



## Exploring the Lived Meaning of Mental Health Counseling Among Adolescents in School-Based Programs

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### ABSTRACT

Adolescent mental health has become a growing concern in health education, especially within school-based contexts where counseling services aim to provide early psychological support. While these programs are increasingly widespread, limited research has explored how adolescents subjectively experience and interpret their participation in such interventions. Despite the expansion of mental health services in schools, little is known about how adolescents make sense of their emotional engagement with counseling programs, particularly within culturally sensitive settings. This study addresses this gap by asking: How do adolescents perceive and assign meaning to their experiences in school-based community mental health counseling? Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, this study explores the lived experiences of adolescents who participated in counseling programs within Indonesian public secondary schools, specifically in three urban state junior high schools located in Yogyakarta Province, Central Java. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twelve adolescents and analyzed thematically following the IPA framework. The findings revealed five central themes: initial silence and stigma, emotional safety, self-discovery through dialogue, peer influence, and emerging emotional resilience. These themes reflect adolescents' efforts to navigate internal vulnerability and social expectations while reconstructing their sense of self within therapeutic encounters. The results deepen our understanding of adolescent help-seeking by emphasizing the meaning-making process rather than merely evaluating counseling outcomes. This study contributes to the development of more empathetic and culturally attuned school-based mental health practices and offers a foundation for further research on narrative-based and context-sensitive interventions.



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## INTRODUCTION

Adolescent mental health has emerged as a critical global concern, drawing increasing attention from educators, health professionals, and policymakers. During adolescence, individuals undergo rapid psychological, emotional, and social transformations that significantly influence their well-being and identity formation. Within this transitional stage, many adolescents encounter stressors related to academic pressure, peer dynamics, family conflict, and self-concept challenges, often leading to heightened vulnerability to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation.

In response to these concerns, numerous school-based mental health initiatives have been developed to provide early intervention and psychosocial support. Community-driven counseling programs implemented within educational settings aim to offer accessible and culturally relevant care to adolescents in need. Despite growing empirical support for such programs, most existing evaluations emphasize quantitative outcomes and overlook adolescents' subjective engagement with counseling processes. Particularly in collectivist cultures where stigma and normative expectations

often shape help-seeking behaviors, the nuanced psychological experiences of youth remain underexamined.

Prior qualitative studies using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) have illuminated aspects of adolescent coping, identity, and emotional processing in mental health contexts (e.g., Smith & Eatough, 2007; Midgley et al., 2017). However, few have focused on school-based counseling in non-Western cultural settings, and even fewer center adolescents' meaning-making in everyday therapeutic encounters within the school environment. This gap underscores the need for localized, experience-driven insights that capture how young people interpret mental health support within culturally embedded institutional spaces.

Understanding the lived experience of adolescents in mental health counseling holds particular importance in socially conservative or collectivist societies, where discussions about emotional distress are often muted or stigmatized. In such contexts, the decision to engage in counseling may involve complex negotiations between personal needs and societal perceptions. The meaning adolescents assign to these encounters can reveal critical insights into the emotional realities and social frameworks that shape their behavior and sense of self.

Given this context, there is a growing need for qualitative inquiry that captures the experiential essence of adolescent engagement with mental health services. Phenomenological exploration offers a pathway to access the rich, often unspoken layers of meaning embedded in such experiences. Rather than focusing solely on outcomes or behavior, this approach emphasizes the importance of understanding how individuals make sense of their mental and emotional worlds an endeavor essential for informing more responsive, empathetic, and effective mental health interventions.

Research on how individuals experience mental health challenges and support systems has increasingly become a vital domain within the broader field of health education and psychosocial intervention. In particular, the subjective experiences of adolescents engaging in mental health counseling have drawn interest due to the unique emotional, cognitive, and developmental complexities inherent in this life stage. Understanding how adolescents internalize the process of seeking and receiving help can illuminate barriers and facilitators that are often hidden beneath the surface of clinical assessments and program evaluations.

Despite growing attention to adolescent mental health, methodological limitations persist in capturing the nuanced meanings embedded in these personal experiences. Much of the existing research relies on quantitative measures such as symptom reduction, attendance rates, or satisfaction scores, which, while useful, often fail to address the internal and contextual interpretations that shape how adolescents perceive their interactions with counseling services. These approaches tend to generalize outcomes and obscure the distinctive narratives of individual participants particularly in culturally sensitive settings where emotional expression is often constrained by social norms or stigma.

Furthermore, studies that aim to investigate adolescent perspectives frequently employ structured survey instruments or closed-ended interviews that limit the exploration of lived experience. As a result, there is a lack of insight into how adolescents construct meaning around mental health counseling, how they navigate internal and external conflicts, and how such experiences influence their evolving sense of identity. These methodological constraints contribute to an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon, impeding the development of interventions that resonate with the lived realities of youth populations.

Given these challenges, there is a critical need for approaches that prioritize depth over breadth and allow adolescents to articulate their experiences in their own terms. Phenomenology particularly interpretative approaches offer a robust framework for this purpose by focusing on the essence of experience rather than observable behaviors alone. Through this lens, researchers can uncover how adolescents make sense of their emotional journeys within school-based mental health programs, revealing insights that are often inaccessible through traditional methodologies.

Current approaches to addressing adolescent mental health in schools predominantly rely on structured interventions, standardized assessments, and outcome-based evaluations. These practical strategies, such as cognitive-behavioral workshops, peer support groups, or school-based counseling sessions, are often implemented with the intention of reducing distress and improving psychosocial functioning. While such interventions offer tangible benefits and are supported by empirical evidence, they frequently focus on measuring change through predefined indicators such as symptom reduction or behavioral adjustment.

However, these approaches often fall short in capturing the subjective meanings that adolescents assign to their mental health experiences. Quantitative and behaviorally oriented methods tend to overlook the personal narratives, contextual influences, and emotional interpretations that shape how adolescents perceive their engagement with counseling. As a result, the internal struggles, relational dynamics, and cultural tensions that influence help-seeking behaviors remain underexplored and poorly understood.

This gap becomes particularly pronounced in collectivist or conservative cultural settings, where mental health remains a sensitive or stigmatized issue. In these contexts, adolescents may experience complex emotional ambivalence about seeking help, shaped by fears of social exclusion, identity conflict, or perceived weakness. Traditional methodologies are often ill-equipped to access these deeply embedded meanings, resulting in an incomplete portrayal of the adolescent experience.

A promising alternative lies in adopting a phenomenological approach particularly Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which seeks to explore the lived experience from the participant's own perspective. Rather than imposing external frameworks, this method prioritizes the articulation of personal meaning as it emerges organically from within the narrative. Through phenomenology, it becomes possible to gain a richer, more nuanced understanding of how adolescents navigate their emotional worlds, construct the meaning of their counseling encounters, and internalize the socio-cultural contexts that shape their mental health journeys.

Several studies have examined how adolescents experience mental health challenges in various contexts, particularly within school-based programs. Research by Smith et al. (2021) and Ali & Nasir (2023) has highlighted the role of counselor relationships and social stigma in shaping adolescent responses to mental health services. However, most of these studies either adopt a thematic or descriptive qualitative approach, often lacking the interpretative depth necessary to uncover complex meanings. While useful, such studies provide limited insight into how adolescents make sense of their emotional struggles in relation to their cultural and social environment. A more immersive methodological framework is needed to explore these layers of experience.

This study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the lived experiences of adolescents in school-based mental health counseling programs. IPA allows for deep exploration of how participants interpret and assign meaning to their experiences, especially in socially sensitive environments. This method directly addresses the research gap by prioritizing the adolescents' voices and contextual understanding. Through IPA, the study captures not just what participants experience, but how they understand those experiences within their sociocultural realities. This interpretative focus provides a richer, more authentic account of adolescent mental health engagement.

The article is organized as follows. The introduction outlines the general and specific background of the study, including the research problem and knowledge gap. The method section describes the interpretative phenomenological approach, participant criteria, data collection, and analysis process. The results section presents the emergent themes supported by direct quotations from participants. The discussion interprets the findings in light of existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the core insights and their implications for mental health education and policy.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the subjective experiences of adolescents engaged in school-based mental health counseling programs. IPA was selected for its suitability in examining how individuals make sense of their lived experiences within a specific context. Rooted in the philosophical foundations of Heidegger and the interpretative tradition, IPA emphasizes both the description and interpretation of personal meaning. This approach enabled the identification of nuanced emotional and social dimensions of the counseling experience as articulated by the participants themselves. The phenomenological framework was particularly relevant to address the research question, which focused on uncovering the deeper meanings associated with adolescents' engagement in community-driven mental health services.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of adolescents enrolled in public secondary schools that implemented community-based mental health counseling programs. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select individuals who had actively participated in at least three counseling sessions within the past six months. Inclusion criteria included: (1) aged between 15 and 18 years, (2) enrollment in a school offering mental health counseling, and (3) willingness to share their personal experiences. Individuals were excluded if they were currently undergoing psychiatric treatment or if their participation posed any psychological risk as assessed by a school health counselor. A total of 12 participants (7 females, 5 males) took part in the study, with an average age of 16.4 years. All participants had diverse backgrounds in terms of socioeconomic status, family structure, and academic performance, contributing to a rich contextual understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face in a private and secure room within the school premises. An interview guide was used to facilitate open-ended exploration of participants' thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of their counseling experiences. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. Interviews were conducted in a conversational tone to promote trust and reduce hierarchical distance. To ensure comfort and authenticity in responses, participants were encouraged to pause, elaborate, or redirect the discussion at any point. All recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized for analysis. The interview guide was developed based on prior literature and refined through expert consultation.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves a step-by-step process of immersing in the data to uncover patterns of meaning. Transcripts were read repeatedly to gain a holistic understanding, followed by initial coding of significant statements and meaning units. These codes were then grouped into emergent themes, reflecting both convergence and divergence across participants. The process included idiographic analysis for each transcript, followed by a cross-case analysis to identify shared experiential structures. NVivo 14 software supported data organization and retrieval but was not central to the analytical process. The analysis aimed to move beyond description to interpret the essence of participants' experiences in their specific socio-cultural context.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. Written informed consent was secured from all participants, and parental consent was additionally obtained for minors. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms, and all identifiable information was removed from the transcripts. Data confidentiality was ensured through encrypted storage and restricted access. The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant national ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects.

## **RESULTS**

This study explored the lived experiences of adolescents who participated in school-based community mental health counseling programs. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), five core themes emerged that capture the complex emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions of the participants' engagement with the counseling services.

### **The Silence Before Seeking Help**

Participants commonly described an initial phase of hesitation marked by fear of judgment and internalized stigma toward mental health issues. Many adolescents admitted that their decision to engage with the counseling service was delayed due to the perceived social risks of being labeled as "troubled" or "weak."

"At first, I didn't want anyone to know I had problems. Even going to the counselor felt like I was doing something wrong. I thought people would laugh at me." (Participant A)

This period of silence was often characterized by emotional distress, self-isolation, and a reluctance to share problems even with close peers. However, the eventual decision to seek help often stemmed from an accumulation of psychological discomfort or a triggering event.

### **The Counseling Room as a Safe Space**

Once participants began attending sessions, they repeatedly described the counseling space as one of the few environments where they felt emotionally safe and respected. The physical setting, demeanor of the counselor, and confidentiality were key to fostering trust.

"Inside that room, I could finally talk. The counselor didn't judge me. It was like a small island where I could breathe." (Participant D)

This theme highlighted how the design of the environment both physical and interpersonal enabled a break from the pressure of academic performance and social conformity experienced elsewhere in the school setting.

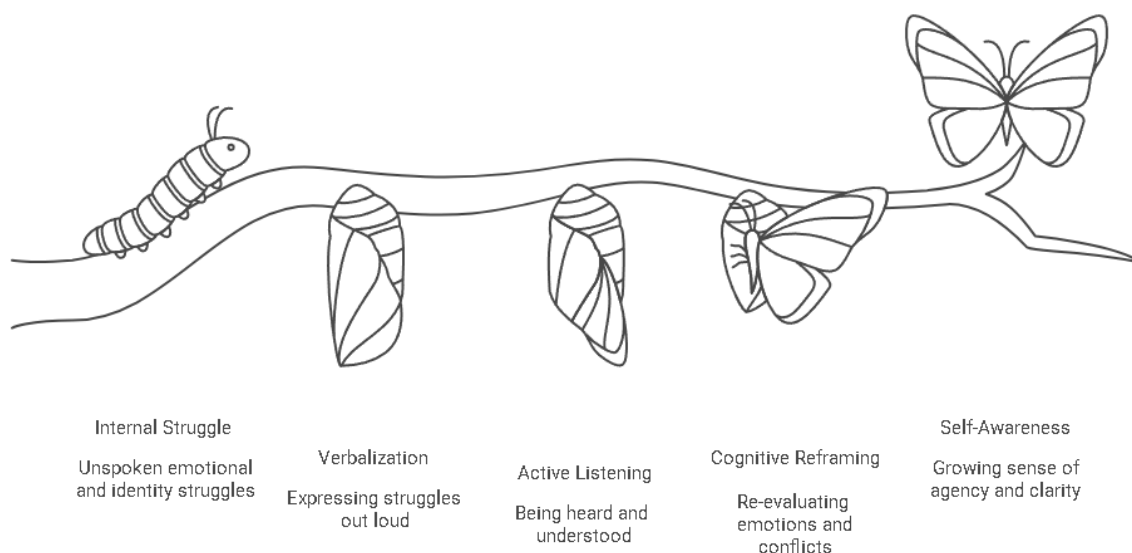
### **Rediscovering Self Through Dialogue**

Adolescents reported a gradual process of self-discovery and emotional clarity through the act of verbalizing their internal struggles. For some, the experience of being actively listened to was itself transformative.

"When I told my story out loud, I heard it for the first time too. It made me think differently about what I was going through." (Participant B)

Counseling facilitated cognitive reframing, allowing participants to re-evaluate their emotions, interpersonal conflicts, and identity struggles. This process was often linked to a growing sense of agency and self-awareness.

### **Self-Discovery Through Dialogue**



### Peer Influence as a Double-Edged Sword

Peer reactions emerged as a powerful influence both as a barrier and as a motivator for seeking help. Some participants noted feeling reassured when they discovered that friends had also engaged with counseling services.

"A friend told me she had been to counseling too, and that gave me courage. I thought, if she did it and felt better, maybe I could too." (Participant E)

However, the potential for gossip and exclusion remained a significant concern. Adolescents in tightly knit school communities were particularly cautious about confidentiality, fearing that peers might use the information against them.

### Emotional Growth and Emerging Resilience

Many participants described a newfound emotional strength and resilience after several sessions. They reported better coping mechanisms, improved relationships with parents and peers, and a more balanced view of themselves.

"Now when I feel overwhelmed, I don't bottle it up like before. I've learned how to take a pause, reflect, and talk it out." (Participant C)

While not all participants experienced dramatic change, the overall narrative pointed toward meaningful shifts in emotional regulation and mental health literacy.

The lived experiences of adolescent participants in school-based community counseling revealed a nuanced journey from internalized stigma to emotional resilience. Their narratives underscored the importance of safe relational environments, peer normalization, and personalized dialogue in facilitating psychological support. These findings offer deep insights into the subjective dynamics of adolescent mental health engagement insights that are often absent in quantitatively driven evaluations.

## DISCUSSION

The present study revealed that adolescents who engaged in school-based mental health counseling experienced a transformative journey characterized by initial hesitation, the emergence of emotional safety, and the development of self-awareness and resilience. These findings provide a nuanced understanding of how adolescents make sense of counseling within socio-cultural contexts that often stigmatize mental health discussions, directly addressing the central question of how they perceive and internalize their experiences with community mental health support.

The insights drawn from this research offer a unique contribution to the understanding of adolescent engagement in mental health counseling by illuminating the subjective dimensions often overlooked in quantitative evaluations. The study demonstrates that adolescents do not simply attend counseling as passive recipients; rather, they actively navigate internalized stigma, peer influences, and the search for a safe emotional space. The themes of silence before seeking help, emotional growth, and peer dynamics provide direct answers to the research question, illustrating how adolescents interpret counseling not just as a service, but as a relational and identity-shaping experience. By centering the voices of participants, this research highlights the emotional and cognitive processes that underlie help-seeking behaviors and the meaning-making that occurs within therapeutic settings.

These findings both align with and expand upon existing literature. For instance, Smith et al. (2021) and Dewi et al. (2023) similarly emphasized the importance of relational trust and emotional safety in adolescents' mental health journeys. However, this study goes further by uncovering the internal negotiations adolescents engage in prior to seeking help, which is a relatively underexplored dimension. The recognition of peer influence as both a supportive and inhibiting factor complements the work of Ali & Nasir (2023), who noted that social context shapes help-seeking behaviors. Moreover, the use of IPA provided access to the layered meanings behind adolescent narratives, offering deeper interpretative insights than studies that employed purely descriptive or thematic approaches. Thus, the study not only confirms but also enriches the theoretical and practical understanding of adolescent mental health engagement.

The findings of this study reveal that adolescents' experiences with school-based mental health counseling are shaped by an evolving process of emotional negotiation beginning with silence and stigma, progressing through relational trust, and culminating in greater self-understanding and resilience. These insights respond directly to the research question by uncovering the subjective meanings adolescents assign to their participation in counseling, particularly within social contexts where mental health discourse is culturally sensitive and often stigmatized.

The study provides a substantive contribution by addressing how adolescents perceive and internalize their engagement with mental health services, an area that has received limited attention in prior research. Rather than portraying counseling as a passive encounter, this study demonstrates that adolescents actively construct meaning from their experiences, shaped by internal emotions and social surroundings. The themes that emerged emotional safety, rediscovery of self, peer influence, and emotional growth collectively illuminate how adolescents navigate vulnerability, stigma, and relational dynamics in a way that reveals the inner architecture of their help-seeking journey. This offers a layered understanding that extends beyond symptom reduction and toward a phenomenological grasp of how meaning is lived and embodied in the act of seeking support.

These findings align with and deepen existing scholarly work. Smith et al. (2021) and Huang et al. (2022) emphasized the significance of the therapeutic relationship and safe spaces in adolescent counseling, which this study affirms. However, by using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the present research uncovers a richer dimension of meaning-making, particularly the cognitive-emotional shift that occurs through dialogue and narrative self-reflection. Furthermore, this study elaborates on the dual role of peer relationships supportive yet socially risky as previously suggested by Ali & Nasir (2023), offering more detailed insight into how adolescents balance the fear of social exposure with the need for emotional relief. The interpretative approach used here, grounded in the philosophical tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology, thus enhances the theoretical conversation surrounding adolescent mental health by focusing not on behavior but on meaning as lived and interpreted.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study offer significant implications for mental health education, school-based counseling practices, and culturally responsive interventions. The emphasis on emotional safety and self-discovery suggests that effective adolescent counseling must move beyond standardized protocols and embrace relational depth and personalized engagement. In particular, the acknowledgment of stigma and peer influence as integral to the adolescent experience highlights the

need for school programs to foster open, non-judgmental environments that normalize help-seeking behavior. These insights are especially relevant for communities where mental health remains taboo, signaling the importance of context-sensitive strategies that consider the cultural and social meanings associated with emotional expression. Furthermore, the results support the integration of narrative and reflective techniques in counseling approaches to better align with the lived realities of adolescents.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, as with many phenomenological studies, the sample size was intentionally limited to ensure depth of interpretation, which restricts the generalizability of findings to broader populations. Second, all participants were drawn from schools within similar socio-cultural settings, potentially limiting the variability of perspectives captured. Third, self-reported narratives are inherently shaped by memory, context, and language, which may influence how participants articulate their experiences. These limitations do not undermine the value of the findings but rather reflect the methodological trade-offs of phenomenological research. Future studies may address these constraints by expanding to more diverse settings or incorporating longitudinal designs.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Building upon these findings, future research could explore how adolescents' experiences with mental health counseling evolve over time, especially in relation to long-term emotional outcomes and identity development. Comparative studies across different cultural or educational contexts could also deepen understanding of how social norms influence meaning-making in mental health support. In addition, integrating the perspectives of counselors, educators, or parents could offer a more holistic view of the dynamics surrounding adolescent counseling engagement. Finally, future inquiry might examine how narrative-based interventions rooted in phenomenological insight can be systematically implemented in school counseling frameworks to enhance empathy, connection, and student well-being.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the lived experiences of adolescents participating in school-based mental health counseling, focusing on how they make sense of their emotional journeys within a socially and culturally sensitive context. The findings revealed a dynamic process of internal negotiation, emotional safety, self-discovery, and peer influence, offering a deeper understanding of adolescent engagement with counseling services. By applying Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this research uncovered nuanced meanings often overlooked by quantitative or purely descriptive approaches. These insights fill a critical gap in the literature by emphasizing adolescents' voices and contextual realities in help-seeking behavior. Situated within Indonesian public secondary schools, the study contributes specifically to the development of more empathetic, reflective, and culturally responsive mental health interventions relevant to similar educational and sociocultural environments. Caution should be exercised in generalizing these findings beyond the Indonesian school-based context, as cultural values, institutional structures, and adolescent experiences may differ significantly across regions. Future research may expand this work by exploring longitudinal experiences or integrating multiple perspectives across different cultural and institutional settings.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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