

The Impact of an Embodied Narrative Therapy Integrating Zhuang Ethnic Culture on Post-Traumatic Meaning in Life among the General Population with Mild to Moderate Distress

Yuan Huixiu^{1,a}, Wang Zeguang^{2,b,*}, Nong Fuyi^{1,c}, Wang Dongna^{1,d}

¹School of Education, Guangxi University of Foreign Languages, Nanning, China

²School of Transportation, Guangxi Vocational and Technical College of Communications, Nanning, China

^a398538784@qq.com, ^brenka7878@163.com, ^c919457184@qq.com, ^d965014872@qq.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: This study aims to explore the intervention efficacy of an embodied narrative therapy integrating Zhuang ethnic cultural elements on alleviating trauma response and enhancing the sense of meaning in life for individuals with mild to moderate distress. A single-group pre-post intervention design was employed. Forty participants meeting the inclusion criteria for mild to moderate distress received a standardized 90-minute culturally integrated embodied narrative intervention. The Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R) and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) were used as assessment tools. Results showed: after the intervention, participants' total IES-R scores decreased significantly ($p < 0.001$), while their total MLQ scores and scores on both the "Presence of Meaning" and "Search for Meaning" subscales increased significantly ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that the embodied narrative therapy integrated with Zhuang culture can effectively alleviate trauma reactions and significantly enhance the sense of meaning in life for individuals with mild to moderate distress. It provides an operable, replicable, and promotable localized, culturally friendly intervention strategy for post-traumatic psychological adaptation and meaning reconstruction.

Keywords: Embodied Narrative Therapy; Zhuang Culture; Meaning in Life; Trauma Response

1. Introduction

Traumatic events are common among the general population. Long-term unaddressed traumatic experiences can easily lead to a series of psychological issues such as emotional numbness, cognitive avoidance, loss of meaning in life, and reduced self-worth. Traditional psychological interventions often focus on reducing trauma symptoms but neglect post-traumatic meaning reconstruction, value reorientation, and cultural identity. Cultural factors play an irreplaceable protective role in trauma recovery^[1]. The Zhuang ethnic group, as the largest minority in China, has a culture characterized by strong connection, emphasis on empathy, harmony, and the life force. Cultural symbols such as Zhuang brocade, mythology, folk songs, and rituals contain rich healing value^[2]. However, standardized intervention protocols that integrate indigenous Zhuang culture with modern embodied and meaning-based therapies are still scarce.

Embodied narrative therapy emphasizes integrating traumatic experiences through bodily movement, emotional expression, and story reconstruction to achieve trauma integration and self-identity repair^[3]. This study deeply integrates Zhuang cultural symbols, values, and ritual structures with embodied narrative therapy, constructing a localized, culturally sensitive, brief, and effective intervention model. It aims to examine its intervention effects on trauma response and sense of meaning in life for individuals with mild to moderate distress^[4]. This enriches China's trauma psychological intervention system in ethnic regions and provides empirical evidence for culturally friendly psychological services.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

This study aimed to explore intervention effects for the general population. Therefore, participants were limited to: adults aged 18-45, without a professional background in psychology/psychiatry, who self-reported experiencing psychological distress due to events such as work frustration, interpersonal conflicts, life changes, or emotional troubles within the past 1-3 months^[5]. All participants needed to meet the following inclusion and exclusion criteria, screened by researchers holding National Level 2 or 3 Psychological Counselor certificates. Inclusion Criteria: Age 18-45 years; A score of 20-35 on the Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R) (indicating mild to moderate distress); A total score ≤ 50 on the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ); Screened by the Mini-International Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI) brief version, with no major mental disorders, severe physical illnesses, or cognitive impairments; Not currently receiving professional psychotherapy or psychiatric medication; Voluntary participation and signed informed consent

A convenience sampling method was used in this study. A total of 65 volunteers were recruited from communities, business parks and universities in a southern city. After screening, 40 adults who met all criteria were finally included^[6].

2.2. Research Design

This study employed a single-group pre-post design. All eligible participants received a single, standardized, 90-minute embodied narrative therapy intervention integrating Zhuang culture (centered on Zhuang brocade). Eligible participants (N=40) completed baseline assessments (IES-R, MLQ) at time T0, immediately received the standardized intervention, and completed post-tests (same scales) at time T1 after the intervention. Paired-sample t-tests were used to compare score differences between T0 and T1 to verify intervention effects.

2.3. Research Tools

2.3.1. Chinese Version of the Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R)

Consists of 22 items, scored on a 0-4 scale, with a total score range of 0-88^[7]. A score of 20-35 indicates mild to moderate subjective distress^[11]. This scale was used in this study to assess participants' subjective distress related to traumatic events, with a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.92, indicating good reliability^[8].

2.3.2. Chinese Version of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)

Consists of 20 items, containing two subscales: "Presence of Meaning" and "Search for Meaning." It uses a 1-7 scale, with a total score range of 20-140^[9]. Higher scores indicate a higher level of meaning in life. This scale is widely used in domestic populations. In this study, the total scale's Cronbach's α coefficient was 0.85^[10].

2.3.3. Mini-International Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI) Brief Version

This procedure is used for the initial mental disorder screening of participants. It is conducted via brief oral interviews by trained researchers to exclude individuals with major mental disorders, ensuring participant safety and the general applicability of the intervention^[11].

2.3.4. Intervention Materials

Zhuang brocade pattern patches, collage baseboards, glue sticks, embodied relaxation guidance scripts, standardized intervention manual, a quiet and independent intervention room (approx. 10 m²), warm lighting, soothing background music^[12].

2.4. Intervention Protocol

The intervention was delivered by two certified psychological counselors who had completed specialized training in this therapy to ensure standardization. Each intervention was conducted one-on-one, lasting 90 minutes, using plain language throughout, adhering to the principles of "non-judgment, more empathy, emphasis on experience, light guidance." The intervention was divided into three stages:

Phase One involved embodied relaxation and emotional priming (0-20 minutes). Through diaphragmatic breathing and three sets of basic stretching movements, participants were guided to focus on bodily sensations, lower psychological defenses, and establish a safe atmosphere for emotional expression^[13].

Phase Two focused on the embodied expression and narrative externalization of trauma (20-50 minutes). Participants were guided to create a personalized emotional movement based on the core emotion of their traumatic experience^[14]. The repetition of this movement facilitated the externalization of emotion, followed by integration of the body and mind with language through brief verbal articulation.

Phase Three comprised Zhuang brocade collage and meaning reconstruction (50-90 minutes). By incorporating the cultural significance and symbolic meanings of Zhuang brocade patterns, participants were guided to identify and extract positive resources from their trauma. Through the creative process of collage, their internal insights were materialized. The process culminated in the formulation of a "new meaning declaration" and the repetition of the personalized emotional movement, thereby achieving a holistic integration of meaning. Participants were allowed to retain their artwork.

2.5. Research Procedure and Data Collection

Assessments were completed at two time points: T0 (pre-intervention): completing IES-R and MLQ; T1 (immediately post-intervention): completing IES-R and MLQ again. All questionnaires used standardized instructions and were completed in a uniform environment. 40 valid questionnaires were collected, with a 100% validity rate^[15].

2.6. Data Processing and Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. First, descriptive statistics were conducted to calculate participants' demographic data, trauma types, mean scores, and standard deviations. Second, paired-sample t-tests were used to compare differences in IES-R total scores, MLQ total scores, and its two subscale scores before and after the intervention, verifying the intervention effect of the culturally integrated embodied narrative therapy^[16]. The significance level was set at $\alpha=0.05$, with $P<0.05$ considered statistically significant and $p<0.001$ considered extremely statistically significant.

2.7. Ethics Statement

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

3. Results

3.1. Trauma Characteristics of Participants

This study included 40 adult participants from the general population. The distribution of their demographic and trauma-related characteristics aligned with the profile of mild to moderate everyday distress in the general population. Specific results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Demographic and Trauma-Related Characteristics of Participants

Gender	Age (years)	Education	Occupation	Trauma Type	Trauma Duration (months)
Female:23 (57.50%) Male:17 (42.50%)	28.62±6.15	College/Associate or below: 15 (37.50%) Bachelor or above:25(62.50%)	Corporate Employee:16 (40.00%) Self-employed:9(22.5 0%)Student:7(17.50 %) Other: 8 (20.00%)	Work Frustration: 14 (35.00%) Interpersonal Conflict:11 (27.50%) Emotional Distress:10 (25.00%) Life Change: 5 (12.50%)	1.88±0.63

3.2. Descriptive Statistics of Scale Scores before and after Intervention

Participants' total IES-R scores were significantly lower after the intervention compared to before, while their total MLQ scores and scores on both the "Search for Meaning" and "Presence of Meaning" subscales were significantly higher. Specific results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Participants' Scale Scores before and after Intervention

<i>Scale Indicator</i>	<i>Pre-intervention (T0)</i>	<i>Post-intervention (T1)</i>
<i>IES-R Total Score</i>	<i>28.72±4.05</i>	<i>19.15±3.62</i>
<i>MLQ Total Score</i>	<i>42.60±3.90</i>	<i>58.25±4.30</i>
<i>MLQ-Search for Meaning</i>	<i>21.35±1.90</i>	<i>28.50±2.12</i>
<i>MLQ-Presence of Meaning</i>	<i>21.25±2.08</i>	<i>29.75±2.33</i>

3.3. Paired-Sample t-Tests of Scale Scores before and After Intervention

Results of the paired-sample t-tests showed that participants' total IES-R scores were significantly lower after the intervention than before, while their total MLQ scores and scores on both the "Search for Meaning" and "Presence of Meaning" subscales were significantly higher after the intervention (all $p < 0.001$). The research hypothesis was fully validated. Specific results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Paired-Sample t-Test Results of Participants' Scale Scores before and after Intervention

<i>Scale Indicator</i>	<i>Pre-intervention (M±SD)</i>	<i>Post-intervention (M±SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
<i>IES-R Total Score</i>	<i>28.72±4.05</i>	<i>19.15±3.62</i>	<i>12.586</i>	<i><0.001**</i>
<i>MLQ Total Score</i>	<i>42.60±3.90</i>	<i>58.25±4.30</i>	<i>14.265</i>	<i><0.001**</i>
<i>MLQ-Search for Meaning</i>	<i>21.35±1.90</i>	<i>28.50±2.12</i>	<i>11.892</i>	<i><0.001**</i>
<i>MLQ-Presence of Meaning</i>	<i>21.25±2.08</i>	<i>29.75± 2.33</i>	<i>12.158</i>	<i><0.001**</i>

**Note: **P<0.001*

4. Discussion

4.1. Validation of the Intervention Effect of Embodied Narrative Therapy Integrating Zhuang Culture

The results of this study fully validated the research hypothesis. A 90-minute embodied narrative therapy integrating Zhuang culture, centered on Zhuang brocade, can significantly enhance the sense of meaning in life and significantly reduce the level of subjective distress for the general population after mild to moderate trauma. In terms of score changes, participants' average IES-R total score decreased by approximately 9.57 points, and the average MLQ total score increased by approximately 15.65 points, with all dimensions showing significant improvement. This indicates that the therapy is not merely emotional catharsis but achieves deep psychological adaptation for mild to moderate trauma in the general population from both dimensions of externalizing traumatic experiences and reconstructing meaning in life^[11]. It aligns with the psychological adaptation needs of the general population for mild to moderate trauma and serves as an effective localized intervention strategy suitable for this group.

4.2. Core Reasons for the Significant Intervention Effect

4.2.1. Embodied Expression Effectively Breaks the "Emotional Expression Barrier" in the General Population

The general population typically lacks professional psychological knowledge, finds it difficult to accurately describe traumatic emotions, and is prone to expressive avoidance due to psychological defenses. The basic embodied movements used in this study are simple, barrier-free, and non-verbal, allowing individuals to complete bodily expression of emotions without relying on complex language, enabling the safe release of negative emotions^[17]. Building on this, creating a "personalized emotional movement" strengthens the connection between the individual and internal emotions, gradually transitioning to brief narration. This effectively reduces the secondary pressure and defensive reactions associated with verbal expression, better aligning with the emotional expression styles and psychological characteristics of the general population.

4.2.2. Integration of Zhuang Brocade Culture Reduces Intervention Resistance and Strengthens Meaning Reconstruction Internalization

Zhuang brocade, as a classic intangible cultural symbol of the Zhuang ethnicity, possesses high local familiarity, cultural affinity, and positive symbolic meaning^[18]. Compared to unfamiliar professional psychological intervention formats, the cultural experiential intervention of Zhuang brocade collage can significantly reduce individuals' sense of unfamiliarity and resistance to psychological intervention, enhancing participation and engagement. Simultaneously, the hands-on operation, concrete creation, and immersive experience of Zhuang brocade collage transform the abstract process of meaning in life reconstruction into a tangible, operable, and visible creative process^[19]. This helps individuals naturally uncover internal positive resources, making meaning reconstruction easier to accept and internalize. The cultural connotations of harmony, resilience, and fulfillment carried by Zhuang brocade patterns also provide positive cultural suggestions, further reinforcing cognitive restructuring and meaning construction effects.

4.2.3. Intervention Design Balances Professionalism and General Applicability

The intervention duration was set at 90 minutes, sufficiently covering the standardized intervention process of stabilization-embodied expression-narrative organization-meaning reconstruction to ensure professional quality, while not imposing an excessive time burden on the general population, aligning with everyday mental health service scenarios. The entire intervention avoids professional terminology, has a clear procedure, uses easily obtainable materials, and has low venue requirements^[20]. It maximizes the reduction of implementation difficulty while retaining the core mechanisms of embodied narrative therapy, achieving a balance between clinical professionalism and community general applicability, laying a foundation for subsequent scaled-up promotion.

4.3. Practical Implications of This Study for Mental Health Services for the General Population

Provides an easily promotable localized intervention strategy. The therapy has standardized procedures, readily available tools, and simple operation, requiring no professional knowledge from participants. It can be conducted in ordinary settings such as communities, resident activity centers, and psychological service stations in commercial districts, making it suitable for large-scale promotion among the general population, filling the gap in localized interventions for mild to moderate trauma in this group^[21]. It offers new ideas for the localization of psychological interventions. Integrating indigenous Zhuang intangible cultural heritage with modern embodied narrative therapy preserves the core of the psychological intervention technique while incorporating local cultural characteristics. Enriches the forms and content of mental health services. It breaks the limitations of traditional mental health services that are "purely verbal and heavily professional," integrating embodied movement, handicraft creation, and cultural experience^[22]. This makes mental health services more engaging and participatory, increasing the willingness of the general population to actively participate, helping to promote the popularization and accessibility of mental health services in China.

4.4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has three main limitations: first, it only assessed immediate effects and did not conduct follow-up evaluations, preventing the verification of the long-term stability of the intervention; second, convenience sampling was used, with the sample primarily consisting of individuals aged 20–45 in southern cities, limiting its representativeness and generalizability; third, only a quantitative design was employed, lacking qualitative data, making it difficult to provide an in-depth explanation of the underlying mechanisms. Future research could advance in four directions: conducting follow-up studies at 1-month and 3-month intervals to test the durability of the effects; expanding the geographical, age, and occupational range of the sample to enhance representativeness; adopting a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data to analyze individual experiences and cultural mechanisms in depth^[23]; and exploring multicultural integration models to develop a more universally applicable localized psychological intervention system.

5. Conclusion

This study employed a single-group pre-post cross-sectional experimental design with 40 adults aged 18-45 experiencing mild to moderate everyday distress to explore the intervention effect of Zhuang culture-integrated embodied narrative therapy centered on Zhuang brocade on post-traumatic

meaning in life. The results indicate: First, the Zhuang culture-integrated embodied narrative therapy centered on Zhuang brocade can significantly enhance the sense of meaning in life (search for meaning, presence of meaning) and significantly reduce the level of subjective distress for the general population after mild to moderate trauma, demonstrating stable and reliable immediate intervention effects. Second, this therapy combines the low threshold of embodied expression with the local adaptability of Zhuang brocade culture. It both reduces emotional expression resistance through bodily movement and enhances the acceptability of meaning reconstruction through cultural symbols, forming an integrated intervention pathway of "bodily release - narrative organization - cultural empowerment." Third, this therapy has standardized procedures, simple operation, and easily obtainable materials, balancing professionalism and general applicability. It is suitable for promotion in community, corporate, campus, and public service settings and can serve as a localized, accessible intervention strategy for populations with mild to moderate everyday distress. In summary, this study provides an operable, replicable, and promotable practical pathway for the psychological adaptation of the general population to mild to moderate everyday trauma, enriches research on the integration of ethnic culture with embodied narrative therapy, and holds significant theoretical and practical value for promoting the localization and popularization of grassroots mental health services.

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