



Mental Health Stigma in Thai Society: Cultural Barriers and Psychological Implications

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Received: 04 December 2024; Revised: 10 December 2024; Accepted: 19 December 2024
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Abstract: Mental health stigma in Thai society is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs, traditional values, and Buddhist teachings, creating significant barriers to addressing mental health issues. This study examines the cultural and psychological factors contributing to mental health stigma in Thailand, highlighting the impact of societal norms, family dynamics, and media portrayals. Traditional beliefs often frame mental illness as a consequence of karma or spiritual imbalance, deterring individuals from seeking professional help. The study also explores the historical evolution of mental health care in Thailand, the influence of Buddhism on perceptions, and the intersection of social norms with stigma. Addressing these challenges requires culturally sensitive interventions, community engagement, and systemic changes in policy and education to promote mental health awareness and reduce stigma. By fostering empathy and encouraging open dialogue, this research aims to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals facing mental health challenges in Thailand.

Keywords: Mental health stigma, Thai society, cultural barriers, Buddhist perspectives, psychological implications

1. Introduction

Understanding mental health stigma in Thailand requires looking at the different cultural ideas that affect how society thinks. In Thai culture, perspectives on mental illness are deeply connected to traditional values, including the importance of family reputation, communal harmony, and the significant role of Buddhist teachings. These cultural aspects shape how mental health issues are seen and also determine the social reactions they get. Individuals facing mental health problems navigate these cultural challenges and often face big obstacles in getting help, which can lead to feelings of shame, loneliness, and fear of judgment from others. Therefore, addressing mental health stigma in Thailand needs more than just raising awareness; it needs a careful look at the cultural stories about mental illness, working on both personal and community levels, changing long-held beliefs and promoting a kinder view of mental health well-being.

Common in many societies, mental health stigma shows a mix of negative views, beliefs, and misunderstandings about mental disorders, which greatly affect how people with these issues are treated. This stigma often appears through societal views that encourage ignorance and discrimination, creating a situation where those with mental health problems may feel excluded and hesitant to seek help. In Southeast Asia, studies show a worrying pattern





where high stigma levels link to a low readiness to get professional help, with research revealing a fair understanding of mental disorders but widespread stigmatizing views (Dessauvague et al., [2022](#)). Moreover, the absence of a culturally specific understanding of mental health adds to this stigma, hindering clear discussions about mental health knowledge and allowing misinformation to spread in communities (Fairuziana et al., [2020](#)). Tackling these cultural obstacles is essential for creating a more caring and knowledgeable approach to mental health in Thai society.

In Thai society, mental health problems often get overlooked due to traditional beliefs and cultural stigma, making people hesitant to ask for help. In the past, mental disorders were seen as caused by spiritual or supernatural factors, which makes it hard for the public to understand and worsens misunderstandings about mental illness. Because of this, many people facing mental health issues feel left out of society, which leads to fewer people looking for formal help. Research shows there is a big lack of mental health knowledge in this region, with stigma and cultural views seriously limiting awareness and understanding about mental health (see (Dessauvague et al., [2022](#)). Additionally, while there are local practices and traditional healing methods, these often do not connect well with modern health care, indicating that it is vital to include cultural contexts in mental health education (Fairuziana et al., [2020](#)). Doing so could improve how the public views mental health and motivate people to seek necessary treatment without fear of being judged.

Cultural barriers are very important in keeping mental health stigma alive, especially in places like Thailand, where traditional ideas often cover up medical knowledge. It is important to deal with these barriers so that open talks about mental health can happen, which reduces stigma and helps people get the support they need. In refugee groups, as noted in (Ilham Zaidi, [2024](#)), facing mental health problems along with the stigma of illnesses like Tuberculosis (TB) can make it hard to get healthcare. This stigma not only makes people feel alone but also worsens mental health issues, leading to a cycle of ignoring and misunderstanding. Moreover, (World Health Organization, [2022](#)) points out the value of community involvement in mental health programs, indicating that bringing mental health into regular healthcare can improve how these services are seen. By breaking down cultural barriers through education and community work, society can help achieve better mental health results and lessen stigma.

This research essay looks to explain the various goals related to the strong stigma around mental health in Thai society, a problem that is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and social norms. By examining these cultural obstacles, the essay aims to reveal how they not only worsen the mental health issues people face but also make it harder to find good intervention and treatment options. Social taboos about mental health often create a situation of silence and isolation, which stops open conversations that are crucial for understanding and tackling mental health problems. Furthermore, the research points out how mental health stigma affects overall public health, relating it to findings in similar areas like TB infection in refugee groups, where stigma increases mental distress and makes it tougher to get healthcare (Ilham Zaidi, [2024](#)). This study ultimately hopes to promote solutions that can raise awareness and lessen stigma, in line with current public health objectives (Nor Faiza Mohd. Tohit et al., [2024](#)).

2. Historical Context of Mental Health in Thailand

The way mental health care has changed in Thailand shows a larger story about society and culture, often mixed with spiritual and religious ideas. In the past, mental health problems were seen as signs of spiritual problems, leading to treatments that relied on rituals and religious practices instead of scientific methods. This viewpoint was supported by Buddhism, which views mental issues as results of karma and being morally wrong. However, in the late





20th century, there was a big change as globalization and better education began to challenge these old beliefs. The arrival of Western mental health practices led to the creation of official mental health services; at the same time, more people in Thailand started to recognize the biological causes of mental disorders. Even with these improvements, leftover stigma from past views still makes it hard for the public to accept modern mental health care.

Traditional beliefs and practices regarding mental health

In Thai culture, traditional views and actions greatly influence how mental health is seen, creating stigma and confusion. Many people think mental health issues are caused by spiritual or supernatural factors, which can distract from biological or psychological reasons. This focus on cultural beliefs often leads to a hesitance to get professional help; instead, individuals may turn to alternative methods, such as rituals or advice from local healers, rather than seeking help from trained mental health experts. The World Mental Health Report 2022 points out that these cultural obstacles have serious effects, leading to significant gaps in treatment and a lack of mental health services, particularly in primary care settings (World Health Organization, [2022](#)). Also, factors like social conditions and low awareness of mental health issues make it hard to accept modern mental health practices (Gergana Petrova et al., [2016](#)). As a result, these long-standing beliefs keep an environment where stigma flourishes, which ultimately obstructs effective mental health support and interventions.

Evolution of mental health care in Thailand

The change in mental health care in Thailand has seen important shifts, influenced by cultural stigmas and changing societal needs. Traditionally based in healing practices, the view of mental health has started to shift towards a more medical approach shaped by global discussions on mental health. This change shows a growing awareness of mental health's importance, but the old stigma is still a big issue. For example, the experiences of second-generation Filipino Americans show similar issues of cultural stress and pressures to fit in, emphasizing the common struggle of managing identity and mental health (Krista Parker, [2020](#)). Additionally, military groups around the world highlight the need to support mental well-being and resilience, similar to Thailand's focus on including mental health in wider health programs (Subedar F Antony Fernandes et al., [2024](#)). In conclusion, while progress has been achieved, continued work to reduce the stigma around mental health discussions is essential for creating a supportive environment in Thai society.

Influence of Buddhism on mental health perceptions

Buddhism's practices and teachings have greatly influenced how mental health is viewed in Thai society, blending spiritual health with psychological well-being. A key idea in Buddhist thought is suffering (dukkha) and the recognition that mental challenges are part of being human. This belief system promotes accepting one's thoughts and feelings, encouraging resilience and emotional control as ways to deal with mental pain. However, while Buddhism supports self-reflection and awareness, it can also create stigma by seeing mental illness as a result of karma. This can make some people see their mental health issues as personal shortcomings instead of health problems. This mix creates a complex situation for mental health discussions in Thailand, where traditional beliefs exist alongside changing psychological views, often making it harder for people to seek professional help. In the end, a culturally aware approach is needed to connect these ideas and support kinder perspectives on mental health.

Historical events shaping current attitudes towards mental illness



To understand modern views on mental illness in Thailand, it is important to look at historical events that shaped how society thinks. The effects of long wars, like the Vietnam War and ongoing conflicts in nearby areas, have influenced how trauma and mental health are viewed by people in Thailand. These historical situations often show deep-rooted stigma, as seen with the Hill tribes of Myanmar, who deal with the mental impacts of war and displacement, resulting in cycles of domestic violence, substance abuse, and social isolation (Kaiser et al., 2020). Additionally, recent research shows some awareness of mental disorders among people in Southeast Asia but indicates that negative views still exist that hinder seeking help, especially among certain groups, like men and STEM students (Dessauvague et al., 2022). Overall, these historical influences are key to continuing mental health stigma, making it essential to create focused interventions and awareness programs.

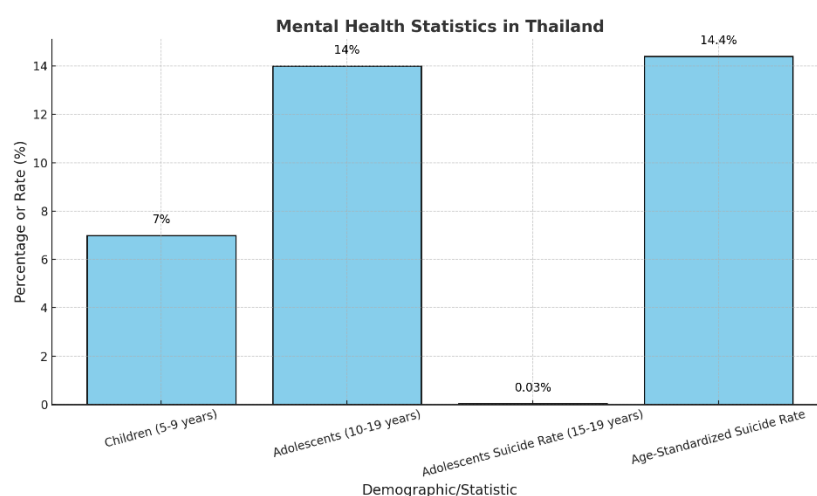


Figure 1: Mental Health Statistics in Thailand

Source: UNICEF, Thailand; BMC Psychiatry, The Nation Thailand

3. Cultural Barriers to Mental Health Awareness

The complex link between cultural norms and awareness of mental health shows big obstacles that hinder good communication and understanding in Thai society. Cultural views on mental illness often continue stigma and prevent people from recognizing their mental health needs, which results in cases not being reported and a lack of seeking professional help. A thorough review found that mental health knowledge is significantly lower in some groups in Southeast Asia, like Thailand, where high rates of stigmatizing views are linked to a hesitation to get professional treatment (Fairuziana et al., 2020). Furthermore, these cultural ideas may strengthen traditional beliefs about mental disorders, minimizing the importance of healthcare practices based on evidence (Dessauvague et al., 2022). Thus, tackling these obstacles requires mental health promotion strategies that are sensitive to culture and align with local beliefs and practices, which will help create a more supportive space for individuals facing mental health issues in Thai society.

Role of family and community in mental health perceptions

When looking at how family and community influence each other, it is clear that both are important in shaping views on mental health in Thai society. Families are often the main place where ideas about mental health are created and supported, with stigma often coming from family attitudes. This stigma that people carry can make those with mental health issues feel ashamed and alone, which leads to more silence and confusion. At the same time, community views on mental health are shaped by cultural stories and shared experiences that



can support or dispute these family ideas. Community stigma can make it hard to seek help, making it even tougher for those who need it. In the end, the mix of family and community views creates a unified understanding of mental health, highlighting the need for a complete approach to reducing stigma in both areas.

Impact of social norms and expectations

In Thai society, the expectations about personal behavior and mental health greatly affect people's readiness to seek help and talk about their psychological pain. The strong social norms, which emphasize harmony and group cohesion, create a situation where showing vulnerability is often seen as a weakness instead of a real issue. This stigma appears in many ways, leading to feelings of shame in those with mental health problems, which often stops them from sharing their experiences or getting help. People often deal with a tricky situation where following societal rules is more important than their own well-being, reinforcing negative views about mental health. As a result, the effects of these norms go beyond personal suffering, creating a cycle of misunderstanding and bias that makes open discussions about mental health in Thailand even harder. It is important to address these social beliefs to create a more supportive environment that encourages psychological recovery and openness.

Language and communication barriers in discussing mental health

In Thai society, language is very important in how people think and talk about mental health. When the words used for mental illness are not clear or too influenced by culture, people have a hard time sharing their feelings or asking for help. This problem with communication makes the stigma around mental health worse, as many may use indirect ways to talk about it, which keeps societal taboos alive. Additionally, the mix of local dialects and traditional views makes it difficult for mental health talks to be respected or understood correctly. Because of this, many might be afraid of being judged and choose to stay quiet instead of being open. To improve conversations about mental health, it is crucial to create language tools that are sensitive to culture. This can help encourage open discussions and build understanding and kindness in the community.

Influence of media representations on public perception

Media representations are important for shaping how the public sees mental health. They often spread stigma and misunderstanding. In Thailand, traditional beliefs mix with modern media stories, and how mental illness is shown can greatly affect how society views and reacts to it. Good representations can help break down stereotypes, leading to more empathy and better understanding of mental health issues. On the other hand, bad portrayals can increase fear and discrimination, causing those affected to be pushed to the sidelines. This shows the need for careful examination of media content to see how it affects public views, especially in cultures where mental illness is a big stigma. The effects of these portrayals influence daily life, impacting how people seek treatment and overall mental health outcomes in the community. Therefore, it is essential to tackle media narratives to fight stigma and encourage a more understanding and caring society.

4. Psychological Implications of Stigma

The psychology of stigma in Thai society shows clear effects, creating big hurdles to people getting mental health care and feeling good overall. People with mental health problems who deal with stigma might feel socially cut off, which can make their depression and anxiety worse. Studies show that stigma can make people not stick to their treatment plans, leading to worse health and higher death rates for those affected (Ilham Zaidi, [2024](#)). This issue is made





worse by a lack of understanding about mental health, which is common in many cultures, including Thailand. Research on attitudes toward mental illness among college students in Vietnam and Cambodia found many not understanding mental health issues and looking down on those affected, which leads to less desire to seek help (Dessauvague et al., [2022](#)). Tackling these psychological effects needs a broad approach, mixing stigma reduction with better mental health education to create a supportive space that promotes open conversations and sticking to treatment.

Effects of stigma on individuals seeking help

The mix of stigma and mental health makes it hard for people to get the help they need, especially in Thai society. Cultural beliefs often support negative views about mental health, leading to the idea that talking about personal problems is not acceptable. This unwillingness to have open conversations leads to ignorance and strengthens the stigma around mental illness, as seen in studies about sexual and reproductive health taboos (Nor Faiza Mohd. Tohit et al., [2024](#)). Furthermore, the stigma surrounding depression specifically affects young people's choices to seek help; research shows a strong negative link between stigma and the desire to get counseling, worsened by a troubling lack of understanding about depression among young men (Nur Dhaniah Zainul Ikram et al., [2024](#)). Because of this stigma, many people struggle to find important psychological support, making their issues worse. It is crucial to deal with these cultural views to create a more supportive atmosphere for mental health recovery.

Relationship between stigma and mental health outcomes

There is a complicated relationship between stigma and mental health results, greatly affecting people's readiness to get help and follow treatment plans. In Thai culture, stigma can harm self-esteem and worsen mental health problems, shown by studies that stress how societal views can negatively impact emotional health. For example, research on university teachers showed that self-esteem is a key factor in predicting depression and anxiety (Ratanasiripong et al., [2024](#)). Moreover, cultural beliefs about mental illness often cause people to hide their problems, leading to ongoing pain, loneliness, and poor coping strategies (Gergana Petrova et al., [2022](#)). As a result, the stigma related to mental health keeps people from getting necessary services and lowers their overall quality of life, highlighting the urgent need for broad interventions that address these issues in Thai culture.

Impact of stigma on social relationships and support systems

Stigmatization related to mental health harms the growth and upkeep of strong social ties and support systems. The widespread nature of this stigma often makes people take in negative images, which leads to social withdrawal and isolation. This withdrawal worsens loneliness and reduces the essential emotional and practical support from friends, family, and the community. Moreover, the fear of being judged or rejected may prevent people from asking for help, causing them to stay in a cycle of silence and pain. In Thai society, which values connections among people, stigma can be especially harmful because it disrupts community ties and affects overall wellbeing. Thus, the stigma surrounding mental health issues results not only in personal distress but also poses a broader societal problem, highlighting the need for a cultural shift in attitudes towards mental health to create more supportive environments.

Long-term psychological effects of living with stigma

Feeling stigma can strongly change a person's mental state, causing lasting effects that touch many areas of their life. Those with mental health issues, especially in cultures with deep-seated stigma, may deal with ongoing shame and isolation, which can worsen their situation.





For example, refugees in India with Tuberculosis (TB) not only have to manage health problems but also face social discrimination that marks them as outsiders. This stigmatization can increase chances of mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD, as stated in (Ilham Zaidi, [2024](#)). Likewise, people with depression in Thailand often face social obstacles that block their healing, as shown in community occupational therapy research (Supaluck Phadsri et al., 2021). In the end, the combined impact of mental health stigma creates a harmful cycle, where social isolation and mental distress support one another, creating a need for quick action that tackles both stigma and its psychological effects.

5. Conclusion

The effects of mental health stigma in Thai society show an important link between cultural beliefs and personal experiences with mental health. This study has found how traditional values impact views on mental illness, often resulting in negative outcomes for people who want help. Deeply held beliefs about mental health, along with social norms that stress toughness and independence, form significant obstacles to recognizing and treating mental health issues. The research shows that these obstacles not only make it hard to get mental health services but also increase the loneliness and pain of those affected. Tackling mental health stigma in Thailand needs a broad strategy that includes education, community involvement, and changes in policy to build a more accepting and understanding society. Future initiatives should focus on encouraging open conversations and empathy, ultimately viewing mental health as a key part of overall health, which will help lessen stigma and improve individual outcomes.

The research shows important insights into the cultural barriers related to mental health stigma in Thai society. This stigma is not just a personal issue; it is a deeper problem tied to social and cultural norms. Key findings indicate that people with mental health problems often face discrimination and social isolation, which makes their situations worse. Traditional beliefs and values play a big role in why many do not seek help, as they worry about how society will react. Additionally, looking at gender biases in education reveals more challenges, as women face unique difficulties that worsen their mental health issues. Effective solutions need to take a broad approach, targeting not just individual support but also engaging the community and driving systemic change. Tackling these deep-seated attitudes is crucial to create an environment that encourages understanding and support for mental health, paving the way for important social reform.

To reduce stigma about mental health in Thailand, a varied approach is important. First, education is key to changing how people think; mental health topics should be included in school programs, giving accurate facts and helping young people understand better. Also, community programs can help people talk about mental health, making open discussions possible and cutting down on wrong ideas that keep stigma alive. These programs should get help from mental health experts, local leaders, and well-known figures, making sure they fit the culture and have a wider effect. Additionally, using media to share personal stories can make mental health issues relatable, helping people express sympathy for those struggling. By focusing on these ideas, Thai society can create a more welcoming environment that recognizes mental health issues and assists individuals in their recovery process.

Cultural sensitivity is very important for mental health treatments, especially in places with special cultural rules and taboos, like Thailand. Knowing the cultural views that influence how people see mental health is key to dealing with the stigma tied to mental disorders. For instance, cultural taboos about mental health can make people feel more alone and stop them from asking for help. Studies show that groups who are often left out, like refugees in India,



might have worse mental health problems due to social stigma that belittles their experiences. In the same way, the review *Forbidden Conversations* points out that strong cultural norms can stop people from having open talks about sexual and reproductive health, which can significantly affect mental health. Therefore, mental health programs that include cultural sensitivity can build trust, encourage involvement, and lead to better treatment results, helping to reduce stigma and improve access to mental health care.

Further look into mental health stigma in Thailand needs to focus on a mixed approach that includes cultural, political, and economic views. Future studies might look at how Thai cultural beliefs connect with people's economic status, as this mix could strongly shape attitudes and actions related to stigma. Additionally, qualitative research with detailed interviews from people of various backgrounds could reveal personal stories that show the real experiences of stigma, helping researchers understand its forms and impacts better. Studying the impact of digital media in discussions about mental health could also provide useful insights, especially in how these platforms might support or oppose existing stigma. In the end, a broad and cross-disciplinary approach will be crucial for creating effective strategies and policies to reduce stigma and create a more supportive space for those with mental health challenges in Thailand.

Originality & Body of Knowledge

Originality: This paper offers a distinctive exploration of the deep-rooted cultural barriers contributing to mental health stigma in Thai society. Unlike previous research that primarily examines mental health stigma from a global perspective, this study uniquely contextualizes the issue within Thailand's cultural and historical framework. By analyzing the influence of Buddhist teachings, traditional beliefs, and societal norms, the paper reveals the intricate ways these elements perpetuate stigma and hinder access to mental health care. The originality lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining cultural anthropology, psychology, and public health to propose culturally sensitive strategies for reducing stigma and improving mental health outcomes in Thailand.

Body of Knowledge: This study significantly enhances the discourse on mental health stigma by addressing the cultural, social, and psychological dimensions specific to Thai society. It expands the body of knowledge by examining the historical evolution of mental health perceptions, the impact of Buddhist perspectives on stigma, and the role of media and language in shaping public attitudes. The paper also highlights the interplay between family dynamics, community norms, and social expectations in perpetuating stigma. By providing actionable recommendations—such as integrating mental health education into schools, promoting community engagement, and leveraging media for awareness campaigns—the research offers practical frameworks for addressing stigma at both individual and societal levels. This comprehensive analysis makes the study a valuable resource for policymakers, mental health professionals, and educators working to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for mental health in Thailand.

Funding: This study did not receive financial support from any public or private agencies or organizations.

Declarations

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical treatment of experimental subjects (animals & human): The research was conducted in compliance with the principles of the Helsinki Declaration regarding human subjects, so formal ethical approval was not required.



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