



Trauma-Informed Counseling in the Philippine Context: A Scoping Review with Implications for University Counseling Services

Rochelle T. Fernandez¹, RGC, Rpm
Welmer T. Adajar¹, RGC

¹University Counselor, Counseling and Psychological Services, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

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Abstract

Trauma significantly affects university students' mental health, emotional regulation, and academic functioning. Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) emphasizes safety, trust, empowerment, collaboration, and cultural responsiveness in counseling services. This scoping review aimed to map existing literature on trauma-informed and culturally responsive counseling in Philippine universities using the PRISMA-ScR reporting guideline. Due to the absence of indexed studies, gray literature sources were systematically examined. Findings revealed emerging recognition of trauma-related student concerns, the presence of implicit trauma-informed practices, and the influence of cultural and systemic factors on counseling responses. The review highlights significant gaps in research, training, and policy, underscoring the need for culturally grounded trauma-informed counseling frameworks in Philippine higher education.

Keywords: trauma-informed care, university counseling, higher education, Philippines



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INTRODUCTION

Trauma is a pervasive concern that significantly affects individuals' mental health, emotional regulation, and academic functioning, with many effects persisting into adolescence and young adulthood. University students who have experienced abuse, violence, loss, chronic stress, or other adverse experiences often present with anxiety, depression, academic difficulties, and impaired help-seeking behaviors (Mofatteh, 2021). As institutions responsible for students' holistic development, universities play a critical role in responding to trauma-related mental health needs through accessible and supportive counseling services (Kaluzeviciute et al., 2020).

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) has emerged as a guiding framework that emphasizes safety, trust, empowerment, collaboration, and cultural responsiveness in mental health and educational settings (Goldstein et al., 2024). However, despite the growing global adoption of trauma-informed approaches, their application within Philippine university counseling services

remains underexplored and poorly documented. Existing research is fragmented and largely absent from indexed databases, raising concerns about the visibility, cultural relevance, and systematic implementation of trauma-informed counseling in higher education.

This gap in the literature presents challenges for counselor education, professional practice, and policy formulation. Without a clear understanding of how trauma-informed counseling is currently conceptualized and implemented in Philippine universities, it is difficult to identify best practices, address existing barriers, and develop culturally appropriate training and intervention frameworks. Furthermore, the absence of a comprehensive review limits the ability of educators, counselors, and policymakers to make evidence-based decisions that support trauma-affected students.

Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following problem: there is no existing scoping review that systematically maps the literature

on trauma-informed and culturally responsive counseling in Philippine universities. By conducting a PRISMA-ScR guided scoping review, this study aims to fill this gap by synthesizing available evidence, identifying key themes and research gaps, and providing direction for future inquiry and practice.

Research Questions and Objectives. This scoping review is guided by research questions designed to systematically map the existing literature on trauma-informed counseling in Philippine university settings. Consistent with scoping review methodology, the research questions are intentionally broad to capture the range, nature, and characteristics of available evidence rather than to test causal relationships or intervention effectiveness.

The primary research question guiding this study is *“What is the existing body of literature on trauma-informed and culturally responsive counseling in Philippine universities?”* This overarching question aims to establish the scope and extent of scholarly work addressing trauma-informed practices within higher education counseling services in the Philippine context.

To further guide the review, the following sub-questions are posed. First, how is trauma-informed counseling conceptualized and defined in studies conducted within Philippine university settings? This question seeks to examine the theoretical frameworks, principles, and definitions used to describe trauma-informed care in higher education. Second, what types of trauma and adverse experiences among Filipino university students are addressed in the literature? This inquiry aims to identify the forms of trauma most commonly discussed, including but not limited to abuse, violence, disaster-related trauma, family-related adversity, and online exploitation. Third, what counseling approaches, models, or interventions are described as trauma-informed within Philippine university counseling services? This question focuses on identifying specific practices, strategies, and frameworks employed by counselors and

institutions. Fourth, in what ways are cultural considerations integrated into trauma-informed counseling practices in Philippine higher education? This question examines how Filipino cultural values, beliefs, and sociocultural contexts are incorporated into counseling approaches to enhance relevance and effectiveness. Finally, what gaps, challenges, and future directions are identified in the existing literature on trauma-informed counseling in Philippine universities? This question aims to highlight areas requiring further research, policy development, and professional training.

The objectives of this scoping review align closely with the research questions and reflect the exploratory nature of the study. The primary objective is to systematically map and synthesize the existing literature on trauma-informed and culturally responsive counseling in Philippine universities. Specifically, this study aims to identify how trauma-informed counseling is defined and operationalized in higher education settings, describe the types of trauma addressed among Filipino university students, and examine the counseling frameworks and interventions utilized.

In addition, this study seeks to explore how cultural responsiveness is incorporated into trauma-informed counseling approaches within the Philippine context and to identify contextual factors that facilitate or hinder implementation. Another key objective is to identify gaps in research, practice, and policy related to trauma-informed counseling in Philippine higher education. Ultimately, the findings of this scoping review are intended to inform counselor education, professional training, institutional mental health programming, and future research initiatives aimed at strengthening trauma-responsive and culturally grounded counseling services for Filipino university students.

METHODOLOGY

This review followed established guidance for conducting scoping studies, drawing primarily

from the methodological framework proposed by Arksey and O' Malley (2005) and later refined by Levac et al. (2010). This approach is appropriate for mapping the extent and characteristics of research in areas where evidence remains limited or has not yet been systematically synthesized, as similarly noted by Jaleniauskiene and Lisaite (2023). To ensure transparency in reporting, the procedures were documented in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Extension for Scoping Reviews, or PRISMA-ScR (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA-ScR provides structured requirements for describing the search strategy, screening and eligibility processes, and the reporting of included studies. Consistent with the steps outlined by Pollock et al. (2024), this review involved the formulation of research questions, identification of relevant literature, application of predefined eligibility criteria, systematic data charting, and synthesis of the extracted information.

Eligibility Criteria. Studies were eligible for inclusion if they were conducted in the Philippines and addressed trauma, trauma-informed care, counseling, or psychosocial support in any setting relevant to informing university counseling practice. Studies were excluded if they were unrelated to trauma or counseling, conducted outside the Philippines, or consisted solely of opinion pieces without empirical or conceptual grounding. These criteria were applied with conceptual flexibility due to the scarcity of publications explicitly focused on trauma-informed counseling in higher education.

Information Sources. A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple electronic databases, including Scopus, PsycINFO, PubMed, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Additional searches were carried out in institutional repositories of selected Philippine universities to capture gray literature. The search covered the period December 2020 to December 2025.

Search Strategy. The search strategy consisted of combinations of keywords such as trauma-

informed care, trauma-informed counseling, counseling services, higher education, universities, colleges, and Philippines. Boolean operators were used to refine searches, and keywords were adapted to the indexing systems of each database to ensure comprehensive retrieval of relevant studies.

Study Selection. Study selection occurred in three stages. First, all records identified through database searches were screened based on titles and abstracts to determine initial relevance. During this phase, the Scopus search yielded no studies that met the predefined inclusion criteria, as no eligible Scopus-indexed studies were found.

Because of this, the search strategy was expanded to include gray literature and non-indexed sources. Records identified through Google Scholar, institutional repositories, and practitioner-oriented publications were then screened for relevance.

After screening and eligibility assessment of gray literature sources, only three studies met all eligibility criteria and were included in the final synthesis.

Data Charting. Data charting was conducted using a structured extraction form. Extracted information included authorship, publication year, study design, setting, population characteristics, descriptions of trauma-informed care, types of trauma addressed, counseling approaches or interventions, cultural considerations, key findings, and reported limitations. Two reviewers independently performed data extraction to ensure accuracy, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion until agreement was reached.

Synthesis of Results. The synthesis involved the use of descriptive summaries to present study characteristics and qualitative content analysis to identify thematic patterns across studies. This approach is appropriate for integrating findings from heterogeneous sources and aligns with recommendations from Pollock et

al. (2024). The synthesis focused on mapping key concepts, identifying gaps, and generating implications for research, practice, and policy relevant to university counseling services. The analysis did not attempt to assess the methodological quality of individual studies, consistent with the aims of scoping reviews.

Ethical Considerations. This review followed established principles of research integrity, including accurate citation, transparent reporting, and avoidance of plagiarism. Because the study relied exclusively on publicly accessible literature and did not involve data from human participants, formal ethics approval or institutional review board clearance was not required. Artificial intelligence tools were not used for screening, study selection, data extraction, or analysis. Any AI support was limited to minor language editing and formatting. All substantive review procedures were conducted manually to maintain rigor and accountability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic search of indexed databases yielded limited results relevant to trauma-informed counseling in Philippine university settings. Specifically, the initial search conducted in Scopus using predefined keywords related to trauma-informed care, counseling, higher education, and the Philippine context produced no eligible records that met the inclusion criteria. This absence of indexed literature highlights the underrepresentation of Philippine-based trauma-informed counseling research in major international databases.

In response to this limitation, the search strategy was expanded to include grey literature sources, including Google Scholar, non-Scopus-indexed journals, institutional repositories, and practitioner-oriented publications. The identification phase yielded several records related broadly to trauma, mental health, and psychosocial support in the Philippines; however, none of the identified studies were conducted within the Philippine settings or explicitly examined trauma-

informed counseling in schools. During title and abstract screening, records were excluded if they focused on non-counseling interventions, non-educational contexts, or populations outside higher education. Full-text eligibility assessment further excluded studies that lacked empirical or conceptual relevance to trauma-informed counseling. As a result of the PRISMA-ScR identification, screening, and eligibility process, no published study met the criteria for inclusion as a trauma-informed counseling study situated in Philippine university settings.

Given this absence, the final synthesis drew on three conceptually relevant Philippine-based studies from school and community contexts to inform the discussion: one school-based counseling study (Danguis, 2024), one mixed-methods study on counselors' experiences addressing student mental health concerns (Fernandez et al., 2025), and one trauma-informed intervention study conducted among survivors of human trafficking (Tsai et al., 2025). Although two of these studies were not conducted in Philippine universities, they provided transferable insights into trauma-responsive practices and culturally grounded counseling relevant to higher education.

Table 1
Trauma-informed Studies in the Philippines

Study	Design	Setting / Context	Participants	Aim / Focus	Methods	Issues Addressed
Danguis, 2024	School-based study	Basic education school, Philippines	High school students	Assess effects of counseling on emotional well-being	Counseling records, student evaluations	Emotional distress, family adversity
Fernandez et al., 2025	Mixed methods	University counseling centers, Manila	University counselors	Examine student mental health concerns pre- and post-pandemic	Surveys, qualitative interviews	Academic stress, family conflict, psychosocial concerns
Tsai et al., 2025	Intervention study	Community program for trafficking survivors	Filipino women survivors	Evaluate trauma-informed mind-body intervention	Structured sessions, standardized tools	Severe trauma, abuse, exploitation

Rationale for Including Conceptually Relevant Studies. Because no trauma-informed counseling research was found directly within university settings, the review incorporated studies that addressed trauma, psychosocial support, and counseling in related educational and community contexts. This approach aligns with scoping review methodology and PRISMA-ScR guidance, which permit conceptual flexibility when evidence in the focal setting is scarce.

The school-based counseling study (Danguis, 2024) offered foundational insights into counseling strategies, student distress, and contextual factors that are structurally and culturally continuous with higher education. The trauma-informed intervention study involving trafficking survivors (Tsai et al., 2025) provided evidence on culturally grounded trauma-responsive strategies that may inform future university-based frameworks.

Synthesis of Findings. The synthesis of the included studies revealed three overarching thematic areas: (1) emerging recognition of trauma-related mental health concerns among Filipino students, (2) implicit trauma-informed practices within counseling services, and (3) the role of culture and systemic constraints in shaping counseling responses.

Table 2
Summary of Trauma-Informed Care Elements and Their Relevance to the Review

Study	TIC Elements	Key Findings	Relevance to Review
Danguis, 2024	Validation, rapport building, supportive counseling	Improved emotional functioning; practices consistent with TIC	Provides transferable trauma-responsive practices for universities
Fernandez et al., 2025	Empathy, emotional safety, flexible support	Trauma-related patterns observed; counselors used informal TIC practices	Shows trauma-related concerns in universities and informal use of TIC
Tsai et al., 2025	Empowerment, grounding, regulation strategies	Improved coping and emotional regulation	Demonstrates effective TIC adaptable to university counseling

Emerging recognition of trauma-related mental health concerns among Filipino students. The reviewed literature consistently acknowledged the increasing prevalence and complexity of mental health concerns among students, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and broader societal stressors. Studies describing counselors' experiences in Manila universities highlighted heightened levels of anxiety, depression, academic distress, and psychosocial difficulties among students (Fernandez et al., 2025). Although trauma was not always explicitly named, counselors frequently described student experiences that align with trauma exposure, such as family instability, economic hardship, loss, abuse, and prolonged stress. This suggests that trauma is present within university populations but is often addressed indirectly or subsumed under general mental health concerns.

Implicit trauma-informed practices within counseling services. While explicit trauma-informed counseling frameworks were largely absent, several studies reflected counseling practices that align with trauma-informed principles. These included efforts to establish emotional safety, provide empathetic listening, validate students' experiences, and adopt flexible and supportive approaches rather than punitive or rigid responses. For example, studies on school-based counseling and counselor experiences during and after the pandemic emphasized the importance of trust-building, emotional support, and counselor availability. These practices mirror the core trauma-informed principles such as safety, trustworthiness, and empowerment, even when it is not formally labeled as trauma-informed care.

Role of culture and systemic constraints in shaping counseling responses. Cultural and systemic factors emerged as critical influences on counseling practice. Filipino cultural values such as strong family orientation, collectivism, respect for authority, and spirituality were frequently referenced as shaping students' help-seeking behaviors and counselors' interventions. At the same time, systemic challenges such as limited training in trauma-specific approaches, high counselor caseloads, resource constraints, and persistent stigma surrounding mental health were identified as barriers to comprehensive trauma-informed implementation. The literature suggests that counselors often rely on personal experience and general counseling skills rather than structured trauma-informed training, particularly within the confines of educational institutions.

The inclusion of a peer-reviewed trauma-informed intervention study conducted among survivors of human trafficking in the Philippines provided additional conceptual insight. Although not situated within a university setting, this study demonstrated that trauma-informed approaches can be effectively adapted to the Philippine cultural context when interventions prioritize safety, bodily regulation,

empowerment, and cultural sensitivity. The findings offer transferable principles that may inform the development of trauma-informed counseling practices in higher education.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this scoping review highlight the limited visibility and underdevelopment of trauma-informed counseling research within Philippine university settings. The absence of Scopus-indexed studies suggests that trauma-informed practices, while potentially present in practice, remain largely undocumented, informal, or unpublished in indexed academic outlets. This gap reflects not only a research deficit but also challenges in institutional capacity, training, and scholarly dissemination.

Despite the lack of explicitly labeled trauma-informed frameworks, the reviewed studies suggest that counselors in the Philippine context may already employ practices aligned with trauma-informed principles, such as prioritizing emotional safety, empathy, trust-building, and flexible support. These practices appear to emerge organically in response to students' complex psychosocial needs rather than through formalized trauma-informed training or institutional policy.

Cultural and systemic factors play a significant role in shaping counseling responses. Filipino cultural values related to family interconnectedness, collectivism, spirituality, and respect for authority influence both students' help-seeking behaviors and counselors' interventions. At the same time, systemic constraints, including limited trauma-specific training, high counselor caseloads and mental health stigma, hinder the systematic implementation of trauma-informed counseling in higher education.

The inclusion of a trauma-informed intervention study conducted outside the university setting further demonstrates that trauma-informed approaches can be culturally adapted within the Philippine context when interventions emphasize safety, empowerment, and cultural

sensitivity. While not directly transferable to university counseling services, these findings offer conceptual guidance for developing contextually grounded trauma-informed frameworks in higher education.

Overall, this scoping review underscores the urgent need for more systematic research, training, and policy development focused on trauma-informed and culturally responsive counseling in Philippine universities. Future efforts should prioritize documenting existing practices; strengthening counselor competencies, and integrating trauma-informed principles into institutional mental health systems to better support trauma-affected students.

Conclusion and Recommendations. This scoping review set out to map the existing literature on culturally responsive trauma-informed counseling within Philippine university settings. Guided by the PRISMA-ScR framework, the review revealed a notably limited body of literature directly addressing trauma-informed counseling in higher education in the Philippines. The absence of eligible Scopus-indexed studies and the reliance on a small number of grey literature sources underscore the marginal visibility and underdevelopment of trauma-informed counseling research within the Philippine academic and professional discourse.

Despite the limited number of studies, the findings indicate an emerging awareness of trauma-related mental health concerns among Filipino students and counselors. The reviewed literature suggests that while trauma is not always explicitly named, many student experiences described in the studies are consistent with trauma exposure. Counselors appear to employ practices that align with core trauma-informed principles such as safety, trust-building, empathy, and emotional support, even in the absence of formal trauma-informed frameworks. This indicates that trauma-informed care in Philippine educational settings is often practiced implicitly rather than systematical.

This scoping review makes several specific contributions to the literature. First, it provides the first systematic mapping of trauma-informed and culturally responsive counseling literature relevant to Philippine university settings, thereby addressing a clear absence of synthesized evidence in both indexed and non-indexed academic sources. Second, it documents the discrepancy between the presence of trauma-responsive counseling practices and the absence of formally articulated trauma-informed frameworks in higher education, highlighting how trauma-informed principles are applied implicitly rather than institutionally. Third, the review integrates insights from educational and community-based studies to demonstrate how culturally grounded trauma-informed practices may be adapted for university counseling contexts in the Philippines.

In addition, this review explicitly identifies several critical gaps in the existing literature on trauma-informed counseling in Philippine higher education. These gaps include the complete absence of published empirical studies examining trauma-informed counseling within Philippine university counseling centers, the limited documentation of counselors' training, competencies, and preparedness related to trauma-informed care, and the lack of institutional-level policies or formal frameworks guiding trauma-informed implementation in higher education settings. Furthermore, there is minimal evaluation of student outcomes associated with trauma-responsive counseling interventions in universities, making it difficult to assess effectiveness or inform evidence-based practice. Addressing these gaps is essential for advancing culturally responsive, systematic, and evidence-informed trauma-informed counseling systems in Philippine universities.

Based on the findings of this scoping review, several recommendations are proposed for research, practice, counselor education, and policy. First, future research should prioritize empirical studies that explicitly examine trauma-informed counseling within Philippine

university counseling services. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies are needed to explore counselors' competencies, student outcomes, and institutional readiness for trauma-informed implementation. Researchers are encouraged to document culturally responsive adaptations of trauma-informed care and to publish findings in indexed journals to enhance the visibility of Philippine counseling scholarship.

Second, counselor education and professional training programs should integrate trauma-informed and culturally responsive care as core competencies. Pre-service and in-service training should equip counselors with knowledge of trauma theory, culturally attuned assessment, trauma-responsive interventions, and ethical considerations specific to educational settings. Training should also emphasize reflective practice to support counselors in navigating the intersection of trauma, culture, and educational demands.

Third, higher education institutions are encouraged to adopt institution-wide trauma-informed approaches rather than relying solely on individual counselor initiatives. University administrators and counseling centers should develop policies and practices that promote psychological safety, flexible academic accommodations, collaborative care, and referral pathways. Institutional support is essential to sustain trauma-informed practices and to prevent counselor burnout.

Fourth, policymakers and regulatory bodies such as the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) should consider integrating trauma-informed and culturally responsive care into mental health guidelines and quality assurance frameworks for universities. Aligning trauma-informed counseling initiatives with national policies, including the Philippine Mental Health Act, may strengthen institutional accountability and resource allocation for student mental health services.

Finally, while the development of a formal intervention or program was not the primary

focus of this scoping review, the findings may inform the future design of culturally grounded trauma-informed counseling frameworks tailored to Philippine university settings. Such frameworks should be developed collaboratively with counselors, educators, students, and cultural stakeholders to ensure relevance, sustainability, and ethical responsiveness.

In conclusion, advancing trauma-informed and culturally responsive counseling in Philippine universities requires coordinated efforts across research, practice, education, and policy. By addressing the gaps identified in this scoping review, stakeholders can work toward building more inclusive, compassionate, and effective support systems that promote the well-being and academic success of Filipino students who have experienced trauma.

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