Effect of religious context in the outcomes of psychotherapeutic interventions in Eastern and Non-Judeo-Christian populations: A rapid review

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Introduction

Mindfulness-based therapies and meditative interventions have become increasingly prevalent in the field of mental health and in psychotherapeutic treatments. Despite the growing enthusiasm surrounding these seemingly novel ideas and exercises in the Western medical paradigm, the ancient religions and schools of thought in which they were originally formed remain of less interest in the existing literature. While secularisation of the spiritual basis behind these practices may serve those of the materialist, individualist cultures that are often studied in scientific papers, this benefit may be inversely a detriment to those of the underserved cultures and communities, of which collectively make up the majority of the global population. The question that remains is how to assess the value of ontological stripping in these populations that frequently get overlooked in the frameworks of institutional health.

In the search for universal treatments, is a degree of effectiveness lost for its originally intended population?

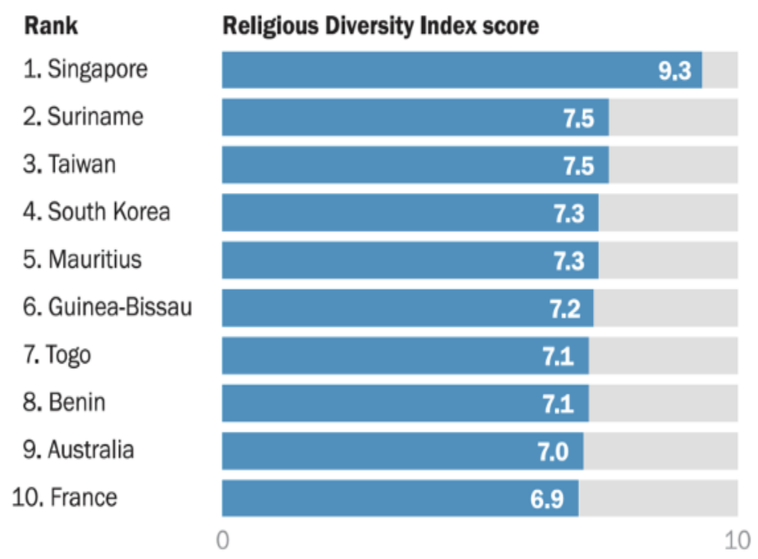


Figure 1: The Australian demographic is changing, and it is pertinent for mental health service to reflect that with proper preparations and adjustments in training and administration. With a higher proportion of Australia's population born overseas, and the country's presence in the Asia Pacific, a region host to a majority Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and 'other' religions, this religiously diverse country has a demand for expanding the cultures we consider when partaking in research (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2026; Hackett et al., 2025; Tong, 2026)

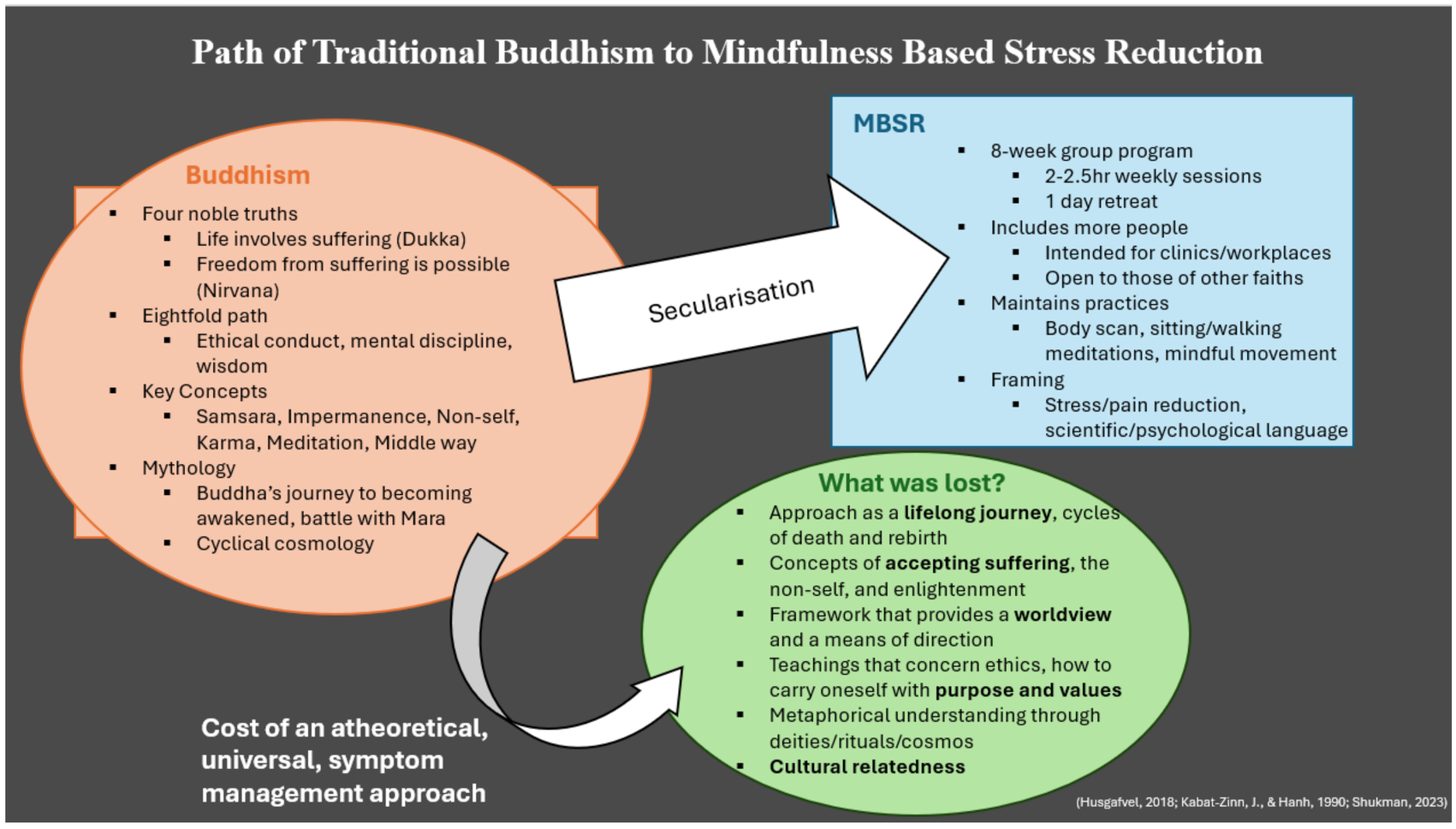


Figure 2: While ontological stripping of proven techniques allows for greater access to those outside of the given culture, it may be a limiting factor to those who would respond to those original teachings. In seeking for benefit to all, there is a risk of compromising the effectiveness for those within the faith. Through medicalisation, an existential teaching of understanding one's purpose in life becomes a heavily systematised protocol aimed for immediate relief. This contradiction between acceptance of suffering and stress reduction may be incompatible for Buddhist clients. Our research aims to seek the role ontology plays in these populations.

Results

BIG FINDINGS… poor studies

22 studies were included in the review. Among these the average sample size was 74 participants. The most common country in the studies was Iran, with a majority of the religious interventions incorporating ideas of Islamic faith. 18 of the 22 studies used religious interventions as the experimental group, making comparison between the two intervention styles difficult. 6 studies used waitlist or no intervention as the control which may produce less interpretable results. Heterogeneity was present in participants, outcomes, interventions, and methods.

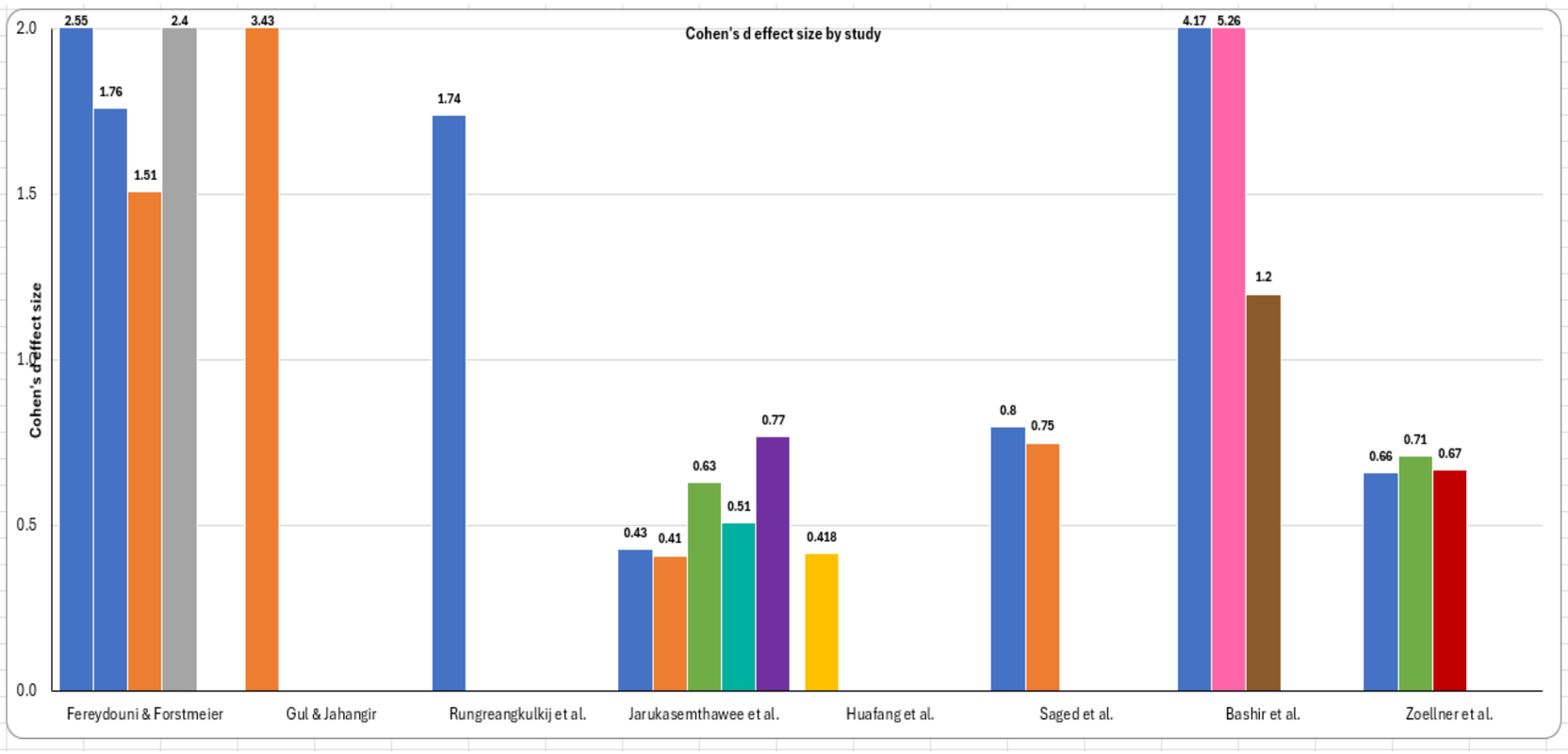


Figure 3: Effect sizes were variable, but a strong trend towards very high in favour of the religiously intact interventions. These values are better interpreted as a lack of high-quality research on the subject rather than substantial data that indicates the need for changes in practice recommendations. The effects were less pronounced in secularised interventions (Huafang et al.).

Major Limitations

The present research is flawed by a significant number of critical limitations:

- Small sample sizes
- No translation services
- Lack of high-quality studies
- Imprecise isolation of concerned variables
- Constraints of rapid review
- Comparison to control/waitlist/TAU instead of direct comparison

Bias was present throughout the research, with researchers often failing to disclose incentives, as well as disregarding any need to account for power dynamics or safeguards for potential harm caused in the administration of religious interventions.

Conclusions

Of the 22 studies included in the review, majority reported extremely high effect sizes, upwards of 1.00. While this may be a promising sign, it more likely presents a warning on the interpretation of these findings due to the low quality of research used to extrapolate them. Despite this, the results mostly point towards religiously-intact therapies providing valuable outcomes to the experimental groups who engaged with them relative to the control. While bold conclusions cannot be made at this point, promising results may be impending if apt resources are contributed to furthering the study of this question. In engaging with this topic, we displayed a veritable gap in this area of mental health and a considerable reason for the progression of continued research investigating the role of ontology in these populations.

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