; Mori, 2000; Prieto-Welch, 2016). Some students adapt quickly, reporting satisfaction and growth, whereas others experience significant strain (Han et al., 2013; Kono et al., 2015; Misra et al., 2003). These variations highlight the importance of holistic and culturally responsive approaches that recognize the diversity of international students' lived experiences. Counseling frameworks that account for cultural transitions, academic pressures, and sociopolitical influences may therefore be particularly relevant for supporting this population (Bernal & Sáez-Santiago, 2006; Oliver et al., 2011; Prieto-Welch, 2016; Sandhu, 1995).

Narrative therapy provides one such approach. It emphasizes the role of context and meaning in shaping individuals' experiences and challenges deficit-based interpretations of personal struggles (Hansen, 2006, 2010; Neimeyer & Stewart, 2000; White, 1995; White & Epston, 1990). Narrative therapy foregrounds cultural context and questions dominant social narratives aligning closely with multicultural counseling values. It recognizes how power, oppression, and cultural discourses shape individuals' experiences and identities. By centering clients' voices and lived experiences, narrative therapy allows counselors and clients to collaboratively examine how cultural expectations, migration experiences, and systemic pressures influence students' identities and well-being. In this way, narrative therapy offers a particularly relevant framework for counseling international students in college counseling centers (Akinyela, 2005; Bernal & Sáez-Santiago, 2006; Oliver et al., 2011; Payne, 2006).

Theoretical Foundations of Narrative Therapy

Modernist epistemology, which assumes that there are "singularly correct counseling interventions for particular categories of human problems," has influenced many therapeutic approaches in mental health care (Hansen, 2006,

p. 104). Consequently, many contemporary counseling models are grounded in assumptions about objective knowledge and universal treatment strategies. In contrast, postmodern epistemology, reflected in narrative approaches, reconceptualizes the role of theory in therapeutic relationships. Rather than viewing theories as objective representations of reality, postmodern perspectives understand them as interpretive tools that shape how individuals construct meaning from their experiences (Hansen, 2007). From this viewpoint, human experience is understood through multiple interpretations rather than a single definitive truth. Postmodernism therefore challenges singular, objective understandings of reality and instead emphasizes multiplicity, flexibility, and diverse lived experiences. Individuals are seen as meaning-makers who interpret their lives through stories shaped by cultural, relational, and historical contexts (Parry, 1997). In counseling practice, this perspective encourages exploration of multiple meanings of experiences and supports the development of richer or "thicker" descriptions of people's lives that acknowledge resilience, agency, and alternative possibilities. Such an approach is particularly relevant when working with populations whose experiences are shaped by multiple cultural contexts, including international students navigating unfamiliar social and institutional environments.

Narrative therapy, developed by White and Epston (1990), emerges from this postmodern and social-constructionist framework that challenges singular truths and values diverse perspectives and meanings. Rather than conceptualizing problems as internal deficits within individuals, narrative therapy externalizes problems by separating them from a person's identity and viewing them as influences that operate within broader cultural, relational, and sociopolitical contexts (Payne, 2006; White, 1995, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). Through this lens, individuals are invited to examine how dominant narratives, often shaped by social expectations, institutional norms, and cultural discourses, can become problem-saturated and obscure alternative stories of resilience, resistance, and strength (Akinyela, 2005; Nylund, 2002; White, 2002). This framework aligns closely with multicultural counseling principles by rejecting absolute truths, challenging dominant cultural scripts, and emphasizing diverse narratives shaped by social and cultural contexts. Narrative therapy explicitly attends to the influence of culture, power, and oppression on individuals' experiences and recognizes how broader discourses can shape personal identity and meaning-making (Bernal & Sáez-Santiago, 2006; Oliver et al., 2011; White, 1995). By acknowledging these influences, the approach disputes deficit-based interpretations of difference and invites clients to construct preferred narratives that highlight strengths, values, and cultural identities. For international students, whose experiences are often shaped by cultural transitions, institutional expectations, and broader sociopolitical conditions, narrative therapy provides a particularly relevant framework for understanding adjustment challenges while honoring the complexity and diversity of their lived experiences.

Narrative Therapy with International Students

Narrative therapy involves several practices that can be adapted for work with international students in college counseling centers. These practices include externalizing conversations, relative influence questioning, identifying unique outcomes and alternative perspectives, role-playing as an outsider witness, and utilizing therapeutic documentation (Payne, 2006; White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990; Wolter et al., 2006). When employed with cultural humility and flexibility, these practices can help international students examine the influence of acculturative

stress, discrimination, academic pressure, and family expectations on their lives while reclaiming agency and preferred identity (Bernal & Sáez-Santiago, 2006; Farrell & Gibbons, 2019; Oliver et al., 2011). Through these processes, students can reinterpret their experiences within broader cultural and systemic contexts while recognizing their own strengths and capacities for change.

Externalizing conversations are a core technique in narrative therapy that separate the person from the problem. Through this process, the problem is framed as an influence acting on the individual rather than as an inherent part of their identity (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). By shifting the problem outside of the individual, clients are able to examine its effects more objectively and explore how it operates in their lives. For example, an international student who describes themselves as "a failure" might be invited to name this experience as something separate from their identity, such as "the Voice of Failure" or "the Pressure to Be Perfect." This reframing allows the student to examine how cultural expectations, family pressures, and institutional norms may contribute to their distress without interpreting these experiences as evidence of personal inadequacy (Payne, 2006). For international students who may internalize narratives of deficiency or inadequacy while adjusting to a new cultural and academic environment, externalization can be particularly liberating because it creates space to question these narratives and consider alternative understandings of their experiences (Farrell & Gibbons, 2019; Wolter et al., 2006). Through this process, international students may begin to reinterpret their struggles not as personal shortcomings but as understandable responses to cultural transitions, academic pressures, and sociopolitical contexts.

Relative influence questioning is a narrative technique used to examine the relationship between the person and the problem by exploring both how the problem influences the individual's life and how the individual responds to or resists that influence (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). Through this process, counselors help clients identify the ways a problem operates across different areas of their lives while also highlighting moments when they have exercised agency in responding to it. For example, questions might include: "When is the pressure most active in your life?" "What does it try to convince you of?" and "Are there times when you have been able to keep it from taking over?" These questions encourage international students to reflect on their experiences, identify patterns in how the problem shows up in different contexts, and recognize strategies they have already used to resist its influence. They also invite exploration of broader cultural and systemic factors, such as racism, immigration-related stress, or academic competition, that may contribute to the problem narrative (Bernal & Sáez-Santiago, 2006; Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Wei et al., 2008). By mapping both the influence of the problem and the student's responses to it, relative influence questioning helps highlight moments of agency and resilience that may otherwise remain unnoticed. These moments can then serve as entry points for identifying unique outcomes, another narrative technique that further develops alternative and strengths-based narratives.

Identifying unique outcomes is a narrative intervention that involves drawing attention to moments when the dominant problem narrative is less influential or when individuals act in ways that contradict the problem story (White, 2007; Wolter et al., 2006). These moments provide opportunities for counselors and clients to explore alternative interpretations of experience and begin developing a preferred narrative that highlights strengths, values, and agency. By

reflecting on these events in greater detail, counselors help clients "thicken" this preferred narrative by connecting actions, intentions, and personal qualities that may otherwise remain unnoticed. For instance, a student who typically avoids speaking in class due to anxiety may recall a time when she asked a question, facilitated a group discussion, or supported a peer. Exploring these moments allows the counselor and student to highlight positive elements of the student's engagement and reconsider assumptions about competence or confidence. By elaborating on these experiences, the counselor and student collaboratively construct richer narratives that emphasize qualities such as courage, adaptability, and persistence (Farrell & Gibbons, 2019; Malgady & Costantino, 2003; Wolter et al., 2006). For international students navigating multiple transitions, identifying unique outcomes can illuminate resources and skills that may have been overshadowed by stress or adjustment challenges.

Lastly, the practice of outsider witnessing expands the narrative process beyond the counseling dyad, providing a communal audience to acknowledge and continuously thicken the individual's preferred narrative. With students' consent, trusted peers, mentors, or family members can be invited to listen to parts of the student's emerging personal narrative and offer reflections based on what resonates with their own experiences (Bjoroy et al., 2016; White, 1995, 2007). For international students who may feel isolated or disconnected from community, such practices can strengthen a sense of belonging and shared understanding (Farrell & Gibbons, 2019; Prieto-Welch, 2016). They can also function as a bridge between the counseling center and the student's broader social network by inviting supportive members of the student's community to recognize and affirm the student's strengths, resilience, and preferred identity narratives outside of the counseling setting. Together, these narrative practices, including externalization, relative influence questioning, identifying unique outcomes, and outsider witnessing, help international students reinterpret their challenges within broader cultural and systemic contexts while strengthening agency, resilience, and more empowering understandings of their experiences.

Case Illustration

This case illustration helps demonstrate how narrative therapy serves as a useful framework to be implemented in a university counseling context with the international student population. Although the example is fictionalized, it is informed by common themes in the literature and clinical practice.

Sara, a 24-year-old international student from a Middle Eastern country, referred herself to the university counseling center after receiving lower-than-expected grades in her first semester of graduate study. She described her presenting problems as increased difficulty concentrating, frequent worries about disappointing her family, and feelings of detachment from her classmates. Her concerns represent commonly reported issues among international students who are adjusting to rigorous academic environments, an unfamiliar environment, and complicated changes in their lifestyles at this stage of life. Although her English proficiency was strong, she reported becoming exhausted after long seminars and sometimes avoided speaking for fear of "saying something wrong," mirroring patterns of cognitive fatigue and communication anxiety documented among international students navigating second-language demands (Khawaja et al., 2018; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Williams, 2012). Sara attributed her difficulties to personal inadequacy and stated, "Maybe I am not meant to be here," reflecting a problem-saturated narrative with a thin description that overshadowed her

complex identity to a narrative of inadequacy and deficit.

In early sessions, the counselor invited Sara to describe her experiences in detail, listening for language that suggested a problem-saturated narrative. As part of the narrative practice of externalization, the counselor asked whether Sara might be willing to give a name to the pressures she was experiencing, emphasizing that she herself was not the problem but that the problem could be viewed as separate from her identity (Payne, 2006; White & Epston, 1990). After some reflection, Sara chose the name "the Pressure Monster" to refer to the constellation of self-doubt, perfectionism, and fear of failure that seemed to dominate her thoughts. The counselor then used relative influence questioning to explore the role of the Pressure Monster in Sara's life and to map its effects across different contexts. Together they examined when the Pressure Monster appeared most intensely, what it attempted to persuade Sara to believe about herself, and how it affected her relationships and academic engagement. While collaboratively mapping these influences in session, Sara noted that the Pressure Monster was especially active before exams, during seminar discussions, and whenever she thought about her family's financial sacrifices. She described how it disrupted her sleep, led her to avoid participation in class, and fueled comparisons with peers whom she perceived as more confident or fluent.

After several sessions of mapping the influence of the Pressure Monster, the counselor shifted attention to identifying unique outcomes, or times when the Pressure Monster was not as present in Sara's life (White, 2007; Wolter et al., 2006). The counselor asked, "Have there ever been times, however small, when the Pressure Monster was present, but you did not let it fully control your actions?" Sara recalled a recent seminar in which she asked a clarifying question and later received an email from the instructor thanking her for raising an important issue that several classmates had also found confusing. She also remembered organizing a study group that her peers found helpful and sparked authentic social collaboration that was beneficial for Sara. These events represent unique outcomes that directly challenge Sara's internalized problem-saturated narrative of incapability and inefficacy.

Recognizing the contrast between Sara's negative internalized view of herself and the unique outcomes she identified, the counselor then encouraged Sara to describe these experiences in more detail. Questions such as, "What did you draw on within yourself to ask that question?" and "What might your classmates' response suggest about how they see you?" helped Sara articulate alternative understandings of herself as prepared, thoughtful, and supportive. Over time, Sara integrated these unique outcomes into a richer and thicker narrative in which she was not simply someone struggling with pressure, but a student navigating a challenging context with emerging competence and resilience. This process also helped normalize her experience by situating her struggles within challenges commonly faced by international students adjusting to demanding academic environments while still emphasizing Sara's personal interpretation of these experiences. As these alternative perspectives emerged, the counselor and Sara also explored the cultural and familial narratives that shaped the Pressure Monster's messages. Examining these influences helped Sara understand how broader expectations and life circumstances had contributed to the pressures she experienced, rather than viewing them solely as personal shortcomings. Sara reflected on the significance of educational achievement in her family, the economic sacrifices her parents had made, and the sociopolitical conditions that had limited opportunities in her home country.

Acknowledging these broader contexts enabled her to understand her distress as a response to complex pressures rather than a personal failing. Building on these reflections, the counselor invited Sara to reconsider how these influences could be incorporated into a more empowering story about her experiences. Through this process, Sara and the counselor collaboratively co-authored a new storyline that represented a more holistic understanding of her identity. The emerging preferred narrative created collaboratively in sessions then recognized her efforts, values, and aspirations, situating them within a larger story of perseverance and hope (Akinyela, 2005; White, 1995, 2007).

Therapeutic Documentation and Language Considerations

Therapeutic documentation is a distinctive feature of narrative therapy that can be particularly meaningful when working with international students. Letters, session summaries, certificates, and other written documents create tangible records of clients' stories, insights, and achievements (Bjoroy et al., 2016; Nylund, 2002; White & Epston, 1990). These documents are not merely administrative artifacts; rather, they function as extensions of the therapeutic conversation and help consolidate preferred narratives (Nylund, 2002; Payne, 2006; White, 2007). For international students, writing can serve several important functions, including providing space for reflection, supporting meaning-making across languages, and allowing students to express experiences that may be difficult to articulate spontaneously in conversation. Students navigating counseling in a second language may benefit from additional time to process meanings, select words carefully, and reflect on the emotional nuances of their experiences (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001; Swain, 1998; Williams, 2012; Webb, 2005). Written documents allow students to revisit session content at their own pace, clarify ideas, and prepare questions or reflections for subsequent meetings, thereby reducing the pressure to communicate complex experiences immediately in a non-native language and enhancing mutual understanding (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011; Khawaja et al., 2018; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

In Sara's case, the counselor incorporated therapeutic documentation by writing letters summarizing key themes from sessions and highlighting moments when Sara resisted the influence of the Pressure Monster and acted in alignment with her preferred identity. These letters included Sara's own language and were shared between sessions so that she could reflect on them, make notes, and bring additional thoughts to the next meeting, strengthening her sense of authorship over her evolving narrative (Bjoroy et al., 2016; Payne, 2006). Therapeutic documentation may also involve inviting clients to write letters directly to the problem, such as addressing the Pressure Monster, to articulate the effects the problem has had on their lives, recognize moments when its influence was limited, and express intentions for future action (Kazantzis et al., 2010; Nylund, 2002; White, 2007). Other writing practices may include collaboratively constructing timelines of significant transitions, challenges, and achievements across a student's educational journey, allowing international students to reflect on their experiences while benefiting from the cognitive and linguistic advantages of writing for second-language learners (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001; Swain, 1998; Webb, 2005; Williams, 2012). While these writing-based practices can support reflection and narrative development, counselors must remain attentive to students' academic workload and emotional capacity to ensure that therapeutic documentation remains supportive rather than burdensome.

Considerations for College Counseling Centers

The integration of narrative therapy into college counseling centers carries several important implications for working with international students. Narrative therapy encourages counselors to approach students with cultural humility and curiosity rather than assumptions about their needs or difficulties (Bernal & Sáez-Santiago, 2006; Farrell & Gibbons, 2019; Prieto-Welch, 2016). By centering students' language, metaphors, and personal narratives, counselors can better understand how cultural values, family expectations, and broader sociocultural contexts influence students' experiences (Akinyela, 2005; Oliver et al., 2011; White, 1995). At the same time, narrative therapy provides a flexible and non-pathologizing framework that aligns with the mission of many counseling centers to promote student development and well-being. Situating concerns within broader life narratives allows counselors to help international students reinterpret distress not as individual deficits but as understandable responses to complex cultural, academic, and sociopolitical pressures, thereby reducing self-blame and validating students' lived experiences (Bernal & Sáez-Santiago, 2006; Prieto-Welch, 2016). Beyond individual counseling sessions, narrative approaches may also inform outreach and prevention efforts within university settings. For example, workshops focused on storytelling, identity development, and cultural transitions can create supportive spaces for international students to share experiences and normalize common adjustment challenges (Farrell & Gibbons, 2019; Mori, 2000; Prieto-Welch, 2016). Counseling centers may also collaborate with international student offices, academic departments, and cultural organizations to develop programs that highlight students' strengths and invite reflection on their educational journeys. These initiatives may help reduce stigma surrounding counseling services, increase awareness of available resources, and foster a stronger sense of belonging within the university community.

In addition, narrative therapy can support the development of strong therapeutic alliances, which are particularly important for international students who may feel hesitant to engage with institutional mental health services. By emphasizing collaboration, shared meaning-making, and attention to sociocultural influences, counselors can create counseling relationships in which students feel respected, heard, and empowered in the therapeutic process (White, 1995, 2007). Narrative approaches may also be integrated with other evidence-informed practices commonly used in counseling centers, such as cognitive-behavioral strategies, mindfulness-based interventions, or skills training (Kazantzis et al., 2010; Langenbahn et al., 2021; Sharf, 2015). Rather than replacing structured interventions, narrative therapy provides a conceptual lens that positions students as active agents capable of selecting and adapting strategies that align with their cultural values and preferred identities (Neimeyer & Stewart, 2000; Payne, 2006). Taken together, these considerations highlight the usefulness of narrative therapy as a culturally responsive framework for counseling international students in higher education settings, offering counselors a flexible approach that recognizes students' diverse experiences while supporting adjustment, resilience, and well-being.

Limitations

Although narrative therapy offers a helpful and comprehensive lens for work with international students, several considerations and limitations merit attention when using this approach. It is important to consider that narrative practices may not align with every student's preference or cultural background. Some students

may come from cultural contexts that emphasize emotional restraint, hierarchical relationships, or directive guidance. For these students, open-ended narrative exploration or externalizing metaphors may initially feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable. Counselors must remain attentive to these cues, adapt their style, and integrate more structured interventions when appropriate (Bernal & Sáez-Santiago, 2006; Sharf, 2015). Recognizing that international students' needs vary according to cultural background, personal values, and prior experiences with help-seeking is essential for ensuring that narrative techniques are implemented in ways that remain responsive, flexible, and culturally appropriate.

The use of therapeutic documentation also requires careful consideration. While written materials can support linguistic processing and reflection, they may amplify stress for students already facing heavy academic demands or second-language fatigue (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001; Khawaja et al., 2018; Poyrazli, 2015; Williams, 2012). Counselors should collaboratively determine whether and how to use writing-based interventions, tailoring the length, frequency, and complexity of documents to students' capacities and preferences. Flexibility and consent are key.

Practical constraints within counseling centers may additionally influence the implementation of narrative therapy. High caseloads and session limits can make it challenging to explore complex narratives in depth. Nevertheless, narrative-informed questions and practices can be incorporated even within brief models. Counselors can select focused narrative interventions, such as a single externalizing conversation or a concise therapeutic letter, that fit within time-limited frameworks while still honoring students' contexts (Bjoroy et al., 2016; Nylund, 2002; White, 2007).

Another consideration involves counselor training and supervision. Effective narrative practice with international students requires not only familiarity with narrative techniques but also ongoing development of multicultural and social justice competencies. Counselors benefit from reflective supervision that explores their own cultural narratives, assumptions about international students, and positions of power within institutional structures. Without such reflection, even well-intentioned narrative work risks reproducing dominant discourses or overlooking important cultural meanings (Bernal & Sáez-Santiago, 2006; Hansen, 2010; White, 1995).

Conclusion

International students' lives are shaped by intersecting cultural, linguistic, academic, relational, and political forces (Mori, 2000; Prieto-Welch, 2016; Zong & Batalova, 2018). Their experiences in higher education are diverse and cannot be reduced to a single story of stress or resilience (Han et al., 2013; Kono et al., 2015; Wei et al., 2008). Narrative therapy offers a conceptually robust and practically flexible framework for college and university counseling centers seeking to respond more effectively to this complexity. Through practices such as externalizing conversations, relative influence questioning, identifying unique outcomes, outsider witnessing, and therapeutic documentation, counselors can support international students in re-authoring their experiences in ways that acknowledge both hardship and strength. By centering students' stories, attending to sociocultural contexts, and collaborating in the development of preferred identities, narrative therapy aligns with multicultural counseling values and promotes agency, dignity, and connection. When applied with cultural humility, linguistic sensitivity, and awareness of institutional realities, narrative therapy can strengthen international students'

engagement with counseling services and support their academic success, personal growth, and overall well-being. Continued research, training, and reflective practice will further expand the potential of narrative therapy as a culturally responsive approach within college and university counseling centers.

References

Akinyela, M. M. (2005). Testimony of hope: African- centered praxis for therapeutic ends. *Journal of Systemic Therapies, 24*(1), 5–18. https://doi.org/10.1521/jsyt.2005.24.1.5

Arthur, N. (2004). *Counseling international students: Clients from around the world*. Plenum.

Aubrey, R. (1991). International students on campus: A challenge for counselors, medical providers, and clinicians. *Smith College Studies in Social Work, 62*(1), 20–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/00377319109516697

Bernal, G., & Sáez-Santiago, E. (2006). Culturally centered psychosocial interventions. *Journal of Community Psychology, 34*(2), 121–132. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20096

Bjoroy, A., Madigan, S., & Nylund, D. (2016). The practice of therapeutic letter writing in narrative therapy. In B. Douglas, R. Woolfe, S. Strawbridge, E. Kasket, & V. Galbraith (Eds.), *The handbook of counselling psychology* (4th ed., pp. 332–348). SAGE Publications.

Bradley, G. (2000). Responding effectively to the mental health needs of international students. *Higher Education, 39*(4), 417–3433. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1003938714191

Buizza, C., Ghilardi, A., & Ferrari, C. (2017). Beliefs and prejudices versus knowledge and awareness: How to cope stigma against mental illness. A college staff e-survey. *Community Mental Health Journal, 53*(5), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-017-0116-9

Chalungsooth, P., & Schneller, G. R. (2011). Development of translation materials to assess international students' mental health concerns. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 39*(3), 180–191. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2011.tb00150.x

Cheung, M., Leung, P., & Cheung, A. (2011). Depressive symptoms and help-seeking behaviors among Korean Americans. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 20*(4), 421–429. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2397.2010.00764.x

DuBose, C. O. (2017). But I don't understand you: One faculty's observations of the challenges facing international healthcare students. *Journal of International Students, 7*(1), 154–159. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i1.250

Farrell, I. C., & Gibbons, M. M. (2019). Using narrative therapy to assist college-age Latino immigrants. *Journal of College Counseling, 22*(1), 83–96. https://doi.org/10.1002/jocc.12116

Frey, M., & Roysircar, G. (2006). South and East Asian international students' perceived prejudice, acculturation, and frequency of help resource utilization. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 34*(4), 208–222. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2006.tb00040.x

Galván, A., Ahmadi, A., Zhao, F., Isadore, K., & O'Shea, A. (2024). Exploring counseling dropout rates among international college students with disabilities. *Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation, 15*(2), 157–174. https://doi.org/10.1080/21501378.2024.2342587

Ginter, E. J., & Glauser, A. (1997, April). *A developmental life skills model: A comprehensive approach for students* [Conference Session]. 22nd Annual University System of Georgia's Learning Support/Developmental Studies Conference, Augusta, Georgia.

Hamamura, T., & Laird, P. G. (2014). The effects of perfectionism and acculturation stress on levels of depression experienced by East Asian International students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 42*(4), 205–217. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2014.00055.x

Han, X., Han, X., Luo, Q., Jacobs, S., & Jean-Baptiste, M. (2013). Report of a mental health survey among Chinese international students at Yale University. *Journal of American College Health, 61*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2012.738267

Hansen, J. T. (2007). Counseling without truth: Toward a neopragmatic foundation for counseling practice. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 85*(4), 423–430. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2007.tb00610.x

Hansen, J. T. (2010). Consequences of the postmodernist vision: Diversity as the guiding value for the counseling profession. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 88*(1), 101–107. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2010.tb00156.x

Hulstijn, J., & Laufer, B. (2001). Some empirical evidence for the involvement load hypothesis in vocabulary acquisition. *Language Learning, 51*(3), 539–558. https://doi.org/10.1111/0023-8333.00164

Hyun, J., Quinn, B., Madon, T., & Lustig, S. (2007). Mental health need, awareness, and use of counseling services among international students. *Journal of American College Health, 56*(2), 109–118. https://doi.org/10.3200/JACH.56.2.109-118

Institute of International Education (IIE) Open Doors. (2024). *Enrollment Trends - IIE Open Doors. IIE Open Doors/Enrollment Trends.* https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/enrollment-trends/

Kangaslampi, S., Garoff, F., & Peltonen, K. (2015). Narrative exposure therapy for immigrant children traumatized by war: Study protocol for a randomized controlled trial of effectiveness and mechanisms of change. *BMC Psychiatry, 15*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-015-0520-z

Kazantzis, N., Whittington, C., & Dattilio, F. (2010). Meta-analysis of homework effects in cognitive and behavioral therapy: A replication and extension. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 17*(2), 144–156. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2850.2010.01204.x

Khawaja, N. G., Chan, S., & Stein, G. (2018). The relationship between second language anxiety and international nursing students stress. *Journal of International Students, 7*(3), 601–620. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i3.290

Kono, K., Eskandarieh, S., Obayashi, Y., Arai, A., & Tamashiro, H. (2015). Mental health and its associated variables among international students at a Japanese university: With special reference to their financial status. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health, 17*(6), 1654–1659. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-014-0100-1

Langenbahn, D., Matsuzawa, Y., Lee, Y. S. C., Fraser, F., Penzien, D. B., Simon, N. M., Lipton, R. B., & Minen, M. T. (2021). Underuse of behavioral treatments for headache: A narrative review examining societal and cultural factors. *Journal of General Internal Medicine, 36*(10), 3103–3112. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-020-06539-x

Lee, E. J., Chan, F., Ditchman, N., & Feigon, M. (2014). Factors influencing Korean international students' preferences for mental health professionals: A conjoint analysis. *Community mental health journal, 50*(1), 104–110. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-013-9594-6

Lee, J. S., Koeske, G. F., & Sales, E. (2004). Social support buffering of acculturative stress: A study of mental health symptoms among Korean international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 28*(5), 399–414. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2004.08.005

Liu M. (2009). Addressing the mental health problems of Chinese international college students in the United States. *Advances in Social Work, 10*(1), 69–86. https://doi.org/10.18060/164

Lui, P. P. (2015). Intergenerational cultural conflict, mental health, and educational outcomes among Asian and Latino/a Americans: Qualitative and meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin, 141*(2), 404–446. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038449

Luyckx, K., Klimstra, T. A., Duriez, B., Van Petegem, S., Beyers, W., Teppers, E., & Goossens, L. (2013). Personal identity processes and self-esteem: Temporal sequences in high school and college students. *Journal of Research in Personality, 47*(2), 159–170. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2012.10.005

Malgady, R. G., & Costantino, G. (2003). Narrative therapy for Hispanic children and adolescents. In A. E. Kazdin & J. R. Weisz (Eds.), *Evidence-based psychotherapies for children and adolescents.* Guilford.

Miller, K. E. (2005). The role of interpreters in psychotherapy with refugees: An exploratory study. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 75*(1), 27–39. https://doi.org/10.1037/0002-9432.75.1.27

Misra, R., Crist, M., & Burant, C. J. (2003). Relationships Among Life Stress, Social Support, Academic Stressors, and Reactions to Stressors of International Students in the United States. *International Journal of Stress Management, 10*(2), 137–157. https://doi.org/10.1037/1072-5245.10.2.137

Mori, S. C. (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 78*(2), 137–144. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2000.tb02571.x

Neimeyer, R. A., & Stewart, A. E. (2000). Constructivist and narrative psychotherapies. In C. R. Snyder & R. E. Ingram (Eds.), *Handbook of psychological change: Psychotherapy processes & practices for the 21st century* (pp. 337–357). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Nilsson, J. E., Berkel, L. A., Flores, L. Y., & Lucas, M. (2004). International students' level of functioning, presenting concerns, referral sources, and length of treatment at a college counseling center. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 19*(2), 49–59. https://doi.org/10.1300/J035v19n02_05

Nylund, D. (2002). Poetic means to anti-anorexic ends. *Journal of Systemic Therapies, 21*(4), 18–34. https://doi.org/10.1521/jsyt.21.4.18.23323

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2023). *What is the profile of internationally mobile students?* In *Education at a glance 2023: OECD indicators*.https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2023_e13bef63-en/full-report/what-is-the-profile-of-internationally-mobile-students_db8ec3b6.html

Oliver, M., Flamez, B., & McNichols, C. (2011). Postmodern applications within Latino/a cultures. *Journal of Professional Counseling, Practice, Theory, & Research, 38*(3), 33–48. https://doi.org/10.1080/15566382.2011.12033875

Paone, T. R., & Malott, K. M. (2008). Using interpreters in mental health counseling: A literature review and recommendations. J*ournal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 36*(3), 130–142. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2008.tb00077.x

Payne, M. (2006). *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors*. Sage.

Pottie-Sherman, Y. (2018). Retaining international students in northeast Ohio: Opportunities and challenges in the "age of Trump". *Geoforum, 96*(1), 32–40. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geofo-rum.2018.07.015

Poyrazli, S. (2015). Psychological symptoms and concerns experienced by international students: Outreach implications for counseling centers. *Journal of International Students, 5*(3), 306–312. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v5i3.424

Poyrazli, S., Kavanaugh, P. R., Baker, A., & Al-Timimi, N. (2004). Social support and demographic correlates of acculturative stress in international students. *Journal of College Counseling, 7*(1), 73–82. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1882.2004.tb00261.x

Prado, A. D. S., Baldofski, S., Kohls, E., & Rummel-Kluge, C. (2024). International and domestic university students' mental health over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany: Comparison between 2020, 2021, and 2022. *PloS one, 19*(2), e0299812. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0299812

Prieto-Welch, S. L. (2016). International student mental health. *New Directions for Student Services, 2016*(156), 53–63. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20191

Sandhu, D. S. (1995). An examination of the psychological needs of the international students: Implication for counselling and psychotherapy. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 17*, 229–239. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01407739

Sandhu, D. S., & Asrabadi, B. R. (1994). Development of an acculturative stress scale for international students: Preliminary findings. *Psychological Reports, 75*(1), 435–448. https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1994.75.1.435

Sentell, T., Shumway, M., & Snowden, L. (2007). Access to mental health treatment by English language proficiency and race/ethnicity. *Journal of General Internal Medicine, 22*(2), 289–293. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-007-0345-7

Sharf, R. S. (2015). *Theories of psychotherapy & counseling: Concepts and cases*. Cengage.

Swain, M. (1998). Focus on form through conscious reflection. In C. Doughty & J. Williams (Eds.), *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition* (pp. 64–81). Cambridge University Press.

Tseng, W. C., & Newton, F. B. (2002). International students' strategies for well-being. *College Student Journal, 36*(4), 591–598. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Fred-Newton/publication/285864451_International_students%27_strategies_for_well-being/links/577e6cce08aeaa6988b0c72f/International-students-strategies-for-well-being.pdf

Webb, S. (2005). Receptive and productive vocabulary learning: The effects of reading and writing on word knowledge. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 27*(1), 33–52. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263105050023

Wei, M., Ku, T.-Y., Russell, D. W., Mallinckrodt, B., & Liao, K. Y.-H. (2008). Moderating effects of three coping strategies and self-esteem on perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms: A minority stress model for Asian international students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 55*(4), 451–462. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012511

White, M. (1995). *Re-authoring lives: Interviews and essays*. Dulwich Centre.

White, M. (2002). Addressing personal failure. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work, 2002*(3), 33–76. https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.661570312326546

White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. Norton and Company.

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to narrative ends*. Norton and Company.

Williams, J. (2012). The potential role (s) of writing in second language development. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 21*(4), 321–331. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2012.09.007

Wolter, J. A., DiLollo, A., & Apel, K. (2006). A narrative therapy approach to counseling: A model for working with adolescents and adults with language-literacy deficits. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 37*(3), 168–177. https://doi.org/10.1044/0161-1461(2006/019

Wu, I. H. C., Bathje, G. J., Kalibatseva, Z., Sung, D., Leong, F. T. L., & Collins-Eaglin, J. (2017). Stigma, mental health, and counseling service use: A person-centered approach to mental health stigma profiles. *Psychological Services, 14*(4), 490–501. https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000165

Yakushko, O., Davidson, M. M., & Sanford-Martens, T. C. (2008). Seeking help in a foreign land: International students' use patterns for a U.S. university counseling center. *Journal of College Counseling, 11*(1), 6–18. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1882.2008.tb00020.x

Yeh, C. J., & Inose, M. (2003). International students' reported English fluency, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness as predictors of acculturative stress. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 16*(1), 15–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/0951507031000114058

Yi, J. K., Giseala, J.-C., & Kishimoto, Y. (2003). Utilization of counseling services by international students. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 30*(4), 333–342.

Zhang, J., & Goodson, P. (2010). Acculturation and psychosocial adjustment of Chinese international students: Examining mediation and moderation effects. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 35*(5), 614–627. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2010.11.004

Zhang, N., & Dixon, D. (2003). Acculturation and attitudes of Asian international students toward seeking psychological help. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 31*(3), 205–222. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2003.tb00544.x

Zong, J., & Batalova, J. (2018). *International students in the United States*. Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/international-students-united-states