

**‘South Asian’ international students’ perceptions about  
counselling in the UK: A qualitative exploratory study using  
thematic analysis**

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Sukriti Kainth

School of Environment, Education and Development

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## ABSTRACT

**Background and objectives:** With the increase in the number of ‘South Asian’ international students at universities in the UK in recent years, many cross-cultural issues have arisen. The literature review in this thesis introduces the challenges faced by international students, including language and cultural barriers, academic and financial difficulties, interpersonal problems, racial discrimination, and loss of social support, alienation and homesickness. Their increased vulnerability to such challenges may increase their need to access counselling in the UK. However, very little is known about their perspectives on mental health and seeking counselling. Presently, there is a lack of literature relating to ‘South Asian’ international students’ perceptions of counselling. The present study examines this gap and contributes to the existing literature by exploring, in depth, the perceptions of counselling among South Asian individuals in a university setting in the UK. Further, it explores the factors that influence their perceptions. The main research questions in this study were: 1) what are the perceptions of South Asian international students towards accessing counselling in the UK? 2) What are the factors that facilitate and inhibit South Asian international students in accessing counselling?

**Methodology:** A qualitative design was used for this research. Eleven participants were recruited for this study in an attempt to include a heterogeneous sample made up of both genders across different cultures and countries. Individuals involved came from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Maldives. The students’ perceptions of counselling were explored in depth using semi-structured interviews and the data were analysed using thematic analysis.

**Findings:** Seven main themes were derived from the thematic analysis: *Previous positive experiences of counselling, previous negative experiences of counselling, positive perceptions of counselling, negative perceptions of counselling, different understanding of ‘counselling’, barriers to accessing counselling, factors which encourage access for counselling.* While previous research has shown that Asian students are unwilling to seek counselling due to stigma towards mental health, the findings of this study demonstrate that South Asian international students were open to seeking counselling in the UK when faced with challenges such as career or academic-related issues. The findings also suggest that language and cultural factors could be a barrier for them to seek counselling in the UK. Additionally, this study indicates new findings regarding the preferences of South Asian international students towards a more directive approach to counselling, as well as the characteristics of a counsellor, like warmth and empathy, could be factors which encourage access to counselling. It also demonstrates that a number of participants had a different understanding of the term ‘counselling’ equating it with the concept of career guidance or advice.

**Conclusion:** This study concludes that promoting the use of counselling services on campus or online awareness campaigns about mental health could reduce stigma amongst international students and could encourage them to seek such services more in the future. Further, the use of a multicultural approach by counsellors may encourage international students to access such services and might allow counsellors to more appropriately tailor their traditional approaches to meet the needs of this population.

**Keywords:** *South Asian international students; counselling; perceptions; university counselling services; qualitative research; semi structured interviews; thematic analysis*

## **DECLARATION**

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **1.1 Background to the study**

In the past few years, there has been an increase in the number of international students at the UK universities, which raises various cross-cultural concerns such as discrimination and prejudice, culture shock, homesickness, communication problems, and language barriers (Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007). Despite these concerns, when these situations are handled successfully intercultural experience can be a transformative process contributing to personal growth and development (Anderson, 1994). According to the Higher Education Statistical Agency, the total number of international students studying in the UK in 2018-19 was 485,645. Almost one third of international students in the UK are from China. The next second largest number of international students in the UK is from India. The statistics shows that the University of Manchester was considered to be the second largest recruiter of international students in 2018-19 with 13,750, whereas the first was University College London with 17,990. Dolby and Rahman (2008) have asserted that colonialism led to the imposition of the European university model on Asia and Africa (p.684). This international influence was formalised with the establishment of the Institute of International Education (IIE), the European Regional Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS), and other geo-political events (p.685). Considering the influence of internationalisation, the majority of undergraduate and postgraduate students of South Asia and Southeast Asia recognise UK as the most attractive destinations for higher studies (Brooks & Walters 2009; Butcher, 2004). The international students enrol themselves in the UK universities to get professional degrees and to benefit from the excellent standards of teaching and practical skills that the UK higher education provides. However, during this process the international students face a great number of problems that are quite unique and different from the domestic student's experience.

Regardless of international students' ethnic, cultural, language, economic, and religious backgrounds, they tend to face cross-cultural adjustment. They are expected to quickly adjust to the host culture and an educational system that is different from theirs, while, at the same time, being away from their usual social support. Because of this, many students face anxiety from the

psychological impact of adapting to a new culture and this can have an impact on their mental wellbeing. However, the international students are hesitant to seek professional support from the university or counsellors, if they increase access to such services they are likely to benefit to deal with the acculturative stress and other related issues. Many studies have explored challenges experienced by international students (Bradley, 2000; Erichsen & Bollinger, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007; Msengi, 2007; Zheng, 2010). These challenges include language difficulties, financial problems, difficulties adjusting to the academic culture, adjustment to social customs and norms, and homesickness, stress, anxiety, feeling of isolation, culture shock (Chen, 1999; Wang, Lin, Pang, & Shen, 2006). International students may also experience other difficulties such as social alienation, getting along with local people (Klomegah, 2006), and racial discrimination (Constantine et al., 2005; Paige, 1990). Russell et al (2010) found that 41% of international students experience substantial levels of stress resulting from homesickness, cultural shock, or perceived discrimination. Galloway and Jenkins (2005) suggested that language is considered one of the greatest academic issues hindering smooth adjustment for international students. Studies have also found cultural adjustment and differentiation between students' home countries and the host country (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Searle, 1991). Some of the studies provide evidence that Asian or non-Western international students experienced more adjustment difficulties than European international students in terms of food, language, educational strain, socialisation with native students, and discrimination (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Schram & Lauver, 1988; Surdam & Collins, 1984).

A large and growing body of literature has investigated how, because of the stress related to acculturation, international students are at a higher risk of physical and mental health related issues (Mori, 2000). Besides, international students face additional stressors due to the demands of cultural adjustments such as difficulties with language, academics, interpersonal and financial problems (Ginter & Glauser, 1997). It has previously been observed in a few studies that international students in the US are likely to underutilise counselling services on campus (Alexander, Klein, Workneh & Miller, 1981; Meyer, 1998; Nilsson, Berkel, Flores & Lucas, 2004; Pedersen, 1991). Several attempts have been made to explain why international students underutilise counselling services including unawareness about the concept of counselling (Brinson & Kottler, 1995), lack of openness or confidence in using counselling to address cross-

cultural issues (Constantine et al., 2005; Mori, 2000), and having a priority for academic, financial, and immigration issues rather than mental health (Alexander et al., 1981; Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002). So far, very little attention has been paid to the UK context while there is an increase in the number of international students at the UK universities. According to Lippincott & Mierzwa (1995) international students' willingness to seek counselling is not universal. Given the fact that international students are a heterogeneous group, students from different countries (e.g., Western vs. non-Western, developing vs. developed countries) may have different attitudes towards seeking psychological counselling (Dadfar & Friedlander, 1982; Yoo, 2001). Dadfar and Friedlander (1982) examined that Asian international students held more negative attitudes towards seeking counselling than international students from Europe and Latin America. Thus, studies which focus on subgroups of international students are beneficial in understanding the subgroup's attitude towards seeking professional psychological help.

Counselling centres in the university can be of great assistance to international students who have difficulties adjusting to the new culture, but studies have shown that international students tend to underutilise these services due to low levels of satisfaction with those services (Pedersen, 1991). A study suggests that cross-cultural barriers exist which interfere with international students' cultural needs of counselling; as a result, it creates challenges, in areas such as "cultural adaptation of techniques, counselling roles and boundaries, and engagement problems" for counsellors working in university settings (Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007, p.182). Additionally, English is a second language to many international students which may affect their capacity to fully express what they are going through. It is considered as a major cross-cultural barrier which results in a low level of utilisation of counselling services by international students.

The counsellors working with international students can face unique issues in counselling but a better understanding of the ways in which culture impacts their experience of living and studying in the host country can help counsellors to understand their situation better. Without the knowledge of cultural differences, there is a greater risk of issues like early termination, client dissatisfaction, and a sense of isolation experienced by international students (Anderson & Myer, 1985; Pedersen, 1991). Counsellors are expected to consider how their values, counselling styles, and way of practicing cater to the needs of international students. It is important for them to have a clear knowledge of challenges and difficulties related to the cultural adjustment period and

acculturation process (Arthur, 2010). It has been reported within the counselling services that there is a lack of emphasis on multicultural competence training which can lead to potential misinterpretation between counsellors and international students in regard to professional roles and boundaries and expectations of counselling. This can often lead to a lack of understanding amongst international students in terms of how they make sense of their own adaptation process and coping strategies (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Mori, 2000).

## **1.2 Statement of the problem**

In a review of the literature, there are limited studies that have attempted to investigate international students' attitudes and perceptions towards seeking counselling, and most of the studies were quantitative and conducted in the US. These studies either used a standardised instrument (Dadfar & Friedlander, 1982; Zhang & Dixon, 2003), such as the Attitude Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS, Fischer & Turner, 1970), or a survey questionnaire developed specifically for the study (Mau & Jepsen, 1988) to measure whether this population had positive or negative attitudes towards counselling and/or to what extent they were willing to seek counselling for personal issues. The past literature has found that international students had fewer positive attitudes or were less likely to seek counselling; however, it lacked details on how international students perceived counselling, what attitudes they had towards seeking counselling in terms of language, culture, and other barriers that kept them away from seeking psychological professional help. In order to add depth and detail to the current quantitative findings, qualitative research is needed. Previously conducted studies focused on either the general population of international or Chinese international students. There is however a dearth of studies focusing on the South Asian international student population. This is despite the fact that a large number of South Asian international students are studying in the UK and due to cultural difficulties, they do not seem to utilise mental health services. It is generally assumed that cultural factors seem to inhibit them from seeking counselling. They tend to have a belief that seeking counselling can stigmatise them and their family (Flum, 1998). Therefore, it is important to explore if these general assumptions still exist with the current South Asian international students in the UK. It is worth exploring their perceptions about seeking counselling and how their culture has an impact on their beliefs on help seeking or if their perception has changed after living in the UK.

### **1.3 Aims of the study and research questions**

The aim of this study is to use a qualitative research design to explore South Asian international students' perceptions of seeking psychological counselling services. The study also focuses on South Asian international students' perceived needs/conditions for seeking counselling, expectations, and cultural and language concerns related to seeking counselling. This study seeks to gather information which will help to address the encouraging or discouraging factors which need to be considered when counselling South Asian international students. Additionally, the study may inquire into students' experiences of living in the UK, challenges faced by them or prior counselling experience, if they had any. Specifically, the main research questions of this study are:

- 1) What are the perceptions of South Asian international students towards accessing counselling in the UK?
- 2) What are the factors that facilitate and inhibit South Asian international students in accessing counselling?

The participants don't necessarily need to have experienced counselling in the past as the purpose of this study is to explore their perception rather than their experience of counselling. This study intends to provide information about international students', and more specifically South Asian students', perceptions towards seeking counselling in the UK and add more knowledge to the multicultural counselling literature as well as to the field of counselling psychology and how culture contributes to this field. The researcher believes that the results of the study will help university mental health professionals and counselling services to understand South Asian international students' perceptions better and will help universities to provide counselling services to this population and other international students who share a similar cultural background more effectively. Moreover, the study may be useful for counsellors in South Asian countries to understand concerns students may have while seeking counselling in their home country and in the UK.

### **1.4 Positioning Statement**

My interest in this topic stems from my personal experience of being an international student. I identify myself as a 'South Asian' international student born and raised in India. As an

international student, everything was so new when I started my university experience. Soon I realized that studying in a foreign country can be very challenging. The first and foremost challenge that I faced was the cultural shock. The culture, atmosphere and people are different from in my home country. Initially, I struggled to understand British culture and how things are done differently. Another problem that I struggled with was communication. I was too shy as a person and, as a result, I had difficulty communicating in group situations and understanding the accent. Another big challenge that I faced was feeling homesick. I missed my family very much and found it difficult to do everyday tasks. I felt quite isolated and had episodes of feeling sad and anxious. During the course, I started personal therapy and I began to realise that being an international student can make you more vulnerable to adjustment issues and negative emotions which can have an impact on your wellbeing. Moreover, while interacting with other international students from South Asia, I realised that most of the international students faced similar challenges. I was lucky that I had an opportunity to seek personal therapy during my doctorate training and able to explore these issues in a safe space. However, not every international student has the opportunity to seek counselling and some have limited awareness about the importance of seeking help during the acculturation process. I became interested in exploring how students are dealing with such issues and how they perceive the process of accessing counselling in the UK in times of distress. My personal experience with such challenges contributed to the development of the present research.

### **1.5 Cultural competencies and counselling psychology**

Counselling psychology is oriented toward approaches that are rooted in humanistic practice, strengths-based perspectives, professionalism, and respect for diversity (Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014; Ratts & Pedersen, 2014). As a result, the counselling of diverse populations, multicultural counselling competencies “the extent to which a psychotherapist/counsellor is actively engaged in the process of self-awareness, obtaining knowledge, and implementing skills in working with diverse individuals” (Cornish et al, 2010, p. 7) operate as major developmental movements within the counselling profession (Comas-Diaz, 2012; Sue & Sue, 2016). Counselling psychology is to be practised in an anti-oppressive way, which means considering all contexts (Shillito-Clarke, 2006). Shillito-Clarke adds that counselling psychologists’ practice

is also influenced, to some degree, by the cultural context in which they practice; so, social changes (e.g. changing ethnic distributions in the UK) will have an impact on practice.

During the last decade, ideas about counselling psychology in a multicultural context have been developing gradually through articles, books and training courses, all attempting to address the mental health concerns of culturally diverse clients. In 2014, the British Psychological Society (BPS) put forward a proposal to include race, culture and diversity in counselling psychology training. The proposal was made by the Black and Asian Counselling Psychologists' Group (BACPG) to include race, culture and diversity in counselling psychology training, amended in December 2015 by BPS (Eleftheriadou, 2014). The aim of this module was to address the concepts of "race", culture and ethnicity and understand their complexity. "It is a way of helping us to become sensitive to the differences and the importance of the social context, cultural and racial roots, and, subsequently, the formation of our complex and ever-changing psycho-racial identity" (p.20). The issue of race, culture and ethnicity are addressed either through the concept of multicultural counselling or the exploration of race and culture in therapy (Moodley & Palmer, 2006). In addition to the BPS guidelines, Ibrahim and Essandoh (1996) called for a paradigm shift in counselling psychology in the way multicultural therapy is viewed. They advocate going from dealing primarily with the mainstream population, with the occasional reference to ethnic minorities, to viewing all therapy as a multicultural endeavour where all cultures are truly embraced. Traditional counselling theories, such as person-centred or psychodynamic, have been perceived as "highly ambiguous and often irrelevant" in a culturally infused environment (Exum & Lau, 1988; Sue & Sue, 1990). Ponterotto and Casas (1987) reported "widespread ineffectiveness" of traditional counselling approaches and techniques with racial and ethnic minority groups, claiming that the counselling profession as a whole 'is failing to effectively meet the mental health needs of racial and ethnic minorities'.

As the number of international students continues to increase at UK universities, the demand for counselling of diverse populations will continue to grow and the need for counselling psychologists to tailor their services and skills to the needs of various cultural populations has become more relevant (Constantine, Kindaichi, Arorash, Donnelly, & Jung, 2002). In particular, the recognition of the experience of international students living in the UK and the adjustment issues commonly faced by them has been crucial in helping many counsellors and counselling

psychologists to identify effective interventions, in order to address such issues and to work more broadly to effect social change (Hage, 2003; Vera & Speight, 2003). This awareness and recognition have led to the emergence of the multicultural competence movement (Arredondo & Perez, 2003; Sue et al., 1982).

Within counselling services, it has been reported that there is not enough emphasis on multicultural competence training in counsellor training programmes (Arthur, 1997; Jacob & Greggo, 2001). As a result, it can create misunderstandings between practitioners and international students with regard to understanding the process, expectations of counselling and coping strategies (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Mori, 2000). Issues of “race”, culture and ethnicity are constantly being reconstructed in the profession of counselling and how multicultural competencies can help mental health practitioners to meet the needs of culturally diverse students will be discussed more broadly in the literature review chapter. The current study enables a more in-depth understanding of the topic to be developed and this may contribute to the development of more culturally responsive interventions that support international students and counsellors at the universities who are working with such students.

## **1.6 Definition of terms**

Key terms for this study are defined below.

*South Asian international students:* South Asian international students are defined as individuals who come from South Asia or Southern Asia (students from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) who are currently enrolled in a UK higher education institution to obtain professional training or a specific degree.

*Counselling:* Counselling and psychotherapy are mainly listening and talking based methods of addressing psychological and sometimes psychosomatic problems, including deep and prolonged human suffering, situational dilemmas, crises and developmental needs, and aspiration towards the realization of human potential (Terry et al, 2017,p.2).

*Perception:* refers to the way one perceives or understands an experience and how one makes sense of the knowledge (Tinsley & Wescot, 1990). In the current study, the term ‘perception’ includes participants’ understanding and knowledge of different aspects of counselling, such as



what counselling is, how it is done ,why and when people seek counselling, and if they are comfortable in seeking counselling. *Perception* is used interchangeably with the word, *understanding* in this study.

*Higher Education Institutes (HEIs)*: the term Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) has been used in the study to describe academic institutions including universities and colleges which offer higher education and formal learning through accredited undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate academic degrees, diplomas, and professional certifications.

*Counselling services*: this term refers to university and college counselling services which provide service to HEIs' student populations. The teams for these services consist of counsellors or therapists who practice within the profession of counselling and psychotherapy. The term 'support services' is used often , these refers to stand to the wide spectrum of support services available to international students at HEIs such as international support offices, academic advising services, student support services, and career services.

*Stigma*: the term 'stigma' has been used in this study to reflect participants negative views or stereotypes towards counselling or mental health. Dudley (2000) defined stigma as stereotypes or negative views attributed to a person or groups of people when their characteristics or behaviours are viewed as different from or inferior to societal norms. It is viewed as a social cognitive process comprising three components: stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination (Corrigan, Watson, & Ottati, 2003). Stereotypes are shared beliefs about personality traits and behaviours of members of a social group (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996). Prejudice is the endorsement of negative attitudes and stereotypes towards particular social groups (Krueger, 1996) which leads to discrimination; the behavioural reaction (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998).

*Multicultural counselling*: Multicultural counselling is defined as "counselling in which the counsellor and the client are culturally different because of socialization acquired in distinct cultural, sub-cultural, racial-ethnic or socioeconomic environments" (Vontress, 1988, p. 74). 'Multicultural' is relating to or representing several different cultures or cultural elements. Multiculturalism refers to a perspective in which diversity in backgrounds and experiences related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, disability, education status, and socioeconomic class is recognized. It is a social movement that celebrates

and values pluralism, or differences between individuals and groups. The related term “cross-cultural” has also been used throughout the study when referring to working with diversity with clients in a counselling context as outlined by Pedersen (1985). *Cross culture* refers to more than one culture, this means that often cultures are compared or contrasted. It is inclusive of a wide variety of reference group identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class). Another term which is distinguished from cross-culture/multicultural is *Intercultural*. It refers to a process of maintaining the link between individuality and culture (The United Church of Canada, 2011). It is something that occurs between people of different cultures including different religious groups or people of different national origins. At some point, the term ‘multinational’ is used to indicate including or involving several countries or nationalities.

Multicultural counselling has been described as an important force in counselling (Pedersen & Locke, 1998, p.12), suggesting that “multiculturalism rests upon the belief that all cultures have values, beliefs, customs, language, knowledge, and worldviews that are valid”. Moreover, multicultural counselling is built on an understanding that counsellors and clients alike are cultural beings who are exposed to cultural influences which affect their life situations and worldviews (Lewis & Arnold, 1998). According to Sue et al. (2001) it is a process which recognises a client’s cultural values and client’s identity to include individual, group and universal dimensions, advocates the use of universal and culture-specific strategies and roles in the healing process and balances the importance of individualism and collectivism in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of a client and client’s systems (Sue, 2001).

Multicultural counselling requires therapeutic cultural competencies such as counsellor awareness, beliefs, knowledge, and skills within the multicultural counselling context. As practitioners, we attempt to understand the “cultural” and psychological views of the world of clients who are culturally different to ourselves. Such competencies require the ability to work in collaboration with clients of different cultural backgrounds and with environments different to one’s own cultural norms. Constantine et al. (2007, p.24) argued that this could be achieved by “drawing from an existing fund of cultural knowledge to design mental health interventions that are relevant to marginalized populations”.

There are some challenges posed by multicultural counselling, including the continuing development of sensitivity to cultural diversity, the shift from theories and attitudes to actual practices (Lee & Richardson, 1991) and the adoption of new roles. A difficulty faced in multiculturalism is viewing culture through a monoculture lens focusing solely on one group or on one set of identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality and social class). It might be essential to move beyond a single focus, essentially, to examine the complex interaction and intersection of identity development across multiple cultural groups and identities (Bowleg & Bauer, 2016; Warner & Shields, 2013). Intersectionality theory applications are interdisciplinary (Bowleg, 2008, 2012; Warner, 2008) with evidence in law, sociology, psychology, counselling, and education. In one perspective, the conceptualization of intersectionality addresses multiple cultural identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual identity, ability, social class, spirituality). Other perspectives emphasize the notion that cultural identity is difficult to conceptualize beyond just one set of values tied to one identity. Two or more cultural identities are difficult to be treated as separate constructs, considering their relationship with each other (e.g., race and gender) and the process of identity development that occurs in tandem (Cole, 2008, 2009). An additional perspective from intersectionality theory is its address to social inequalities that are perpetuated by institutional oppression (Shields, 2008; Walby, Armstrong, & Strid, 2012). To address the inequalities tied politically to institutions, intersectionality theory focuses on moving beyond a micro-level perspective to a macro-level perspective (Carastathis, 2016; Cho, 2013; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). The theory also posits that instituting change is possible by addressing problems that are inherent in political structures (Crenshaw et al, 2013).

Another major criticism of multicultural counselling approaches is the lack of evidence-based practices. Morales and Norcross (2010, p. 283) stated “Multiculturalism without strong research risks becoming an empty political value and evidence based training without cultural sensitivity risks irrelevancy”. However, gradually evidence-based practice has been broadened to include the understanding of the influence of an individual’s cultural differences and the need to take into account clients’ cultural characteristics. Moreno (2007, p.358) concluded that “the existing empirical multicultural competencies process/outcome research has shown consistently that counsellors who possess these competencies tend to evidence improved counselling processes and outcomes across racial and ethnic differences”. While working with diverse clients,

counsellors need to be aware that each culture is unique, and it is important to be respectful towards all cultures and cherish them.

### **1.7 Overview of the thesis**

This thesis is divided into six chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, findings and discussion and conclusion. Chapter One provides an overview of the thesis and includes the information on the research topic/aims and how the topic contributes to the profession. Chapter Two includes the review of literature in the context of the current study and a theoretical framework applicable to the research question. This chapter also justifies how the present study addresses the gap therein. Chapter Three describes and justifies the methodology used for this study. It also provides a rationale for the research design, sample, data collection and analysis. Chapter Four presents the findings of the study and analysis of the results whereas Chapter five includes analysis with regard to the study's research question, literature review and theoretical framework. It also includes the strengths or limitations of the current study and recommendations for future research. Chapter Six includes a conclusion to the study and the implications of the findings and contribution to knowledge. It also narrates the researcher's reflection on the study.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to review recent research through the relevant theoretical and research literature. The literature review involved various database searches to locate research relating to the perceptions of counselling or therapy among international students. In the search criteria, there was no restriction in terms of the publication year, but a limitation to studies written in English and the only literature found included studies from the US, Canada, Australia and the UK. As this study focuses on the perceptions of counselling or therapy among South Asian international students, the literature review provides an overview of international students' general perceptions of counselling as well as focusing on the factors that influence their perceptions. The following significant areas emerged while examining the literature review related to the present study. Firstly, a brief review has been provided on the common challenges faced by the international students. Secondly, their perceptions related to seeking counselling, this section also explored the literature in regard to the utilisation rate of counselling services by international students. Further section of the literature review provides an overview of reasons that may encourage international students to seek counselling and potential barriers for seeking counselling. However, it proved very challenging to gather information primarily on the South Asian population. Therefore, Asian international students in general, in the literature, were considered. The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of international students and the challenges they face with regard to counselling and their perception of counselling.

#### **2.2 International students and their roles**

Qualitative research has played an important role in giving international students an opportunity to voice their opinions on supports which are helpful and issues which are not while studying and living in another country. It can be used to explore their experiences and perceptions, allowing them to provide a holistic view of their experiences of living abroad and the challenges they might come across. When international students start their journey at foreign universities, they tend to face certain challenges as their circumstances change and they are expected to take on various competing and contradictory roles such as fulfilling self and family expectations or

dealing with cultural transition in terms of both academic and personal. Adjustment at university can be a stressful experience for both local and international students. For example, students have to adapt to new educational and social settings, as well as deal with developmental factors such as financial independence and establishing one's identity (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007). For those students who are moving away for the first time, their successful adjustment to a new culture and environment depends, to an extent, on their ability to find similarities between their new life and their previous life, and involves connecting with people who share similar values as them (Kenney, 2007). The international students may need to perceive and learn about these similarities and differences more realistically. However, when they fail to identify such issues, it leads to conflicts in their identity and can affect their objectives in studying abroad or hinder their emotional wellbeing.

The following section reviews studies in the literature on common issues faced by international students while living and learning in a different culture; it considers the factors affecting their acculturation adjustment, and their coping strategies.

### 2.2.1 Challenges faced by international students

Prior research suggests that international students can experience a large number of challenges as a result of language and cultural barriers, academic and financial difficulties, interpersonal problems, racial discrimination, loss of social support, alienation and homesickness (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Hsu, 2003; Andrade, 2006). Problems may occur in adjusting to a new culture, experiencing academic differences, dealing with developments in their country of origin (including the death of family or friends), experiencing anxiety about returning home, and dealing with financial, emotional and cross-cultural challenges (Hsu, 2003). Early examples of research have frequently investigated common challenges or stressors that international students experience (Alexander et al., 1981; Arthur, 2004; Pederson, 1991). However, these studies are quantitative in nature and primarily focus on 'what' but fail to answer 'why' and 'how'. These stressors are generally divided into three areas: (1) language difficulties, (2) academic and career stressors, and (3) socio-cultural stressors (Chen, 1999). I will discuss these areas briefly in the following section.

### *2.2.1.1 Language difficulties*

Language is considered to be the most prevalent challenge for international students, especially Asian international students (Mori, 2000; Swagler & Ellis, 2003). Studies have found that Asian students are more likely to suffer due to language difficulties since their first language is very different from English (Constantine et al., 2005; Coward, 2003). Additionally, other research reports that Asian international students have higher concerns about language issues than European students (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002), or lower perceived English fluency and usage than European students (Sodowsky & Plake, 1992; Yeh & Inose, 2003). However, more information is needed about language difficulties of international students as well as explorations of subgroup differences amongst them. Further investigation may be needed to examine the students' experiences and needs depending on their nationality and region. For instance, there may be differences between students coming from the same region and different countries.

In order for international students to make academic and social adjustments, it is important for them to have decent English language skills (Andrade, 2006). One of the studies, by Yeh and Inose (2003), suggests that poor English proficiency is considered to be the most prevalent barrier by international students as it affects their ability to succeed academically and engage socially with other students, which can eventually influence their psychological state of mind. Language can also have an impact on students' participation in class and group discussions, in terms of understanding lectures and writing assignments which can significantly impact international students' self-esteem increase their psychological distress and affect their overall experience as a student (Anna, 1998; Yang, Noels & Saumure, 2006). Many international students reported poor English-related skills, in terms of listening ability, lecture and reading comprehension, note taking, oral communication, vocabulary and writing, to be a serious issue (Lee, 1997; Lewthwaite, 1996; Senyshyn et al., 2000). As described by Coward (2003) and Mori (2000), poor communication in English also has an impact on students' social interactions as well as their academic performance by diminishing their ability to understand lectures, take notes, participate in class discussions, and complete reading and writing assignments and this has a significant impact on their ability to adjust in a new environment. Studies have found that students lack confidence in their English abilities (Lewthwaite, 1996; Robertson et al., 2000; Senyshyn et al., 2000; Tompson & Tompson, 1996) and are fearful about making mistakes due

to English being their second language (Jacob & Greggo, 2001) The effect that has on their class participation is confirmed by a number of researchers (Lewthwaite, 1996; Robertson et al., 2000; Tompson & Tompson, 1996).

Another study by Poyrazli and Kavanaugh (2006) found that international students who were academic low achievers reported lower levels of English proficiency and greater overall adjustment issues. The inability to achieve academic success may create a great level of distress for international students. Lack of English skills may not only affect their grades but their participation in the class or group projects. This finding is consistent with further research showing a relationship between English proficiency and academic performance among international students (Poyrazli, Arbona, Bullington & Pisecco, 2001; Stoyhoff, 1997; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Moreover, a qualitative study examined the perceptions of 27 academic staff (professors, department chairs, and deans) about the challenges faced by international students; they identified poor English proficiency to be the main challenge due to the fact that it can affect students' academic performance. Several studies have examined the importance of English language proficiency with regard to international student's socio-cultural and academic adaptation to a new country. However, language proficiency not only involves written or spoken English but mastery of other skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. While defining the adjustment difficulties of international students in regard to language proficiency we should keep in mind each of these skills may affect acculturation differently. The academic performance of the international students reported in these studies may be affected by lack of such set of skills. In a systematic review, Zhang and Goodson (2011) found that English proficiency was a predictor of both psychological and socio-cultural adjustment. However, they only reviewed studies conducted in the United States. More reviews are needed to suggest which factors might be important in other countries. Furthermore, the literature includes significant evidence that lower levels of English proficiency are a predictor of acculturative stress defined as the 'disorientation that often accompanies cross-cultural transitions' (Yakunina et. al, 2013, p.216), and/or feeling of sadness (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007; Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008; Yeh & Inose, 2003). A study by Barratt and Huba (1994) found that international students' English competency increased their self-esteem and resulted in more interpersonal interactions and relationships with



native students. The international students who struggle with the English competency might be encouraged to seek support from university language centres to improve their academic proficiency as well as to reduce their level of acculturative stress.

One investigative case study by Thorstensson (2002) researched the academic experiences of six Asian international graduate students in a business school, and found that classroom participation was particularly challenging for this group of students. Participants reported challenges in “formulating thoughts on the spot” and “in finding the appropriate language to communicate ideas and questions coherently” (p.333). This might not only affect their grades but students might doubt their own capabilities and may struggle to voice their opinion. It was also reported that they had difficulties in discussion with native students and voiced the need to be aggressive in order to be heard. Inability to have discussion with peers may lead to withdrawal and have an immense impact on their social/academic life which can lead to different emotions such as sadness, lack of self esteem or even aggressive behaviour. The feeling of aggression may exacerbate for international students due to inability to articulate their feelings. However, university can play an important role in educating international students about such issues and should encourage them to access support to express these emotions in a healthy way.

Previous exposure to English language in their home country may also have an impact on international students’ adjustment in the host country. For many Asian international students, the linguistic system of their native languages (e.g., Japanese) is quite distinct from English (Miyagawa, 1999), and these languages are spoken and written in very different ways. Therefore, East Asians may experience more difficulties in learning English than some other international students (e.g. South Asians) whose first languages are relatively close to English or have been exposed to English language in their home country. Kukatlapalli (2016) pointed in his study that 87% of Indian international students studying at New Zealand universities had their previous education through English medium schools/colleges and as a result they had less language difficulties during their stay. Guzma et al (2006) indicates that Korean students experienced difficulties in their English language learning at a multidisciplinary university in Philippine. The common difficulties experienced were inability to use English language both in daily conversations and in academic settings. It was noted in the study that participants barely had the opportunity to use the English language in Korea, so they struggled to use it in the Philippine

context. Hence, Asian international students are expected to encounter language barriers when they first arrive in the UK as many of them have none or limited exposure to English language.

### *2.2.1.2 Academic and career stressors*

The majority of international students report experiencing stress related to academic pressure (Alexander et al., 1981; Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002; Leong & Sedlacek, 1989; Yi, Lin & Kishimoto, 2003). Alexander et al. (1981) investigated academic adjustment and finances as the factors expected to be the most prevalent problems for international students compared to homesickness, personal happiness, and establishing social contacts. When international students face challenges, they are more likely to focus on academic, language and career-related concerns than personal issues (Leong & Sedlacek, 1989; Mau & Jepsen, 1990). An exploratory study by Hanassab and Tidwell (2002) examined 640 international students' needs and concerns about adjustment enrolled at UCLA. They investigated different areas of adjustment including cultural, language, academic, career, immigration, psychological, personal and social related issues, and found that participants identified knowledge about immigration regulation as the priority rather than academic- and career-related concerns which were second most important. This may be due to the fact that international students are concerned about their status as outsiders in a different country and want to increase their knowledge about work visas available when they complete their studies. However, it was noted by the researchers that international students from UCLA experienced substantial changes in their awareness of different philosophies, cultures, and ways of life. This may relate to the diversity of students present on campus and in their host country. International students coming from different regions experience change differently when exposed to the host culture. The findings of this exploratory study may suggest that those international students who have been here longer experienced more change than those who have been here for a shorter period of time. Those students who prioritise academic and career needs are likely to face stress due to performance expectations and adjustment to a different system (Chen, 1999; Paige, 1990) and are likely to value their academic performance as it is their primary goal for studying abroad, particularly for Asian students (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006). They reported that although they may have high expectations of academic success, their academic functioning may be negatively impacted due to language barriers and unfamiliarity with the new education system. Additionally, specifically when international students have to

take on a different role in the new educational system, either as a teaching assistant or an education assistant, they are likely to face challenges relating to being a “foreign teaching assistant” due to the different culture, language and accents (Mori, 2000; Paige, 1990). Some of the literature also highlights the vulnerability of international students to exploitation. This may occur when they do not have equal opportunities, especially when foreign students end up at an institution which offers a poor standard of education in the visiting country or are financially exploited, perhaps when an educational institution regards internationalisation as little more than a chance to sell products to “foreigners” (Altbach & Teichler, 2001).

Mau and Jepsen (1990) conducted a study to explore the perceptions of students towards counselling or help-seeking behaviour. The results showed that Chinese international graduate students in general perceived their problems (e.g., health issues, financial difficulties, personal-psychological problems) as being less serious than white American graduate students, except in terms of issues related to career and educational concerns. The perception of Chinese students was that issues relating to their career and education were more serious. Similarly, a study by Gim et al. (1990) revealed that Asian college students were most concerned about academic or career issues, as opposed to relationship issues, and conflicts with parents. The sample of these studies solely consisted of Chinese international students. As this is a geographically large country, it is important to note that people who live in different areas may show distinctly different characteristics. Often, the nation-state is assumed to control the geographical region and is considered as identical with society. There is a presupposition that the nation-state or society is the natural social and political form of the world also known as “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002). It is a stance in the social sciences that unjustifiably presupposes the nation-state, uncritically treats it as the natural form of social organization and/or reifies it (Chernilo, 2006). Methodological nationalism leads to a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of social reality by failing to recognize sub-regions and by not taking into account how nations are situated in and constituted by local, transnational and global forces (Amelina et al., 2012; Beck, 2000; Chernilo, 2006).

Another most important stressor for international students is applying for jobs and career placements as they are experiencing various immigration restrictions and their uncertainty about returning to their home country after graduation (Sandhu, 1995; Shen & Herr, 2004). There are

many factors which make the decision-making process very complicated; these relate to job opportunities, work permits, the living and working environment, family expectations etc. Such concerns might increase the likelihood of international students seeking career support services in the university compared to home country students (Leong & Sedlacek, 1989).

### *2.2.1.3 Social and cultural stressors*

All the issues related to learning in and adjusting to a new culture can be serious, especially for international students who suddenly become vulnerable in a new country. Numerous studies have explored the ways in which international students face different types of social and cultural problems such as social isolation and alienation (Kaczmarek et al., 1994; Klomegah, 2006), cultural value conflicts (Arthur, 2004; Constantine et al., 2005; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986), loss or change of social/economic status (Paige, 1990; Sandhu, 1995), adjustment to the social norms in the host country (Church, 1982; Parr, Bradley & Bingi, 1992), and stereotypes and prejudice (Constantine et al., 2005; Lin & Yi, 1997; Paige, 1990; Spencer-Rodgers, 2001).

The findings from Hanassab's (2006) research revealed that in interactions with their classmates, international students from the Middle East, Asia, and Americas experienced the highest level of discrimination, while international students from Europe experienced the least amount of discrimination. Similarly, there are other studies which identify racial discrimination as a significant problem for international students. As cited in Barletta and Kobayashi (2007), international students who are visible minorities might experience more discrimination due to the colour of their skin. Being aware of power and systemic or individual racism seems important for people who are working with international students to be aware of their own cultural values and the cultural diversity of students.

Although social and cultural stressors encompass various issues, social alienation is considered to be the most highly reported issue by international students (e.g., Klomegah, 2006; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1991). According to Burbach (1972), social alienation includes three elements: powerlessness, meaninglessness, and social estrangement. Powerlessness is the feeling of lack of influence or a sense of the impossibility of achieving desired outcomes. This is usually experienced when students are in the process of adjusting to a new system and are restricted due to many factors relating to immigration, the new educational system, a different classroom

culture etc. Meaninglessness is the inability to make sense of what is happening and uncertainty. This is experienced when students realise they were functionally effective in their home country and they have suddenly become vulnerable in a new country and are having to deal with a lot of uncertainties. Social estrangement is the feeling of isolation and loneliness. They feel lonely as they do not have their family and friends with them and they are in the process of making new friends and find it difficult to socialise. When international students go through the process of acculturation they are likely to encounter these elements of social alienation at some point. The exploration of socio-cultural stressors faced by international students could help practitioners or educational institutions to understand their experience in a better way in order to provide support. International students are expected to interact and socialise with students from the host culture since this makes it easier for them to adjust to their new environment. However, it is reported that such interactions can be difficult. In an Australian study (Rosenthal et al., 2007), it was discussed that international students are more likely to interact with members of their own culture than with members of the host culture. It was also discussed that international students from Asian countries interact more with people from their own culture than they do with Australians; interestingly, the findings were different for students from non-Asian countries.

Another factor which can be classified as a socio-cultural stressor is “culture shock”. Bektas (2008) described culture shock as “the consequence of strain and anxiety resulting from contact with a new culture and the feeling of loss, confusion, and powerlessness resulting from loss of accustomed cultural cues and social roles” (p.274). It can be quite severe for international students coming from different cultural or religious backgrounds; as a result, they report feelings of isolation and marginalisation (Bradley, 2000; Sandhu, 1994). It is very common for international students to experience culture shock when studying abroad. However, the way they cope with it is varied. Some coping strategies include seeking social support from family and friends (Pederson, 1991b), or turning to religion and spirituality (Minn Chai, 2009). There are studies which indicate that if international students interact with students from both their own culture and the host culture, they tend to adapt to the new culture more effectively and they are more likely to face challenges in adjusting to the new culture if they interact solely with people from their own country (Berry, 1997). Several studies found that students from Asia, Africa, or South America perceived more social alienation (Schram & Lauver, 1988), prejudice (Sodowsky

& Plake, 1992) and concerns about interacting with Americans (Trice, 2004) than students from Europe. Specifically, the researchers found that East and Southeast Asian students tended to be fairly isolated from US students, and most of them expressed concerns about relating to and establishing friendships with US Americans. Again, there is no evidence available on the experience of South Asian students living in the UK in this regard. As the statistics suggest the number of South Asian students are increasing at the UK universities it would be useful to understand their social circumstances and their experience of interaction with native students and British culture as it can influence their ability to adapt to a new culture.

Yeh and Inose (2003) investigated the influence of social support satisfaction, social connectedness, and English fluency in predicting acculturative distress among 327 international undergraduate students from various regions of Asia, Europe, Central/Latin America, Africa, North America, and Oceania. They defined acculturative stress as “the distinctive type of stress associated with individuals’ cross-cultural encounters, which can manifest in physical, social, and psychological problems” (p. 16). The study showed that social connectedness and social support network satisfaction were significantly related to predicting international students’ acculturative distress. They hypothesised that international students’ close connections and social support networks helped them adjust to the new culture and deal with their acculturative stress. They analysed data by geographic region rather than by specific country of origin. There are vast cultural differences within each of these regions that were not addressed in this study. Further, the participants completed ‘the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students’ in English, not in their native languages which may potentially have an impact on their responses. Constantine et al. (2005) interviewed 15 Asian international undergraduate students and found that acculturative stress causes anxiety amongst international students. The participants reported feeling anxious about fitting in with domestic students. Participants also experienced cultural value conflicts between their cultures of origin and the foreign culture, in areas such as different gender role socialisation norms and values placed on groups, and relationships vs. individual competition.

As we know that international students face a range of difficulties compared to home country students, they are more likely to have unique counselling needs and expectations. This promotes the need for counsellors working with such students to have a better understanding of their

experiences in a host country and their aim to provide more meaningful, relevant, and culturally sensitive services.

### **2.3 Emotional difficulties of international students**

An international student faces different conflicts relating to various issues such as culture shock, adjustment to food, climate, language, identity crisis. Such problems can, in some circumstances, lead to psychological and emotional difficulties. Changes within a new environment can create tension in students' personal and academic lives. According to Hamamura and Laird (2014), Asian students are more likely to have psychological difficulties than do domestic students, due to the process of acculturation. They are at increased risk of feeling anxious or sad because of language barriers, problems adjusting, lack of social supports and friendships, and lack of familiarity with new culture. The study also reported that Asian students are more prone to stress due to internalised or unrealistic expectations or family pressure. However, it should be noted that sample sizes in this study were uneven between East Asian international students ( $n = 52$ ) and domestic students ( $n = 126$ ). This may be considered a potential threat to the validity and reliability of this study. Khoo et al. (1994) also found that international students can be more vulnerable to adjustment issues compared to local students relating to emotions and physical wellbeing. However, some of the issues can be more serious and lead to emotional or health crises (Oropeza et al., 1991).

There are a few studies which have investigated the transition period before and after their stay at the university and how students' physical and mental wellbeing is affected. Sam and Eide (1991) investigated 310 international college students in Norway, during their transitional phase, and found a decline in their health and increase in certain emotional changes such as loneliness, tiredness, worrying too much about things. They also found that during the second and third year of their overseas stay, international students were more vulnerable to developing emotional wellbeing. Studies have reported that a lack of quality sleep, poor nutrition and reduced amounts of physical exercise can contribute to the risk of developing loss of interest and feeling of hopelessness in international students (Kono et al., 2015). A study in the UK by Still (1960) found that they presented more physical and emotional related issues as compared to home students. However, there are some comparative studies which are contradictory in nature, comparing stress and adjustment between international and domestic students and finding

contradictory results (Hechanova et al., 2002; Kaczmarek et al., 1995; Leong et al., 1990; Nguyen, 1996; Zheng & Berry, 1991). For example, several researchers found that international students had more difficulties with interpersonal-social demands (e.g., interaction with host nationals, fitting in on campus) than native students, but that there were no differences in emotional strain and academic stress (Hechanova et al., 2002; Kaczmarek et al., 1995; Misra & Castillo, 2004). One of the studies compared the differences between Asian international students (n = 75) and white home students (n=129) and measured their levels of stress, physical health problems and psychological distress. In spite of their minority and cultural differences, Asian students were no more vulnerable than native students to stress, health and psychological problems (Leong et al., 1990). Another study with Chinese international students and white home students found that they had different mental health beliefs and coping strategies; however, no differences were found between the two groups in terms of general well-being (Nguyen, 1996). It is possible that such results are due to communication difficulties whereby international students find it difficult to express their feelings in a second language as well as finding it stigmatising. This idea has been supported by Okorochoa (2010) who found that Chinese and East Asian international students tend to express their physical distress as they are less stigmatised than psychological issues. Ebbin and colleague's (1988) study explored how international students had a higher frequency of expressing stress-related problems, including feeling anxious, headaches and inability to sleep as compared to domestic students.

#### **2.4 International students coping with acculturation**

An international student's acculturation process is largely affected by various factors such as the nature of the larger host society, the type of acculturation group, and an individual's demographic, social, and psychological characteristics (Berry et al., 1987; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). However, socialisation with other international students from the same country and host country is considered to be the most effective predictor of successful adjustment across studies (e.g., Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Klomegah, 2006). Interacting with students from the host country helps international students to learn about the new culture, develop social skills and have access to more information. Studies depict that international students who had more social contact and received more social support reported overall better cultural and psychological adjustment (Kagan & Cohen, 1990; Searle & Ward, 1990; Yeh & Inose, 2003),



less social alienation (Klomegah, 2006), lower levels of loneliness (Ng, 2001), and more confidence in coping with academic stress (Wan et al., 1992).

Myburgh et al. (2006) studied international students' coping experiences and mechanisms and found that they used different resources to cope with different issues. For example, international students mainly relied on their social support system either in their country of origin or other international students in the host country to cope with feelings such as isolation, loneliness, and insecurity while living in a foreign country. The study also explored how, in order to deal with the challenges, international students relied on internal resources (e.g., beliefs about their personal efficacy and worth) and made efforts to actively engage in problem solving. Another study by Constantine et al. (2005) found that international students typically use constructive or adaptive coping processes, such as seeking social support, problem-solving, accepting responsibility, and positive reappraisal, rather than distancing or escape-avoidance coping. They tend primarily to seek informal support (e.g., family and friends) to address personal and cultural adjustment issues (Brinson, 1995; Constantine et al., 2005; Lewthwaite, 1996; Zhai, 2002). International students can cope with culture shock and acculturative stress in different ways. Some might rely on seeking support outside their social circle and family (Pederson, 1991), or turning to religion or spirituality (Minn Chai, 2009). Task-oriented and avoidance-oriented coping strategies were positively associative with a reduction in acculturative stress among Asian international students (Ra & Trusty, 2015). It has also been found, in contrast, that emotion-oriented strategies were associated with an increase in acculturative stress. Similarly, a study by Akhtar and Kroner-Herwig (2015) investigated how different coping styles are associated with the level of acculturative stress among international students. The study found that strategies like suppressive coping (a tendency to avoid coping activities and deny problems) and reactive coping (a tendency to have strong emotional responses, distortion, and impulsivity) were significantly related to higher levels of acculturative stress among international students. The evidence indicates that international students go through the process of acculturation and adjustment issues but often make choices not to seek professional support. However, the cross-sectional nature of this study provides only a snapshot of the situation at a single point in time about the observed associations among variables. It would be worth exploring the association of

variables over time by longitudinal study. The following section will explore why international students utilise counselling services or why they choose not to.

## **2.5 Utilisation of counselling services by international students**

So far, we have explored how international students are at risk of experiencing adjustment difficulties and various mental health problems. In the context of this, they are also believed to underutilise counselling services. In a relatively recent study involving 4,699 first year university students at a British university (84% of first year students at the university), it was reported that 3% had used the university counselling service by the end of the second semester (Cooke et al., 2006). In the same study, only 5% of students categorised as ‘vulnerable’ on the basis of their GP-CORE psychological wellbeing scores had accessed university counselling, with the majority indicating that they had not used alternative services (Cooke et al., 2006). Nilsson, Berkel, Flores and Lucas (2004) sought to understand the utilisation rates and present the concerns of international students (n= 41). The results indicated that only about 2% of the international student body sought counselling services from the counselling centre that year. The results also demonstrated that most of the international students who sought counselling presented with concerns about depression, assertiveness, their academic major, and anxiety, and that about a third dropped out after the initial intake session. Whereas, in a comparative study of international students’ and home students’ use of counselling service, for example, Anderson and Myer (1985) found that 33% of international students who sought therapy at a college counselling centre failed to return for a second appointment, as compared to 12% of home students. These studies involved a smaller sample size of international students and were classified in one group, disregarding the diversity of this sample in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and cultural background. Similarly, Xie (2006) studied the utilisation rate for counselling services amongst international students and European students and found that 79% of the clients at the university counselling centre were European students (69% of the student body), while 4% of the clients were international students (8% of the student body).

Research suggests that international students generally do not seek services from counselling centres on campus (Mau, 1990). The study by Mau (1990) suggests that Asian students seek counselling at a much lower rate than native students. The study also showed that Asian students utilized a broader support network such as utilizing family, friends, professors and advisors than

did home students. It was found that home students seek help for health, academic and financial problems. However, Asian students sought help for academic, career-educational and health problems. The study suggests that the Asian students are likely to underutilise the counselling services due to higher priority on their career and academic goals rather than on social or personal concerns. Asian cultures perceive personal troubles and shortcomings as indicative of a lack of determination or as a failing by the individual, which is consistent with the literature (Mau, 1990; Chu, Yeh, Klein, Alexander, & Miller, 1971) which might hinder them from seeking counselling. Another reason for the underutilization of counselling services could be that international students have not been exposed to such services in their own countries (Kilinc & Granello, 2003) due to which they might not be aware of the process of seeking counselling. A study by Rosenthal et al. (2006) found that 65.5% of their sample population of international students did not know where to go for counselling assistance due to which they are highly prone to underutilise the services.

Lin (1996) found that international students from Asian countries do not seek professional help until their have exhausted their primary support network. On the contrary, Cramer (1999) reported that Asian students are more likely to utilize counselling services when they have a high degree of distress. He also found that Asian students who have a positive view of counselling and previous experience will seek counselling much more often than those who don't (Cramer, 1999). Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson (2006) reported similar findings that international students who had positive prior experience of the counselling service are more likely to seek in future and could be the main source of encouragement for other students to seek assistance from the counselling service. Sue and Sue (1999) did comparisons between the utilization of mental health services between Asian and non-Asian students. The study suggests that the Asian students underutilise services more related to cultural factors which prohibits seeking professional help. Their study also supports evidence that Asian students are more likely to present physical or body related complaints as they are easily accepted by them as compared to psychological or emotional concerns (Wang & Marsella, 1999).

Yakunina and Weigold (2011) reported gender differences reported in the utilisation of university counselling services. Generally, studies have reported that females are more likely to use these services than males (e.g., Connell et al., 2007; Flisher et al., 2002). In a study by Arco

et al. (2005) females were 10% more likely to attend counselling services than males; however, no significant differences due to gender remained when those students receiving counselling were compared with the general university population. Similarly, a study by Raunic and Xenos (2008) reported that only 2-4% of students accessed university counselling services with females more likely to use the services as compared to men who preferred to seek help from family or friends over counsellors. Intersectional theory asserts that people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression: their race, nationality, gender, religion, and other identity markers. Intersectionality recognizes that identity markers (e.g. “gender” and “nationality”) do not exist independently of each other, and that each informs the others, often creating a complex convergence of oppression.

Yi, Junn-Chih, and Kishimoto (2003) examined 562 international students’ utilisation of counselling; 59% of the participants were Asian students. The study showed that undergraduate students were more likely to seek counselling for academic problems whereas graduate students seek counselling for personal problems such as romantic relationship issues. The study also looked at the pattern of referral with 57.6% of participants referring themselves to the centre, as opposed to being referred by someone else. A similar study was conducted at an Australian metropolitan university; the study provided data related to the use of university health and counselling services. The research found that students were under-utilising both health and counselling services. However, students who did seek help evaluated their experience as positive.

As in the previous section, the fact that international students are more likely to receive informal support rather than formal counselling services is apparent. There are studies indicating that students may seek alternative ways to deal with their problems, such as seeking out support from families or friends as opposed to utilising counselling services (Morgan et al., 2003; Olivas & Li, 2006; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Setiawan, 2006). One study pointed out that students may be more likely to seek the help of their families and friends instead of counselling services if their own culture does not recognise the value of professional and support services (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004).

The literature stresses upon the assumption that international students have need of help during the adjustment process, particularly counselling, however they make less use of university services than expected. The studies suggest that international students continue to underutilize services within university counselling centres despite facing many difficulties in the host country (Carr et al, 2003; Constantine et al, 2005; Kilinc & Granello, 2003; Zhang & Dixon, 2003). Many international students tend to view counselling as an inappropriate source for help either due to personal or cultural factors (Dadfar & Friedlander, 1982) or those who utilise these services often have a lower return rate. This highlights the importance of exploring these perceptions and views about the services. This will help us to identify the barriers and find potential solutions to increase the uptake of these services.

## **2.6 International students and counselling**

Many qualitative and quantitative studies have been conducted to examine international students' perceptions of and attitudes towards seeking psychological services (e.g., Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Harik-Williams, 2003; Tedeschi & Willis, 1993). The following section will provide details about some general and specific perceptions identified by international students and issues reported about counselling services.

Thomas and Althen (1989) summarised some of the issues faced by the international students in their counselling. Cultural stereotyping is considered to be the most important problem faced. Both positive and negative stereotypes can prevent the counsellor from communicating effectively and accurately with international students. Their study suggests that international students can present with complex issues due to having cultural different views, values, attitudes and identity. It might be difficult for counsellors to identify the source of their problems as it can be due to differences in cultural values and norms. It has been argued that contemporary Western approaches are used by counsellors in English-speaking countries and whether such approaches are appropriate for international students or not. Moreover, cultural differences between counsellors and international students can create more tensions if counsellors are unfamiliar with certain cultural narratives and identifying what shapes students' beliefs and behaviours (Anderson & Myer, 1985; Mori, 2000). Some of these issues will be explained in greater detail below.

### 2.6.1 International students' perceptions of seeking counselling

International students reported their experiences and perceptions related to seeking counselling. International students' previous counselling experiences, previous training/education in counselling, support networks, and acknowledgement of the need for professional help influenced their readiness to seek counselling (Najmi, 2013; Xie, 2007). When information is available to students on campus to make them aware of psychological counselling services, they become more open towards seeking counselling. Brinson and Kottler (1995), conducted a study of 100 international students, and found that most of them were not aware of counselling services or the concept of counselling. They also found that international students were reluctant to go to a foreign counsellor due to cultural differences.

The nature and severity of international students' problems and the resources available to help them can influence their openness to seek counselling (Rhee, 2015). Studies have discussed how international students can be hesitant to seek counselling because of the nature of their presenting issues or assumptions about counselling due to privacy and confidentiality concerns (Najmi, 2013; Rhee, 2015; Davis, 2010). The study also reported that international students may feel vulnerable about disclosing personal information to the counsellor which can hinder them from seeking counselling. Zhang et al. (2003) found relationships between acculturation and attitudes toward psychological help-seeking in a sample of 170 Asian international students. Results showed a significant relationship between levels of acculturation and attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help. Significant correlations were found between students' levels of acculturation and stigma tolerance and confidence in mental health practitioners. These findings demonstrate that international students' willingness to seek services is associated with a lack of privacy or lack of knowledge regarding the services available to them.

### 2.6.2 Reasons for seeking counselling

Various studies describe the reasons for which international students seek counselling (Rhee, 2015; Jones, 2012; Xie, 2007). Acculturative stress and psychological concerns are explored as the primary reasons for seeking counselling. The acculturative stress category included preparing to leave home, the adjustment process, frustration related to language barriers, independence versus dependence, and inability to express negative emotions.

International students mainly struggle in terms of their adjustment to a new culture. Leong (1984) reviewed the literature on counselling international students with regard to three types of problem situations. Firstly, being away from home, living with peers and being autonomous were considered as problems common to all college students. Secondly, students may struggle with the adjustment to being away from home for a long period of time. Other issues can include culture shock, culture fatigue or role shock. Thirdly, students may face difficulties related to finances, immigration and others. The language barrier can lead to frustration and mean that students are unable to communicate their needs to others, often resulting in isolation. During the initial phases of their international student experience, there can be a feeling of homesickness and lack of social support. Students can find it difficult to meet new people, to engage in meaningful relationships with others and they can feel pressure to be independent, in order to be able to cope with their isolation and lack of social support. Many international students view poor language proficiency both as a source of distress in the university environment as well as a factor which discourages them from seeking counselling assistance (Morgan et al., 2003).

Another reason explored was the psychological concern or other stressors resulting in international students seeking counselling. There is a positive relationship between the severity of problems experienced and intentions to seek counselling among international students (Rhee, 2015; Xie, 2007). They might be willing to seek professional help when dealing with severe problems such as rape, suicide, and bankruptcy. Students typically reported that in order to seek counselling, their issues must be (a) severe enough, (b) have affected their normal life functioning, and (c) be beyond their normal ability to cope with the issue (Rhee, 2015). Xie (2007) stated the need for counselling for problems with relationships that are important to individuals' personal or professional lives or any significant academic stress or career concerns. Research has demonstrated that someone's acculturation level predicts their overall psychological functioning (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Wei et al., 2007). A study by Surtees et al. (1998) at a British university examined how international students who sought help from university counselling services reported primary presenting problems such as symptoms of depression, course-related problems, relationship difficulties, and feelings of anxiety. Additionally, Connell et al. (2007) investigated counselling services across several British universities and reported that the most common presenting problems were anxiety

(63%), interpersonal problems (57%), depression (54%), low self-esteem (43%), and academic concerns (41%) amongst the university students in general. In addition, the data from such studies relies on client self report/ratings and not on formal diagnosis. Moreover, these studies were conducted between the years 1998 to 2001. There is a possibility that the severity of distress of clients accessing student counselling services has changed for better or worse since that time.

Research suggests that issues like feelings of sadness, alienation and isolation might be experienced less by some international students who familiarise themselves with the host culture systems (education, social customs), and when they are aware of what is expected of them and what they might expect of others (Pedersen, 1995). The findings suggest that culture can play an important role in one's adjustment and if international students are prepared for the transition, it can ameliorate these effects and decrease the negative psychological impact of this process.

### 2.6.3 Therapeutic relationship

The therapeutic relationship is considered to be the most important factor influencing the decision of international students to seek counselling and their perceptions towards it (Najmi, 2013; Wilk, 2016; Cheng & Merrick, 2017). International students were able to identify positive and negative aspects of the therapeutic relationship that helped enhance or hinder their counselling experiences. Good listening skills, openness and client counsellor match (Najmi, 2013; Xie, 2007; Cheng & Merrick, 2017) are all considered to be helpful factors in a therapeutic relationship and all of these influenced international students' experiences of counselling. Students reported their expectations of counsellors' interpersonal skills or the counselling process. They expected counsellors to be good listeners, with a non-judgemental stance and attentiveness and to be able to establish good relationships to win clients' trust.

Students described how if a counsellor suggested words (Willis-O'Connor et al., 2016) that helped them more accurately describe their story, and was actively following them, this made them feel connected to the counsellor. One of barriers reported was poor familiarity with a client's cultural narratives and the influences that shape these clients' beliefs and behaviours due to cultural differences between the client and counsellor (Anderson & Myer, 1985; Mori, 2000). In contrast, the ability to connect with the client's culture was reported to be a helpful factor



within the therapeutic relationship. Counsellors who were perceived to be culturally knowledgeable and who found ways to connect with the international student's culture were significantly more successful in building rapport and maintaining the therapeutic relationship. Counsellors do not always have the appropriate training available to support international students when it comes to multicultural competence (Sue & Sundberg, 1996), which can lead to provision of services that treat international students as a homogenous group. Hayes and Li (1994) and Herring & Jespersen (1994) also discuss these cultural difficulties' and recommend that when counsellors work with international students the counselling strategies must be culturally-specific. A few enhancements like using methods and strategies that are consistent with international students' life experiences and cultural values could enhance the efficacy of counselling (Sue, 1992).

As seen above, the literature emphasises the significance of culture in counselling and the multicultural nature of client-counsellor interactions (e.g., Collins & Arthur, 2007, 2010a; Pederson, 1991b). For collaborative working, there is a need for a counsellor to be culturally competent and sensitive towards international students. While working with international students, counsellors need to examine their own values (Dillard & Chisolm, 1983). When counsellors work with international students who have different cultural values, they need to have cultural self-awareness and sensitivity towards them. There is a tendency for both the counsellor and international students to develop stereotypes, biases and unrealistic expectations towards each other because of inappropriate attitudes and motivations (Althen & Stott, 1983) but both should be open and respectful towards each other's cultural backgrounds and must have tolerance and a willingness to learn from each other (Cadieux & Wehrly, 1986; Wehrly, 1988). According to Ackerman and Hilsenroth (2003), a therapist's personal attributes, like being flexible, honest, respectful, warm, trustworthy, interested, confident and open, can have a positive influence on therapy. Wampold (2000) suggested that it is important to use the words of the client in the session which might facilitate the therapeutic relationship.

International students reported that a positive therapeutic relationship with their counsellors enabled them to feel comfortable, disclose more in sessions and helped in collaborative working. However, students described some aspects of the counselling that affected their ability to feel understood or supported and such factors were identified as hindering the therapeutic

relationship (Najmi, 2013; Wilk, 2016; Cheng & Merrick, 2017). As touched upon earlier, one of the obstacles described by the international students was a poor ability to comfortably communicate verbally in English. Students also reported that when counsellors were emotionally disengaged or lacked empathy in a therapeutic process, this hindered the relationship. The international students preferred warmth and emotional connection in the therapeutic relationship, which is considered to be an important aspect of developing empathy, rather than counsellors using a logical rational approach. In contrast, however, Bradley et al (1995) reported international students' preference for a more direct, concrete, goal-oriented, and practical counselling style (e.g., providing psycho-education about a specific mental disorder and practicing relaxation skills), instead of an indirect approach (e.g., reflective, relational focused, and not giving advice). The data from this study was drawn from students who attempted to seek counselling. Thus, it remains unclear how these findings might generalize to international students who have not attempted to seek counselling.

#### 2.6.4 Barriers to seeking counselling

Many international students face a variety of concerns that may lead them to seek or not seek counselling. The main concerns, raised in a few studies that may represent barriers to international students in terms of seeking counselling are: *accessibility, culture, language* and *stigma* (Najmi, 2013; Xie, 2007; Davis, 2010; Cheng, & Merrick, 2017).

It is important for international students to know that counselling services exist in the university and there is a need for them to know about how to access these services. The location of counselling services is also seen as a factor which can enhance or create barriers to accessibility. Counselling services need to be convenient for students, in terms of physical proximity and ease of making appointments. Cultural stereotypes regarding mental illness and counselling services are generally also reported by international students as a significant factor creating barriers towards accessibility and utilisation of counselling services (Najmi, 2013; Xie, 2007; Davis, 2010; Cheng & Merrick, 2017).

*“The participants in the present study mentioned that individuals who sought counselling might be seen as ‘crazy’ or severely ill in Thailand, whereas seeking counselling is considered ‘normal’ in the United States. Therefore, a large stigma appears to exist in Thailand and perhaps in other Asian countries regarding the use of counselling services”* (Rhee, 2015, p.88).

There are many international students who believe that a counsellor would not have the appropriate cultural knowledge to support them. They lack trust in counsellors and believe that they would struggle to understand their issues and values. According to Casas et al. (2002), clients are more comfortable with therapists from the same culture. However, due to the diversity in any student population, it is not always possible to find a counsellor with the same cultural background. It can also cause an unhealthy therapeutic alliance. When the student has a counsellor with a different cultural background, they may hide their reactions out of fear of rejection. They may be fearful that if they express negative feelings to the therapist they will not be accepted or they may hide their feelings out of respect for the therapist's authority. Students' can perceive their problems to be unique and they may believe that a counsellor with a different cultural background would lack the sensitivity or experience to counsel them. Moreover, they may be reluctant to disclose their problems to a stranger in a second language; the idea may provoke too much anxiety for them which hinders their decision to seek counselling from a professional. Shannon(2014) investigated barriers to forming a therapeutic alliance by interviewing counsellors on their perceptions of working with international students and identified "*stigma towards mental illness [which] was attached to specific regions or countries, their level of English proficiency, their expectations and attitudes towards help seeking, client-counsellor mismatch in value systems and cultural context*" (p.45). However, in contrast, there are studies which report that other personal or social factors are more important than cultural background for predicting students' help-seeking behaviours (Russell et al., 2008). This study was conducted at an Australian university and demonstrates that "*students' social and psychological wellbeing predict their help seeking attitude [more] than demographic variables such as origin, culture, age or gender*" (p.72). The research concludes that stereotyping international students in terms of their culture and origin could be detrimental and prevent them from accessing professional help from therapy if inter-cultural variability is not recognised (Yoon & Portman, 2004; Arthur, 1997).

The issue of language (Rhee, 2015; Xie, 2007; Davis, 2010; Cheng, & Merrick, 2017) was prominent among international students who felt challenged in fully expressing themselves in English. Their inability to feel comfortable expressing themselves could hinder the process and pose difficulties in creating mutual understanding and in developing a positive therapeutic

relationship. Moreover, stigma was found to play a key role in attitudes towards seeking out psychological services (Najmi, 2003; Xie, 2007). International students have reported feelings of shame and guilt which can be a barrier to them seeking counselling. They also had concerns relating to confidentiality as they did not want to reveal personal negative information to others; this concern can lead to negative attitudes towards seeking counselling (Cramer, 1999; Liao et al., 2005). Lee (2014) investigated Asian international students in group therapy and confirmed that Asian international students' levels of acculturation were associated with stigma towards counselling. '*Stigma*' is defined as stereotypes or negative views attributed to a person or a notion when their characteristics or behaviours are viewed as different from or inferior to societal norms (Dudley, 2000). The study indicated that international students who reported higher place dependence, stigma towards counselling, and fear of negative evaluation reported fear of disclosing their personal information with the group. These findings imply that making counselling services easily accessible and offering services which accommodate multicultural dimensions may encourage international students to seek counselling.

The literature suggests that there is no exclusive way of working with international students, therefore, next section will explore some of the common competencies and approaches suggested by previous studies which could reduce the possible barriers of culture and language towards seeking counselling. This could be done by implementing some of the competencies suggested by researchers in the past and adapting to the current multicultural counselling situation.

## **2.7 Framework for counselling international students**

Studies have shown that international students face different challenges adjusting to the academic and cultural environment. They experience acculturative stress due to cultural differences, concerns about the stigma of mental health, and limited language proficiency. These stressors may work as barriers preventing some international students from seeking help from mental health professionals. Thus, it is important for universities and counsellors to promote international students' help seeking and increase their willingness to use counselling services by taking several factors into consideration and implementing those actions in order to improve students' mental health based on their needs. University counselling services must enhance their multicultural counselling competency to effectively serve this population, and Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) need to implement proper approaches for strengthening international students'

willingness to use available mental health services. Achieving this goal will not only improve international students' sense of psychological well-being but may also result in a better academic outcome and social life for all students. A number of frameworks have been developed (Ratts et al., 2015; Collins & Arthur, 2007; Sue et al., 1998; Pope-Davis & Coleman, 1997; Arredondo et al., 1996) in an attempt to challenge current Western therapeutic practices and to move towards a more culture-centred perspective. Sue et al. (1998) set the standard for cultural competence and provided a basic framework for counsellors requiring a three-fold process: developing an awareness of personal assumptions, values and biases; understanding the worldview of culturally-different clients and their socio-cultural context; and using appropriate strategies and techniques. "Counsellors cannot be experts on all the world's cultures, but they can develop a sound understanding of their own cultural values and the way their own culture affects people from elsewhere" (Thomas & Althen, 1989, p. 209).

Lin and Pedersen (2006, p. 286) defined international students as a unique group of individuals, "a minority among minorities". They portray the process of counselling with international students "as a journey that should be embarked on like any physical journey: with an open mind, an appreciative attitude and an eagerness to learn new ways of looking at the world" (p.285). They strongly encourage counsellors to adopt "a humble attitude" in order to become multi-nationally competent as well as multi-culturally competent. They addressed the need for multinational competence based on Sue and Sue's (1998; 2003) theoretical framework. These guidelines are embedded in three levels of awareness:

- a) The individual level of awareness and appreciation of cultures in the process of psychotherapy
- b) The socio-cultural and socio-political level of awareness for the life of international students
- c) The universal level of awareness for individual uniqueness in a cultural context

Pedersen (1991, p.43) points out that, owing to the cultural dimension, it may be difficult for the counsellor to identify norms and "to know when a behaviour relates to the culture, as distinguished from the person belonging to that culture". Barty (2011, p. 193) suggested that a culturally informed counsellor of any international student will aim to step skillfully and

sensitively without losing sight of either “in between” similarities or differences. For example, having an understanding of subgroups from Asian, African and European cultures will help the counsellor to communicate empathy, respect and understanding. Barty (2011, p. 189) recommended that counsellors should have a high level of attunement and start “from a stand of not knowing”. As discussed in previous sections of this chapter, international students tend to deal with social, emotional and academic problems which can be anxiety provoking and they are unlikely to seek help with such issues (Khoo et al., 2002); counsellors could, however, play an essential role in helping them cope with life in a foreign country by understanding cultural issues and providing information on how counselling can help international students. Okorochoa (2010) reflects on a flexible approach, depending on the problem and the context, including adaptation in communication style to accommodate students whose first language is not English. It has also been reported that some international students may be more responsive to an active and directive approach (Liu, 2009; Cox, 2013). One of the ways is to provide international students with information about careers, local language courses or about resources that may increase their contact with the host culture or help them to use other coping skills to adapt to their new environment. Lago (2010, p. 239) suggested that “the counsellor needs to have the capacity to communicate creatively and effectively within the boundaries of good therapeutic practice, he or she needs to be committed to understanding their cross-cultural therapeutic relationships”; perhaps more importantly, he suggest that counsellors need to have a heightened sense of who they are as persons “within themselves” and within the socio-cultural context they interact with. Lago and Thompson (2003) highlighted the need for culturally appropriate supervision and training for therapists through the exploration of power imbalances, historical implications and parallel processes between the client and the therapist as well as between the therapist and the supervisor. Despite the importance of multicultural training competencies, Lago and Thompson (2003) claim that many therapist training courses in the UK do not adequately address how to work with clients from other cultures. They explained that cross-cultural therapy should be grounded in theory and therapists should explore the racial and ethnic identity development stages (Ponterotto et al, 1993). Cross-cultural therapeutic processes are influenced by the stage of ethnic identity development that the therapist and client occupy. These stages and the awareness about where the therapist is can only be uncovered by rigorous and honest self-explorations and reflections. The limitations of these stage models are that they do not address age, gender, class

and race (Patel et al, 2000). However, Papadopoulos and Cross (2006) provide excellent professional guidance for trainee counselling psychologists when working with culturally diverse clients. They advised the importance of not relying on assumptions and stereotypes however, and treating each client as an individual even if they appear culturally similar to the therapist in order to maintain curiosity and avoid complacency. However, dependency on professional guidance is no substitute for the experience of personal judgement and discretion in their application to specific sets of circumstances. The elements described in this guidance are to be used skilfully and systematically in a variety of combinations to support the needs of a client. Lago (2010) also suggested that therapists need to be aware of and understand their own reactions to other racial and cultural groups and be involved with minority individuals outside the therapy setting to widen their perspectives. This awareness would increase a counsellor's respect of a client's diverse needs.

#### 2.7.1 The role of HEIs and counselling centres in providing better services

Recent research suggests that the types of support needed by international students are beyond one-to-one conventional counselling and rather at a systemic level (Cox, 2013; Liu, 2009; Lago, 2005). Puukari (2012, p. 6) stresses the importance of a holistic counselling approach and supports the creation of "a guidance-based culture in which all related fields of counselling (career, personal, educational) are covered". There is an importance in developing an awareness of support not for counselling but at different levels such as through student unions and international student advisers, which seems to be particularly crucial in providing an appropriate service, particularly for those international students who are underrepresented (Barty, 2011). Most of the HEIs have international student offices and offer orientation programmes; however, they need to be more culturally sensitive to increase international students' awareness relating to the availability of resources and to enable them to cope with issues associated with the acculturation process (Wei et al., 2007; Johnson & Sandhu, 2006). These recommendations are resource intensive and require time for both students to attend and for staff in preparation and delivery. Brinson & Kotler (1995) suggest that increasing cultural diversity among the counselling staff may help international students feel more at ease and they might feel better understood. It has also been suggested by Liu (2009) that counselling services should be located close to medical centres or student international offices to reduce the potential stigma that

students may feel when seeking help. In order to reach out to international students, but also to any students who are less likely to make use of counselling services, most HEIs have set up personal development groups or well-being workshops to help international students deal with issues such as time-management, anxiety or assertiveness (Barty, 2011; Barty & Raven, 2003). While there has been an increased effort by HEIs through induction programmes. Lago (2005) suggests that university counsellors should engage more actively with international students' offices in order to design preventive and developmental initiatives designed to serve a wider international student population. Yoon & Portman (2004) claim that making institutional changes and creating supportive environments for campus support may be more effective than helping international students at the individual level.

## **2.8 Alternative coping skills or strategies**

As we know, not all international students are comfortable about utilising counselling services. Therefore, researchers have identified certain skills and strategies which international students use other than counselling or which they use after counselling has been completed (Najmi, 2013; Rhee, 2015; Davis, 2010). Such techniques can be categorised into internal and external resources. Internal resources are mainly comprised of observing personal strengths more readily whereas external resources are seeking information and emotional support from others (Xie, 2007).

Counselling is usually a process whereby people become more self-reliant about using their personal strengths and resources or skills to cope with stress and distress. This can include enhanced belief in one's ability to solve problems, positive self-talk, and reliance on one's own techniques and skills in problem-solving including prayer, exercise, bibliotherapy and meditation (Najmi, 2013; Rhee, 2015). For many students who move abroad, the elements of culture, spirituality and resilience play an integral role (Bhugra, 2004; Miller & Chandler, 2002). When their culture does not fit with the host culture then resilience is needed to overcome this adversity (Grandbois & Sanders, 2009; Pipher, 2004). It has been observed that religion and spirituality can play a role in building resilience since individuals can draw strength from prayer and spirituality to cope with life's struggles (Winter et al., 2009). These strategies can help international students to maintain a positive or optimistic attitude towards life when they



experience a variety of challenges. They are able to find solutions on their own to solve problems directly and reduce stress.

*“Participants reported a variety of internal resources, including using cognitive strategies (e.g., positive self-talking, reframing problems from a different perspective), solving problems directly on their own, exercising, and shifting attention from sources of stress by engaging in relaxing or pleasant activities (e.g., watching TV, cooking)”*(Xie, 2007).

As explored previously, international students are more likely to experience problems than domestic students but they have less access to resources and professional help; therefore, they are more likely to rely on each other for any support. International students tend to use external resources as well as internal ones to seek out information and emotional support from others (Najmi, 2013; Xie, 2007) such resources can take the form of socialisation with international students from the same country and sharing problems with family. Baloglu (2000) has suggested that friends are the preferred source of help for international students, followed by parents and teachers. Many are more comfortable to share their concerns with familiar people rather than speaking with a stranger such as a counsellor. Friendships with home country students provide many benefits for international students, including helping them to make sense of their experiences, and fostering collective understandings of the new culture. It also provides emotional and practical support from peers who share similar adjustment experiences (Brown, 2009).

Myburgh et al. (2006) reported that international students used different resources to cope with different issues. For example, students seek support from their home country in order to cope with feelings of isolation, loneliness, and insecurity when studying and living in a foreign environment. Some international students also interact with other international students or domestic students. The study also reported that international students relied on internal resources (e.g., beliefs about their personal efficacy) to deal with any academic or living difficulties and made efforts to actively engage in problem solving. Similarly, a study found that international students typically use constructive or adaptive coping processes, such as seeking social support, problem-solving, accepting responsibility, and positive reappraisal, rather than distancing or escape-avoidance coping (Constantine et al., 2005;Ng, 2001). It has been observed that when international students seek social support, they primarily seek informal support from, for

example, family or friends. However, there are limitations to these studies as the data was analysed by combining different ethnic and gender subgroups into one larger group of international students. It might have lost some unique culture-specific issues associated with each subgroup. The individuals from different cultures will have different perspectives and experiences with respect to the environment within which they find themselves.

Counselling seemed to assist international students in establishing and strengthening their social network which helps individuals to adjust to academic and personal life after counselling. International students sought counselling when the above-mentioned coping methods were not available, or when they were dealing with problems they could handle by themselves. There are studies which show that individuals are more willing to seek counselling when they cannot cope with problems (e.g., Hayes, 2011; Vogel & Wei, 2005). The findings are indicative of the benefits of counselling or development of skills which enable international students to cope with stress or problems when professional help is not accessible.

## **2.9 Research rationale and contribution to knowledge**

In recent decades, the population of international students has increased in the UK and the literature review has acknowledged some of the common challenges they face. Moreover, the challenges faced by international students are unique when compared to those experienced by local students and international students may struggle due to poor coping strategies, limited access to services, and poor familiarity with available resources (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). The goals of international student research have not been conceptually defined and attempts at theoretical formulations have not been validated (Pepitone & Triandis, 1987). Some of the common research done on international students is focused on adjustments, culture shock, personal, situational or background factors or the factors which influence them to seek counselling. In addition, studies have been conducted on general populations of international students or more specific populations such as Chinese international students. After China, South Asian students represent the second largest population of international students in the UK. “South Asia” is a term used to represent the southern region of the Asian continent. Modern definitions of South Asia are consistent in including Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives as the constituent countries. Despite being separated geographically, these countries share common cultural values, cultural heritage, beliefs, family

system and way of thinking. All Asians do not have the same cultural practices (Betz, 1993). Instead, their different cultures are based on their country of origin, region, religion, social class, and educational level although some basic beliefs and values are shared by all Asian groups (Kim, Rendon, & Valadez, 1998). Certainly, there is a need to study this population in order to help university counselling services understand and serve them better. There is a lack of sufficient research, to date, looking at the views of “South-Asian” international students themselves and addressing their own perceptions of therapy. This research therefore intends to fill that gap by conducting a study to obtain rich information from South Asian international students who are currently studying in the UK and to explore their perceptions of counselling. The aim of the thesis is to analyse the factors that encourage or inhibit them from accessing counselling in the UK.

According to the literature, international students have a negative perception of counselling mainly due to personal or socio-cultural factors. As a result, they tend to underutilise counselling services in spite of experiencing adjustment difficulties. This study might be useful in exploring if there are any contradictions in terms of the perceptions and may provide an aid to scrutinise the reasons for such perceptions. The studies conducted on international students have mostly utilised a quantitative methodology (Bradley et al., 1995; Flisher et al., 2002; Morgan et al., 2003). Some of the researchers have addressed the limitations in using a quantitative approach while studying international students; for example, in certain cases the interpretation of the results was limited due to lack of comprehension. However, the current study adopts a qualitative approach which takes into account any potential language difficulties. The use of semi-structured interviews is a more appropriate method for the subject matter since participants are able to freely express themselves and researchers have the opportunity to clarify and explain their questions (Creswell, 2009); this has been lacking in past studies. This thesis might be a valuable contribution to knowledge within counselling psychology, and has the potential to benefit the University of Manchester, the counselling service, international students studying in universities in the UK in addition to helping to inform practice at these services, by understanding the perceptions of international students and improving the quality of services offered to diverse students. The findings of this research could also be considered a contribution to the literature on

multicultural counselling and international students by addressing an understudied population, i.e. South Asian international students.

### **2.10 Research questions**

1. What are the perceptions of South Asian international students towards accessing counselling in the UK?
2. What are the factors that facilitate and inhibit South Asian international students in accessing counselling?

### **2.11 Summary**

This chapter has presented past and current research literature addressing diversity and cultural issues concerning international students. The first section of this chapter focused on the role of international students and acculturation stressors that international students face, including their coping mechanisms for handling the stress. Secondly, international students' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours related to seeking psychological counselling were reviewed in this chapter. The chapter then included a review of the literature on multicultural counselling competencies and how it addresses cultural issues faced by international students. The increased growth in the number of international students and their ongoing challenges, as reported in research literature, pinpoints that university counselling services have yet to fully adapt their services so that they better suit the needs of international students. The gap in the research literature has therefore highlighted the basis for the current research which is expected to contribute to existing literature and knowledge in the broader field.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The following chapter aims to provide an overview of the methodology used within this study. This chapter includes: Rationale, Participants, Data Generation, Data Analysis and Ethical considerations. The chapter provides a rationale in Section 3.2, which describes the research design used for the study and the purpose behind it. Moreover, a brief overview has been provided for the theoretical approach and epistemological considerations for the study. Further, in Section 3.3 details are given about the participants, like how they were selected for the study and the rationale behind the process. Next Section 3.4 will provide the details of data generation, which will include details about the interview process and interview questions, the method or process used for transcribing. Also, it will provide the rationale behind the number of participants recruited for the study. This chapter will also provide information regarding the data analysis, i.e. the method of analysis and a rationale behind choosing the analysis for this research in Section 3.5. The description of the process of analysis trustworthiness, reflexivity and the process of how themes were identified is also discussed in this section. Finally, Section 3.6 will give information about ethical and research governance approval and how the ethical consideration for the research was obtained. Also, the information regarding how data are used and stored for the research has been discussed.

#### **3.2 Rationale**

##### 3.2.1 Epistemology

A researcher's "worldview" is represented by paradigm, which can be defined as a "basic belief system based on ontological, epistemology, and methodological assumptions" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.107). The research process is influenced by the researcher's choice of paradigm with regard to the research design and methodology, data collection and analysis method. It was crucial to choose a research method that would consider the nature of the enquiry and create a balance between the understanding of reality and knowledge that would fit in with my personal experience of the world. Epistemology is concerned with identifying the theory of philosophy

one holds whilst engaged in the pursuit of knowledge and meaning (McLeod, 2011; Ritchie & Lewis, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2006). A positivist epistemological stance considers objective social research to be possible and might seek to gain understanding through measuring or testing human behaviour using qualitative methods such as randomised controlled trials (Blaikie, 2007). This approach assumes, to some extent, that human behaviour has a preconceived meaning attached to it and is guided by fixed rules independent of individuals' values (Wills, 2007; Ritchie & Lewis, 2014).

An interpretivist epistemology, however, adopts a more phenomenological approach to gaining understanding. McLeod (2011, p. 21) defines phenomenology as “describing the essential quality of an experience”. Interpretivism will enable the understanding of the data to be based, to some extent, on the meaning making and interpretation that both the participants and researcher engaged in (Bryman, 1988; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). As a result, the perspectives of both participants and researcher are considered to be active ingredients in the acquisition and construction of knowledge and understanding.

### 3.2.2 Social constructionism

“Social constructionism is the claim and viewpoint that the content of our consciousness, and the mode of relating we have to other, is taught by our culture and society; all the metaphysical quantities we take for granted are learned from others around us”(Owen, 1992, p. 386). According to Harper (2011), social constructionism primarily concerns itself with how knowledge is constructed and mainly takes the position that this occurs in social processes between us. Burr (2003) reported that social constructionism has many forms but uses the term as a kind of “family resemblance” for a variety of approaches, each varying in their epistemological and ontological positions. Whereas ontology is concerned with the nature of reality, epistemology “is the study of the nature of knowledge and is concerned with ways of knowing and learning about the world” (Ormston et al., 2014, p.6). Burr (2003) also highlighted Gergen's (1985) assumptions that, to varying degrees, underpin these different variations of social constructionism, which include: a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge; historical and cultural specificity; knowledge as sustained by social processes; knowledge and social action as going together (Burr, 2003). Social constructionist researchers are less focused on phenomena in themselves and more interested in how the phenomena are seen. They are thus

interested in how knowledge is generated, hence the focus on construction (Gergen, 1985). This generation is viewed as a primary social process. This is consistent with the idea of Berger and Luckmann (1991) and the subtle realism of Hammersley (1992) in that reality is socially defined but this reality refers to the subjective experience of everyday life and how the world is understood rather than to the objective reality of the natural world. Social constructionism accepts that there is an objective reality; however, it is concerned with how knowledge is constructed and understood. Therefore it has an epistemological perspective. It helps to acknowledge the social nature of human life, while at the same time; it encourages individuals to tell their own stories. Berger and Luckmann (1991) are concerned with the nature and construction of knowledge: how it emerges and how it comes to have significance for society. They view knowledge as created by the interactions of individuals within society, which is central to constructionism (Schwandt, 2003). Social constructionism has an emphasis on people's daily interactions with others and how they use language to construct their reality.

The social practices engaged in by people are regarded as both objective and subjective reality. In social constructionism, the world is interpreted through language and culture and it is "waiting to be discovered" or "pregnant with meaning". That is, the world and the things in it are seen to be not only social constructions, but also "crucial participants" in the meaning-making process (Crotty, 1998, pp. 42-65). Similarly, in the present research, a social constructionist view is implied in relation to how humans socially construct their perceptions based on our interactions with society. Therefore, using a social constructionist perspective implies that South Asian international students' perceptions and interaction with society will form their perceptions toward counselling.

### **3.3 A qualitative approach**

The "methodology" refers to the general approach taken to studying a research topic (Silverman, 2013). "*Methodology defines how one will go about studying any phenomenon*" (Silverman, 2013, p.113). This study is concerned with exploring and understanding international students' perceptions of counselling in the UK. Therefore, a qualitative design is utilised. A qualitative methodology approaches research topics from the perspective of openness to different voices and an ability to challenge and deconstruct the prevailing dominant language and assumptions by generating knowledge based on humanistic values (McLeod, 2011). A qualitative methodology

fits well with the humanistic and phenomenological philosophy underpinning counselling psychology as it focuses on subjective descriptions and interpretations of meanings within particular contexts and has subsequently made a significant contribution to the knowledge base of counselling psychology (McLeod, 2011). It is argued that counselling psychologists are likely to use qualitative methods more as compared to quantitative. Ponterotto (2005) described “gradual paradigm shift from a primary reliance on quantitative methods to a more balanced reliance on quantitative and qualitative methods” (p. 126). For counselling psychologists, the use of qualitative research creates the possibility of forms of inquiry that can be better integrated with clinical practice (Rennie, 1994). The practices of counselling psychology and qualitative research are related to each other very closely and tend to focus on viewing experiences from the perspectives of the people involved in research in an un-prescriptive way which focuses on detailed, contextualised description and understanding of events and experiences with more focus on process, openness and flexibility allowing unexpected experiences to be addressed (Bryman, 1988). Qualitative research is naturalistic in nature and it attempts to study the everyday life of a variety of groups or communities in their natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people construct meaning for themselves, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in it (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). For qualitative psychologists, a key interest is “*people’s grasp of their world*” (Ashworth, 2008, p. 5), i.e. they are interested in people’s subjective experiences as well as the resources available to them to make sense of and understand their world. This interest can lead to a focus on how people construct their world (including the relationship they have and the objects they encounter) through the social, cultural and linguistic practices they are born into.

As the purpose of the research is to understand the perceptions of international students towards counselling, a qualitative methodology is more suitable here which is also reflected by Elliott, Fischer and Rennie’s (1999, p. 216) statement: “*The aims of qualitative research is to understand and represent the experiences and actions of people as they encounter, engage and live through situations*”. Another reason for choosing this methodology is that it gives the researcher an opportunity to play an active role and reflect on their experiences and style of working as a practitioner. McLeod (2001) draws a parallel between the process of conducting qualitative research and engaging in therapy, in terms of the skills that the therapist/researcher



utilises (active listening, eliciting understanding of people's stories) and in terms of the knowledge that is produced (contextualised, idiographic and incomplete). A large number of quantitative studies have been conducted to identify the perceptions or attitudes of international students towards counselling or help seeking behaviour (Pendse & Inman, 2016; Raunic & Xenos, 2008; Lee et Al., 2014) in the form of questionnaires or surveys. Use of a quantitative methodology gives the opportunity to gather data from a big sample size whereas the quality of the information might be at stake due to a lack of depth. Also, the participants do not have the opportunity to clarify the questions in the quantitative approach. As the current research is concerned with understanding the perceptions of South Asian international students from a wide background of cultures and beliefs, a qualitative approach is most relevant. It is believed by the researchers that a qualitative methodology provides a more valid, reliable and true representation of information gathered which represents the views and beliefs of participants more accurately (Silverman, 2000; Hakim, 2000). Qualitative research can provide a fuller picture and develop an understanding of how the social world is constructed (Barbour, 2008). The aim of qualitative research is to explore participants' constructs of the "world" and, as a result, a social constructionist philosophical stance will be utilised. The notion of the world being "constructed" can be viewed from different perspectives in a social, personal and relational form. We construct our world through many forms of individual and collective actions; this can be in the form of memory, rituals and institutions, and all the myriad ways in which the world is physically and materially shaped by human purposes (McLeod, 2011). The aim of using a qualitative methodology for the present research is to give an in-depth understanding of South Asian international students' perceptions of counselling in the UK. The current methodology allows the researcher to get a much deeper and more in-depth understanding of their experiences living in the UK and how this affects their attitudes towards mental health.

### **3.4 Participants**

This study sought to explore the perceptions of South Asian international students towards counselling. The criteria for selecting participants included the following: the participants should be international students from South Asian countries. In addition, the participants were required to be either an undergraduate or postgraduate student studying at the UK universities and not necessarily experienced counselling as the purpose of this study is to understand their perception

towards counselling not their past experiences. The nature of this study aimed to present rich and in-depth information; therefore, it was important to ensure that the sample size would be large enough to provide an understanding of the South Asian international students' perceptions of counselling, yet small enough to yield high quality analysis in a timely manner (Sandelowski, 1995). Due to the qualitative nature of this study, it was important to ensure that the sample size would be large enough to provide an in-depth understanding of the participant's perceptions, yet small enough to produce a high quality analysis in a timely manner (Sandelowski, 1995).

The sampling strategy used was convenience sampling and stratification (Braun & Clarke, 2013) ensuring that participants recruited had range and diversity in relation to culture/religion/genders and acculturation levels. The sample population was diverse enough to reflect a broad range of perspectives. A total of 11 participants were recruited for this study via advertisement, social media and emails to the international society. See Appendix A for Research Advert. The participants comprised 8 female and 3 male participants. The sample included participants from four universities in North West England. Whilst using their quotations, pseudonyms were used to represent them. A brief description of each participant has been provided here:

- 1) Paula – 24 year old female student from the Maldives who had been studying for three years postgraduate taught degree.
- 2) Priya– first year postgraduate taught, 27 year old female student from India.
- 3) Vicky– First year postgraduate research female student from India. However, she moved to China when she was eight years; she also did her undergraduate study in Canada.
- 4) Sarah–second year 26 year old female PhD student from Pakistan. She belonged to a very conservative and religious family background.
- 5) Faiza– a first year 29 years old female PhD student and a mother of a child from Pakistan.
- 6) Hilary–postgraduate taught, 25 year old female student from India.
- 7) Claire– first year 19 years old undergraduate taught, female student from Nepal.

- 8) Maya– second year undergraduate taught, 20 years old female student from India studying in the UK
- 9) Hifzul–second year postgraduate taught, 26 year old male student from Bangladesh.
- 10) Iqbal–postgraduate taught final year 25 year old male student from India. He also did his pre-masters in the UK.
- 11) Sam–second year undergraduate taught, 21 years old male student from India.

### **3.5 Data generation**

#### ***3.5.1 Interviews***

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted which provided qualitative data. Semi structured interviews are commonly used in qualitative research. This method typically consists of a dialogue between researcher and participant, guided by a flexible interview protocol and supplemented by follow-up questions, probes and comments. The method allows the researcher to collect open-ended data, to explore participant thoughts, feelings and beliefs about a particular topic and to delve deeply into personal and sometimes sensitive issues (DeJonckheere & Vaughn (2019). Semi-structured interviews allow for the generation of rich and illuminating data (Robson, 1993), which is particularly suited to studies investigating new ideas. Semi-structured interviews are more popular these days because of their flexibility, accessibility and intelligence and that they are capable of disclosing important and hidden facets of human behaviour which often makes them the most effective and convenient means of gathering information (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The method of in-depth interviewing within the counselling framework helps in one-to-one interaction and can be an effective strategy to deal with and be sensitive to the distress of the interviewee. Here the interviews helped in exploring the perceptions of the participants in-depth and related to the research questions. Interviews have been described as a form of conversation that is initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information and focused on content-specific research objectives of systematic description, prediction or explanation (Cohen & Manion, 1989). They provide the opportunity to explore ideas or concepts that cannot be directly observed (Patton, 1980). Qualitative interviews provided an opportunity to collect rich and detailed information on how international students explain and understand their experiences. The semi-structured interviews are suitable for a

qualitative methodology as they provide flexibility to the researcher allowing the researcher to be changing the questions and focusing on the areas that are important to participants in order to get a better understanding of the research question. They can enable important information to be explored and elaborated upon (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008) through an in-depth interaction between participant and researcher.

For the purpose of this research study, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with South Asian international students at The School of Environment, Education and Development (SEED) centre at The University of Manchester campus. The interviews were carried out in English language and were recorded on a Dictaphone. The questions were broken into different categories: perception towards counselling, reasons for seeking counselling, accessibility, barriers towards counselling and suggestions to improve the quality of service at university counselling centres. While the questions were pre-defined, at the same time, they allowed flexibility of both the wording and the order of these questions. Furthermore, the interview questions also aimed to elicit challenges faced by the participants living in the UK as international students and discuss if they had experienced counselling either in the UK or in their home country. They also talked about coping strategies used by the participants if they were unwilling to access counselling services. The main purpose of using these interview questions was to gain an insight into South Asian international students' perceptions towards seeking counselling. It also helped to explore the facilitative and prohibitive factors for South Asian international students in seeking counselling in the UK. For the purpose of this study, the main questions were: "What is your understanding of counselling?", "How do you generally feel about the idea of seeking counselling?" and "Under what circumstances are you more likely to seek counselling" and "Is there going to be any barrier for you to seek counselling in the UK?" See Appendix B for detailed interview schedule. The focus of researcher was to ensure the interview questions were constructed to answer the research question. This process can increase the effectiveness of the interview questions and ensure its significance to achieve the aim of the study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). A pilot study was conducted with a colleague before conducting the interviews with the participants. Through the pilot study the appropriateness of the questions were tested besides, it also facilitated researcher to obtain experience in conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews and to build rapport with the participants. The process helped the

researcher to learn the skills in interviewing and the flow of conversation. The researcher used a person centred approach while interviewing the participants. McCormack and McCance (2017) emphasise the importance of healthful relationships that are based on mutual respect and understanding between all significant persons. According to Dewing et al (2017) we need to adopt a respectful approach to the individuals. Underpinning the person-centred approach are values of respect for persons and personhood as well as individual right to self-determination. This is realised through mutual and reciprocal interaction (McCormack & McCance, 2017). An important aspect of the interview process was establishing rapport which involved not only developing trust but also a comfortable environment where participants felt safe to share their opinions. During the interview, participants understood the questions pretty well and responded to the questions without any hesitancy. However, it is worth noting that interviews were conducted in second language and inability to speak in English could have a possible impact on their responses. Following the completion of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to share their experience of participation. Moreover, I had preliminary contact as an acquaintance with a few of the participants; as a result, they might have been more conscious in giving negative responses about counselling. A small body of literature discusses the advantages and disadvantages of conducting research interview with participants with whom the research has some form of prior or existing knowledge and/or relationship (Hanson, 1994). A pre-existing relationship between interviewer and interviewee may affect the conduct of the interview and the data that result (Hockey, 1993). Social desirability might have an effect on the responses given by the participants in a polite and diplomatic way to help my study. However, pre-existing relationships can lessen the time taken to build the rapport and enable the interview to move quickly toward a shared dialogue of experiences (McConnell-Henry et al, 2010).

### 3.5.2 Transcription

After the interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone, they were transcribed by the researcher manually. Transcription of interview data is one of the most common ways to prepare it for analysis (Bazeley, 2007). Transcription is understood to reflect theory and to shape it (Du Bois, 1991) as researchers “reflexively document and affirm theoretical positions” (Mischler, 1991, p. 271) during the process of transcription and analysis. According to Peez (2002), “*all social scientists doing qualitative research must ... carefully attend to the phase of setting down the*

*verbal research material in writing by means of transcription*". Some researchers have emphasised that transcribing and the analysis of transcripts should be done by the same persons (Dittmar et al., 2009). In fact, Chafe (1995) has bluntly stated, "One cannot fully understand data unless one has been in on it from the beginning". The participants were all given pseudonyms in the research to preserve their anonymity and any details that could provide identification of the participants were altered. A very simple system of transcription was used where the term researcher was used for the interviewer and participant was used for the participant. The pauses, laughs or changes in emotion or voices were marked in the transcriptions. The purpose for including these was for the researcher to interpret why these changes occurred at certain points during the interview.

One of the main challenges is the quality and volume of the recording itself, as well as contextual aspects, such as background noise, interference or other sounds (e.g., a door that opens; Bailey, 2008). This was the most common challenge faced during the transcription phase as the background noise had an impact on the quality of the transcription and the length of interview affected the concentration level of the researcher. Some of the speech characteristics might have an impact on the quality of transcription such as different pronunciation. The participants recruited belonged to a diverse range of cultures, languages and ethnicities and had different accents or levels of spoken English which might have affected the process of word-to-word transcribing. In addition to these, cross talk or overlapping speech, incomplete sentences, omission or addition of letters in words, and the lack of clear-cut endings of ideas are also difficulties experienced while transcribing an interview (McLellan et al., 2003). As discussed earlier, all the interviews were transcribed by the researcher and subjected to thematic analysis. A detailed account of the analysis will be provided in the following section.

### **3.6 Data analysis**

The data collected from all the participants were transcribed by the researcher and the transcribed data were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes the data set in (rich) detail. However, it also often goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). As the purpose of this study was to address the gaps in the current literature, therefore it was important to identify themes within each

participant's understanding. The themes arise from the engagement of a researcher with the text while attempting to address a particular research question. Thematic analysis is known for its ability to not only summarise the key features, but also provides a "thick description" of a large amount of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, the methods such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and grounded theory also have the potential to provide 'thick descriptions' of data (Glaser, 1978; Ponterotto, 2006). However, these methods are tied to a particular set of theoretical assumptions. For instance, grounded theory is rooted in a specific theoretical framework (Levers, 2013) and aims to generate a theory from the data (Tweed & Charmaz, 2011). On the other hand, IPA is "strongly influenced by phenomenology" (Smith & Osborn, 2004, p.230) which "strives to describe the essence of everyday experience" (McLeod, 2001, p.37). In addition, thematic analysis is a diverse and flexible methodology which is comparatively straightforward compared to others due to not being "wed to any pre-existing theoretical frameworks" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.9). It would enable researcher to investigate the subject in question. Thematic analysis ideally works well with the semi-structured interviews, when the aim of the researcher is to gather in-depth accounts of 'personal experience' (e.g., McArdle, McGale & Gaffney, 2012). Such approaches involve the researcher generating data through interaction with people. In such situations, thematic analysis also works really well with textual-data, researcher generated, pre-existing or any combination of these different data types (e.g., Smith, Tomasone, Latimer, Cheung & Martin Ginis, 2015).

Thematic analysis is also useful for summarizing key features of a data set, as it forces the researcher to take a well-structured approach to handling data, helping to produce a clear and organized final report (King, 2004). In this study, the researcher used thematic analysis within a social constructionist framework which seeks to report "*experiences and meanings of the participant in relation to a broader social context*" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 9). Thematic analysis serves as a useful tool to illuminate the process of social construction. In particular, combining thematic analyses of a range of data can trace how a particular representation develops. Second, it can organise and describe the data with minimal alterations, as well as go beyond this and "*interpret various aspects of the research*" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.6). In recent publications, Braun and Clarke have more carefully articulated the assumptions and values around qualitative research that inform their approach to Thematic Analysis (e.g. Braun

and Clarke 2019a) to demarcate what is distinct and different about their approach (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2019c; Braun et al. 2019a). They have now called this approach reflexive Thematic Analysis (see Braun and Clarke 2019a, 2019b; Braun et al. 2019a; Terry et al. 2017). This not only demarcates it as a particular TA approach, it emphasises the importance of the researcher's subjectivity as analytic resource, and their reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation.

While thematic analysis has its advantage of being flexible however, this flexibility can lead to inconsistency and a lack of coherence when developing themes derived from the research data (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Consistency and cohesion can be promoted by applying and making explicit an epistemological position that can coherently underpin the study's empirical claims (Holloway & Todres, 2003). The other disadvantage of thematic analysis is the lack of substantial literature when considered in relation to other qualitative research methods such as grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology, for example—may cause novice researchers to feel unsure of how to conduct a rigorous thematic analysis. Another disadvantage of thematic analysis is that it does not allow researcher to make claims about language use (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis has been subjected to criticism on the grounds that it is a “very poorly branded” method as it does not appear to exist as a ‘named’ analysis in the same way that other methods do”. As a result, Braun and Clarke (2006) provide a six phase approach to undertake a rigorous thematic analysis potentially to generate a rich and detailed account of the data. The researcher followed the precise six-phase approach which will facilitate staying grounded in the data while making inferences and interpretations and therefore reduce the influence of the researcher's philosophical assumptions in the study. A step-by-step guide to doing thematic analysis based on six phases includes:

### **Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the data**

The first phase of the analysis involved immersing in the data and familiarizing with it. The first part of this phase was involvement in the interview process (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). Following the interviews, I noted my thoughts emerging as ideas or patterns. Additionally, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews by engaging in careful listening and re-listening to the audio recordings which enabled me to get “close” to the interview data



(Bailey, 2008). Following, the researcher engaged in repeated readings of the data in order to search for meanings and patterns. The interview transcripts were read and re-read for emerging ideas and concepts. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommended that researchers read through the entire data set at least once before beginning coding, as ideas and identification of possible patterns may be shaped as researchers become familiar with all aspects of their data. At this stage, researchers are encouraged to engage with the analysis as a faithful witness to the accounts in the data, being honest and vigilant about their own perspectives, pre-existing thoughts and beliefs (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The process of familiarisation and immersion in the data led to the foundation for the following phases of the analysis.

## **Phase 2: Generating initial codes**

After the familiarisation with the data, the researcher focused on the systematic analysis of the data, through coding. This involved working through each transcript line by line to dig deep into the data and extract as much as possible. The codes were applied labelling what the participants talked in those segments of the transcript. This process was influenced by the inductive approach allowing the data to determine the codes. The purpose of the codes is to identify and provide a label for a feature of the data that is potentially relevant to the research question. Boyatzis (1998) suggested that a “good code” (p. 1) is one that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon. During this phase of the analysis, the researcher was aware that her experiences and perceptions in regard to South Asian students had the potential to influence the coding process, i.e. researchers experiences/perceptions of counselling could result in generating codes that aligned with her personal beliefs. Maintaining this awareness enabled researcher to generate codes that were an authentic reflection of what the participants said. Once the initial codes were identified, the researcher revisited the entire data set several times and applied the additional codes where needed. This phase of the production of the codes from the data requires the researchers to keep revisiting the data. This process allowed the researcher to simplify and focus on specific characteristics of the data. Appendix C shows an extract of a coded interview transcript and Appendix D shows a list of initial codes extracted from the data set.

### **Phase 3: Searching for themes**

After the initial codes, the researcher focused on developing the broader level of themes by reviewing the initial codes. “A theme is an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole” (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000, p. 362). The process of theme development is about clustering codes to identify ‘higher level’ patterns which generally refer to meanings which are broader and capture more than one very specific idea. In this phase, the analysis starts to take shape as researcher shift from codes to themes. A theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). This phase involves reviewing the coded data to identify areas of similarity and overlap between codes: identify any broad topics or issues around which codes cluster. The basic process of generating themes and subthemes, involved collapsing or clustering codes that seem to share some unifying feature together, so that they reflect and describe a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data. A theme may be initially generated inductively from the raw data or generated deductively from theory and prior research (Boyatzis, 1998). In this study, an inductive approach was used. Inductive analysis is a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions. In this sense, this form of thematic analysis is data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic maps were also created at this stage (Appendix E) in order to organise visually the relationship between the different levels of themes; however, it was acknowledged that the themes may go on to be “*combined, refined and separated or discarded*” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.91). Appendix F shows how codes developed into subthemes and main themes.

### **Phase 4: Reviewing the themes**

This phase involves a recursive process whereby the developing themes are reviewed in relation to the coded data and entire dataset. In this process, the initial main themes and subthemes were reviewed. The themes were considered in relation to the entire data set to see how well they ‘fit’. According to (Braun & Clarke, 2006) “*data within themes should cohere together meaningfully;*

*while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes”* (p.91). By the end of this phase, it is important that the researchers can clearly define what the themes are and what they are not and have a good idea of the different themes, how they fit together, and the overall story they tell about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this phase of the analysis, the aim was also to make sure the themes were a reflection of the participants reported perceptions and not merely a reflection of researcher’s beliefs and perceptions as a South Asian international student or knowledge of the existing literature.

### **Phase 5: Defining and naming themes**

During the fifth phase, researchers determine what aspect of the data each theme captures and identify what is of interest about them and why (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher focused on capturing the “essence” of the themes both in relation to the story that was being conveyed and in relation to the research questions. Each theme was clearly defined and given catchy names to convey an immediate essence of the theme. King (2004) also suggested that themes should not be considered final until all of the data have been read through and the coding scrutinized at least twice. This phase of the analysis may be time consuming and investing sufficient time to develop the themes will increase the probability of developing credible finding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is important that, by the end of this phase, researchers can clearly and succinctly describe the scope and content of each theme.

### **Phase 6: Producing the report**

At this final stage of the analysis, involved writing up and reporting the final analysis. This phase involves compiling, developing, and editing existing analytic writing, and situating it within an overall report (which generally contains an introduction, method section, results, discussion often combined with the results in thematic analysis reporting, as in other qualitative research and a conclusion (Braun & Clarke, 2013). At this stage, the overall story of the data is conveyed in relation to the research question. It involved producing the report with the help of examples from the transcript to illustrate elements of the themes. These extracts from the transcript identified issues within the theme and gave appropriate examples to the theme or literature presented. King (2004) suggested that direct quotes from participants are an essential component of the final

report and aid the reader in understanding the specific points of interpretation and demonstrate the prevalence of the themes. Researchers are also encouraged at this stage to refer to their reflexive journal to get a better sense of if the findings and conclusions have been interpreted in a credible manner and reflect on whether the literature supports the findings (Halpren, 1983; Polit & Beck, 2008).

### **3.7 Trustworthiness**

According to the qualitative research guidelines proposed by Elliott, Fischer and Rennie (1999), the researcher intended to follow these measures: Sharing my personal orientation and experiences and adding reflexive components relevant to the study. Describing the sample in terms of gender, age etc for the readers to understand data and their context and influences on interpretation. The researcher also provided detailed examples from transcript data for possible reason and interpretation. Member check was done to improve the accuracy and credibility of the data analysis. The researcher provided the participants' opportunity to review and verify the interview transcripts. This process ensured that the researcher has accurately translated the participant's viewpoints into data. The researcher also integrated summary of findings through thematic maps for visual representation. There was an attempt to gather information from both males and females in order not to be reductionist in terms of gender experiences, excluding any gender discrimination and subjectivity.

All of these measures were applied in order to enhance the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the proposed qualitative endeavour (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Reflexivity is also an integral part of using thematic analysis (Fereday & Cochrane, 2006). Reflexivity is a process researchers go through by situating themselves in the academic research context across the range of historical, institutional and personal dimensions (Parker, 2011). Given that qualitative work is inherently interpretative research, the prejudices, values and judgments of the researcher need to be explicitly acknowledged so they are taken to account when reporting the data. Identifying myself as a "South-Asian" international student, I was transparent about the effects of my beliefs, values, assumptions and preconceptions on the choice of the research topic, my interaction and data collection from other South Asian participants which adds a reflexive component to my analysis (Creswell, 2007) which takes into account my own interpretation and perceptions about the study and monitors such effects and thus enhances

the accuracy of the research and “*the credibility of the findings by accounting for researcher values, beliefs, knowledge, and biases*”(Cutcliffe, 2003,p.137), that is, to gain plausibility by securing the research’s trustworthiness (Buckner, 2005; Macbeth, 2001). Moreover, as a trainee psychologist, the researcher might be partial towards counselling and view it in a very positive way. However, the researcher tried to present a balanced view towards counselling. For example, researcher has tried to incorporate both positive and negative perceptions/experience described by the participants. Another method applied was “bracketing”. This is a method which the researcher used to mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process. Drew (2004) refers to bracketing as “*the task of sorting out the qualities that belong to the researcher’s experience of the phenomenon*”(p. 215).Such a measure enabled to monitor the impact of researcher’s own values, attitudes and emotions on the process and findings of the research. It potentially also highlighted the manner in which the research project transformed me personally and as a researcher and contributed to the transparency of the project.

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysed data, the researcher kept a reflexive journal which included reflections of potential findings and implications of the research study. The journal was used to record her perception towards counselling as an international student and a trainee counselling psychologist. It also included researcher’s interpretation of learning implications. Member checks were also carried out after each interview to further ensure the trustworthiness. Member checking is a technique that consists of continually testing with informants the researcher’s data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This technique ensures that the researcher has translated the information provided by the participants accurately by revealing the information to the participants. Doing this decreases the chances of misrepresentation (Morse et al., 2002). The transcribed and analysed interviews were sent back to the participants and they had an opportunity to comment on the transcription. However, not all the participants responded and no changes were made to either the transcripts or the analysis as the participants were happy with their responses.

Thematic analysis may be criticised for being too simple a technique. It is poorly branded as a non technical method compared to quantitative methods. While it does not require the same detailed theoretical and technical knowledge that approaches such as discourse analysis or conversation analysis do, yet thematic analysis provide a structure for producing a rich and

detailed account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Many of the disadvantages depend more on poorly conducted analyses or inappropriate research questions than on the method itself. Further, the flexibility of the method which allows for a wide range of analytic options means that the potential range of things that can be said about the data is broad. While this is an advantage, it can also be a disadvantage in that it makes developing specific guidelines for higher-phase analysis difficult, and can be potentially paralysing to the researcher trying to decide what aspects of their data to focus on (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Another limitation could be when thematic analysis is considered in relation to some of the other qualitative analytic methods. For instance, unlike narrative or other biographical approaches, the researcher is unable to retain a sense of continuity and contradiction through any one individual account, and these contradictions and consistencies across individual accounts may be revealing. Further limitations, in particular for the research, will be explored in the *Strengths and limitations of the current study* section of fifth chapter.

### **3.8 Ethical considerations**

*“Ethics guidelines are necessary to clarify the conditions under which psychological research can take place”* (BPS, 2014, p.4). The research followed the procedural ethical frameworks of The University of Manchester School of Environment, Education and Development (SEED), the British Psychological Society’s Code of Human Research Ethics (2018) and the Health and Care Professions Council Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics (2016). A 6,000-word research proposal was submitted to my research supervisor and panel which was accepted with few amendments. It was further submitted to The University of Manchester Ethical Committee with completed ethics forms. The research study was evaluated as medium risk, which ensures that the study follows standard procedures and established research methodologies and is considered non-contentious. The 11 participants were recruited through advertisements through social media and email invitations. All of the interviews took place at The University of Manchester in a safe and private enclosed space. The ethical issues were addressed in the informed consent and participant information sheet (*Appendices G and H*) and it was also discussed during the interview that participants had the right to withdraw from taking part in the research at any time. Participants were also notified that there was no compulsion to answer any question if they did not feel comfortable. They were also provided with the opportunity to clarify

or ask openly if they didn't understand a question. All participants signed a consent form stating that they were willing to participate in the interview while also ensuring them confidentiality and anonymity throughout the process. Other issues like data storage were also discussed with the participants. The data were accessible only to the researcher and her supervisor. The transcripts and recordings were stored securely on an encrypted laptop and will be destroyed after ten years in line with The University of Manchester, General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act (2018). Due to the nature of research, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured when using participant quotations within the findings.

### **3.9 Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed my methodological stance used in the study. Further, I discussed how this qualitative methodology helped to explore in-depth perceptions of South Asian international students towards counselling and what they perceived as helpful or unhelpful factors in terms of seeking counselling in the UK. This chapter has also included information on the methods used to select or recruit participants and the method of data collection and analysis. Additionally, it outlined how trustworthiness was ensured along with ethical considerations pertinent to this study. The next chapter presents the findings from the study.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

#### 4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I outlined the methodology that I used in order to address the aim of the research i.e. to explore the perceptions of South Asian international students towards seeking counselling in the UK. The last chapter discussed that semi-structured interviews were conducted with South Asian international students. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcripts of the interviews. Within this chapter, I will present my analysis, outline the research questions and present my findings accordingly. The analysis was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of South Asian international students towards accessing counselling in the UK?
2. What are the factors that facilitate and inhibit South Asian international students in accessing counselling?

Seven main themes were constructed from the analysis: Previous positive experiences of counselling, previous negative experiences of counselling, positive perceptions of counselling, negative perceptions of counselling, different understanding of ‘counselling’, barriers to accessing counselling, factors which encourage access for counselling. The main themes and subthemes are presented in Table 1.4. I will present each main theme and sub themes that were identified from the 11 transcripts analysed. Each theme will be explained further using quotations from transcripts to provide better understanding of each themes and subthemes.

**Table 1.4: Main themes and Subthemes**

Main themes	Sub-themes
<b>Previous positive experiences of counselling</b>	
<b>Previous negative experiences of</b>	



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## **counselling**

### **Negative perceptions of counselling**

- It is for mad people
- I will find an alternative solution rather than counselling
- The counsellor might think I am crazy

### **Positive perceptions of counselling**

- Mental health is important
- Would go to improve mental health

### **Different understanding of 'counselling'**

### **Barriers to accessing counselling**

- Lack of knowledge
- Lack of resources
- Not available in own language
- Taboo or stigma

### **Factors which encourage access to counselling**

- Increased awareness of mental health
- Want directive counselling because I like answers
- A counsellor who listens to me and can put themselves in my shoes
- Making counselling services multicultural

## **4.2 Main theme: Previous positive experiences of counselling**

A main theme identified from the data related to the participants' perceptions towards seeking counselling was their prior positive experience of counselling either in their home country or in the UK. Four participants reported their own experiences of counselling or having the experience of visiting counsellors during a period of stress. Two participants experienced counselling in their home country and third participant accessed counselling in the UK. The fourth participant experienced counselling both in her home country and in the UK. This participant stated that she decided to take professional help when she came to the UK due to extreme academic stress and psychological problems. She reported that the counselling sessions were helpful and that she felt her counsellor was a good listener.

*“I felt I needed a counsellor urgently, then I started looking for profiles and I started contacting some counsellors. I had many initial consultations for free but I opted for a lady counsellor I really liked here. The lady helped me to discover a lot of things about myself; I am the kind of person who concentrated on my weakness rather than strengths so I started changing my perception of myself, I discovered a lot of strengths thanks to the counsellor who helped me discover these things about myself. I really like the sessions and talking about myself and to be listened to”. (Sarah)*

Another participant reported that he was asked by his teachers while studying in the UK to go to counselling – and not by choice. However, he mentioned that he really liked the approach of counselling as it helped him deal with his challenging behaviour and is willing to go for counselling in the future.

*“I had no choice; my teachers told me ‘you need counselling’. I was an annoying kid in secondary school; they used to have counsellors and they just help you to not get in trouble, they give you targets and stuff and you achieve them....maybe when I am older I would like to go for counselling” (Sam)*

In this section, the positive experiences of counselling they had either in the UK or in their home country were discussed. The following section will explore the second main theme and present an overview of the findings.

## **4.3 Main theme: Previous negative experiences of counselling**

This theme highlights the participant's negative experiences of counselling. One of the participants reported her experience of counselling in her home country which she referred to it

as very unprofessional. The participant expected her counsellor to give an advice however, counsellor neglected her feelings. She explained her negative experience of counselling was due to lack of awareness about counselling in her country. She reported people in her home country are close minded in terms of seeking counselling and expressing their feelings related to psychological problems. However, she strongly believed that the situation is different in the UK. Here, people have awareness about the counselling and are encouraged to seek counselling as compared in her home country.

*“Even I tried to speak to a counsellor in my home country the lady said help yourself it is not that difficult I think it was not very professional, people are very close minded they do not talk about feelings especially about psychological problems. I was expecting an advice that could help me but when I came to the UK it is very encouraged and people are aware about it”.* (Sarah).

Another participant reported a negative experience of counselling in his home country where he believed that the counsellor was making suggestions or giving his opinions to make his own profit rather than making efforts to understand what the participant was going through. The participant also expressed in the interview that he is unlikely to access counselling in the future.

*“I realized that the person is doing business over there, the counsellor should give suggestions according to the client and not according to his business they should understand what the other person is going through and should not give his own opinions”.* (Iqbal)

Here, the participants reported their prior experiences of counselling negatively. The participants expressed lack of counsellor’s efforts to understand their problems, inability to give advice, and people’s close minded attitude towards counselling makes their experience less positive.

#### **4.4 Main theme: Negative perceptions of counselling**

This main theme highlights the negative perceptions reported by the South Asian international students regarding seeking counselling in the UK. There were two subthemes: *It is for mad people and the counsellor might think “I am crazy”* which will be explained further using examples.

##### 4.4.1 Subtheme: It is for mad people

Participants reported negative views or perceptions towards counselling in the UK, which were mainly due to stigmatisation in their home country. They strongly believe that, if they go for counselling, it will not be appreciated by their society and family members. For example, one of the participants said: *“In my country I did not even know what is counselling; it is not encouraged in my country even when you have psychological problems people don't understand you - if you have psychological problems you keep them to yourself “ and “People in your home country do not talk about psychological things”*. Furthermore, participants noted the reason for negative view towards mental health is due to a lack of awareness and communication between families. People are not open in talking about emotions and feelings and view this situation as a matter of social pride. Some of the specific examples showing participants' negative perceptions towards counselling due to the stigma associated with mental health in their home country are:

*“In my home country, if you tell them you're going for these sessions, they will think that you are mad. I don't think they can understand” (Claire).*

*“In general, people from my home country - like 50% - might see a professional if you are crazy. So unless you are crazy, you don't go to seek counselling. This is what they think” (Faiza).*

*“It's still stigmatised; you know when they say ‘oh you are going to a crazy doctor’ - you know like a psychiatrist or a psychologist, it's like a crazy doctor. If you are crazy, you go there; it is not as easily integrated in our society” (Vicky).*

This negative mindset is not solely due to prejudice people hold in their home country; it can also appear due to an individual's belief that asking for help is a sign of weakness. This can be further explained with specific examples:

*“In Asia, if you are going for counselling, you are weak and you cannot handle your problems and in some families they feel that, if their child is going for counselling, they will lose face because of that” (Paula).*

*“In my home country, I used to think speaking about your problem is a weakness” (Sarah).*

*“To be honest, I do not believe in counselling; if an individual is brave enough and is mature, they can deal with their challenges in life” (Iqbal).*

There were participants who believed talking about emotional problems means you are not brave and that only depressed people go for counselling. They felt responsible for dealing with their problem(s) on their own rather than going for counselling. For example, one of the participants

said: *“I feel counselling is for someone who is depressed, so they go for counselling. I personally feel if a person is depressed, they should not go to someone and seek counselling; if they go for counselling, they will think about their negative experiences again because they are going to share their problems with the counsellor, they might recollect those memories”* (Sam). The participant thinks counselling is not a helpful process as it may bring back negative memories during the session and can have adverse effects on the client.

#### 4.4.2 Subtheme: I will find an alternative solution rather than counselling

Similarly, there were participants who reported they would try to find alternative solutions rather than going to a counsellor because they strongly believe they should be able to help themselves. For example: *“But my personal opinion is that I will not go to a counsellor. I will try to face challenges by myself”* and *“I have to find some other alternative, to be honest; instead of going to a counsellor, I might go and meet any of my family members because their suggestions are more valuable for me than a counsellor. If you get support and love from your family, you do not need a counsellor”* (Iqbal). This participant also thinks rather than going to a counsellor, he would prefer to speak to his family because he trusts his family than a counsellor. *“People who have family don't need counselling and people who do not have family might go for counselling and might start relying on the counsellor”*. Another participant expressed similar views: *“I don't want to be dependent on a counsellor; God has given me this life and I will face the challenges. At the end, he [the counsellor] will give his suggestions and I will follow like a puppet; it doesn't make any sense”* (Hifzul).

We can see that many participants view counselling negatively and might refrain from accessing counselling services due to negative beliefs or stigma attached to mental health in their home country. However, many participants considered that, if the awareness about mental health is increased in their culture, people might start talking about their problems, as the younger generation might become more aware and open to support mental wellbeing in their country.

#### 4.4.3 Subtheme: The counsellor might think “I am crazy”

Participants reported their views on how a counsellor might approach their problems. Many mentioned fear of being judged during the counselling session. They talked about judgments towards mental health in their home country, which have made them suspicious that the

counsellors would judge them or think they are crazy. Some of the participants were informed about the counselling sessions and confidentiality. They knew counselling sessions provided at their university are private and confidential and the counsellors are nonjudgmental. However, other participants were not informed regarding the fact that sessions are confidential and that counsellors are not supposed to judge their clients. For example, one participant said *“what if the information he shares is not confidential and the counsellor might think he is crazy or he might judge the other person”* (Hifzul). Here the participant mentioned his fear of being judged by the counsellor and demonstrated a lack of understanding about confidentiality. Such participants lacked knowledge about what happens with the information shared with counsellors, which can be a great barrier for this population to seek counselling. As mentioned earlier, due to cultural differences, society of the participants does not appreciate people getting professional help, therefore participants were reluctant to seek counselling as they are not comfortable telling their families, friends or tutors. For example, *“I will not start speaking to a stranger and sharing my personal problems; it will definitely be a barrier for me and what if they tell our tutor”* (Faiza). On the contrary, a participant reported *“you can sense that they are non-judgmental. I think that would be important, someone you can trust and also a complete stranger that your family would not know so your information stays confidential; that would be important”* (Vicky). The participant had a basic understanding that the sessions are confidential and the counsellors are non-judgmental and considered this factor as really important for students to trust their counsellors.

A participant mentioned her awareness about confidentiality; however, she reported she might have difficulty in trusting newly qualified counsellors. *“If they're professionals and they are qualified as a psychologist, I'm sure they will understand they would be more careful in how they would react; if they know what they are doing, they know their job we can trust them. If a person is newly qualified, I might not trust that person very easily”* (Maya). Some participants perceived counselling as a judgmental process and strongly believed the information shared within the counselling session is not confidential. As a result, they might be hesitant to seek professional help and may have difficulty trusting the counsellor. However, the majority of the participants were open to seek counselling in the UK as they were informed that the counselling sessions are confidential and it is a safe space to express. As some of the participants have already

experienced counselling either in the UK or in their home country therefore, they know about the process of confidentiality in counselling.

#### **4.5 Main theme: Positive perceptions of counselling**

This theme highlights the participants' positive perceptions towards seeking counselling. Some participants reported positive views or perceptions towards counselling in the UK. They strongly believe it is important to think about your mental health just as you would do for your physical health. Most of the participants thought it is good to have someone to talk to about our emotional needs. Most of the participants expressed they would go for counselling either to improve their mental health or to tackle their academic or career related stress. The subthemes will describe their positive perceptions further with reference to excerpts from the participants' interview.

##### 4.5.1 Subtheme: Mental health is important

This subtheme describes the importance of mental health reported by the participants. The participants discussed that seeking counselling should be encouraged especially if students are going through difficulties and challenges. Some openly talked about the importance of mental health and need to get professional help if needed. Here are some of the specific examples showing participants' positive perception towards counselling:

*“I have been very open. With mental health, I think it's really important that you share - if not publicly, then at least with someone - about how you are feeling, are you in a good place? [It's] As simple as that just talk to someone about it”. (Vicky)*

*“People should go for counselling; it is not a bad thing. Once you go for counselling, it might change your mindset”. (Hilary)*

*“I think it is good to seek counselling because sometimes people go through difficult situations and they really need help, they need to get out of their troubles in a proper way so seeking counselling is good. Especially for students who are under pressure or people, who are going through a difficult time, they just lose control of their life; I think seeking counselling is great”. (Faiza)*

These participants thought it is alright to think about mental health and people should reach out for help if needed. Some of the participants also remarked that there is considerable stigma in their home country but access to mental health facilities is developing in their home country,

especially among the younger generation; as a result, the participants expressed their positive views about counselling. One participant reported: *“progress has been made; people are getting the help they need, especially the younger generation, we are very open about it. It's great; it's progress”* (Vicky). In spite of the stigma attached to mental health in their home country, some were keen to experience counselling in the UK because they thought asking for help is not something shameful but rather saw it as a sign of strength. For example, a participant stated: *“I think it is completely fine; if the person recognizes they need help, they should go for it, so in the end they are trying to help themselves. Seeking help does not mean that you are weak you are in fact trying to improve”* (Maya). Similarly, a participant felt it is important to talk about your mental wellbeing and realized it is strength to talk about your feelings *“I used to think it is shameful to talk to somebody about your problems but it is okay to talk about your problems; it is a sign of strength”* (Sarah). Another participant reported she would not risk her wellbeing due to the stigma attached to counselling in her home country and would prefer to seek counselling if she needed it: *“Personally, I do not care what people are saying about me -if they say that I am crazy that I was seeking counselling, I don't care. They have their own opinions; if I was so paranoid about what others are going to say about me, then I would not go for counselling. Personally, I am not like that. People in my home country can risk their wellbeing because of what people might think about the”* (Faiza).

It was observed that many of the participants expressed positive views towards counselling due to exposure to psychology or prior experience with counselling. They felt they had enough knowledge about mental health and ways to tackle their emotional problems; therefore they had a positive relationship with mental wellbeing. For example, one participant stated: *“I think because I have been more exposed to mental health awareness for me personally whenever I feel like I need to go to someone, I just talk to people. like a close member of your family or friends; if somebody in my family or friends told me that I have some problem and I should go and seek help from somebody, I will definitely go and seek help”* (Maya). A participant mentioned that she took a class in psychology so understands the importance of wellbeing: *“I did a minor in psychology so I know these things”*. Moreover, one participant did practical work with a psychologist which exposed her to learn things about counselling *“I did like a shadowing thing*



*with a psychologist, I have seen people coming for Talking Therapies and I have seen how it works; I have seen how CBT works” (Vicky).*

One participant shared her experience of counselling in the UK and rated her experience as positive, which made her positive towards seeking out counselling in the UK in future. She told *“I used to think speaking about your problem is a weakness but actually it is strength; I learned it here in the UK, it is a sign of strength - it is good to talk to somebody and to be listened to is very helpful and it helped me a lot. I discovered a lot of strengths thanks to the counsellor who helped me discover these things about me. I really like the sessions and talking about myself and being listened to. I would love to explore myself again” (Sarah).*

Despite the negative views of counselling in their home country, many of the participants had positive perceptions about seeking counselling, either due to past experiences of counselling or exposure to counselling at school or work.

#### 4.5.2 Subtheme: Would go to improve mental health

Participants reported that their understanding of counselling was that people seek counselling for problems that are psychological in nature or are related to mental health. For example, three participants stated:

*“Counselling for me is about seeking advice from a professional. For example, you are going through a difficult time or not feeling well, you can ask a specialized psychiatrist/psychologist to guide you, to give you advice, or just have a chat with him or her and describe your problem” (Maya).*

*“I guess if you are having mental health issues, if you cannot deal it with yourself or help yourself, then you go for counselling” (Faiza).*

*“I see counselling as if you have any problem that you are facing and it is affecting your mental health, then you seek counselling; I think that is one of the reasons I would seek counselling for” (Claire).*

Participants also gave examples of their understanding of psychological problems and mentioned what circumstances would most likely lead them to seek counselling, such as depression, anxiety, negative thoughts, study pressure, and relational/interpersonal problems. For example, three participants stated:

*“When I feel very alone and isolated, depressed, anxious, and have stress about my PhD, I sometimes feel terrible and I will go for professional help” (Sarah).*

*“Maybe for my education; I think the master’s degree can put you under pressure and can affect mental health as well. Then, I would seek counselling” (Claire).*

*“Maybe when I feel under so much pressure and I feel like I cannot control my life, or when I feel like I don’t know what to do, or I feel lost or I do not have plans.” (Faiza)*

Participants typically perceived the counselling process as professional help to deal with mental health related concerns or psychological problems like anxiety and depression. They also believed any stress or pressure related to studies/education should be treated seriously and should be classified as a mental health concern.

#### **4.6 Main theme: Different understanding of ‘counselling’**

It was observed during the interview that some participants struggled to understand the term “counselling” and confused psychological counselling with “Career counselling” commonly referred to as “career services” in the UK. Participants reported they would seek counselling only if it related to their career. They clarified they would go for counselling if they are stuck in their career or would prefer to choose a different career stream rather than dealing with stress related to their career. For example, some of the participants stated:

*“I would go if I was stuck somewhere, and for my career. When the water overflows, you need someone to guide you or talk to you” (Hilary)*

*“I would go for counselling when I don’t see growth in my career.” (Claire)*

*“If it is for my career, without giving it a thought, I would go for counselling.” (Iqbal)*

The participants who responded to counselling as “career counselling” reported their experience as both positive and negative. A participant mentioned it was a turning point of her career and she had benefitted from going to a counsellor in order to get advice related to her career path. For example, *“Me and my Dad went to see a counsellor - one of his friends who was a counsellor and very experienced - so we wanted some guidance as it was a turning point in my career. He was very kind and asked about my problem, he listened very calmly and he suggested what I should do. We talked about it and made the decision. He explained everything to me- like*

*advantages and disadvantages - and his guidance was really helpful for me” (Hilary). According to the participant, her experience was very positive and her visit to the careers advisor helped her make the right decision. However, another participant expressed his views for career services quite negatively. For example, “Once, I went to a counsellor - it was not a proper counselling session, it was like career counselling - they were sharing interesting facts about different courses and I realized that the person is working there, the counsellor should give suggestions according to the client and not according to his business; they should understand what the other person is going through and should not give his own opinions” (Iqbal).*

Some of the participants shared their experience of career counselling in their home country whereas a participant used the term “consultation” when asked their views on counselling. For example, *“So counselling - it's basically... there might be different types of counselling but I think when you have some problem or things you can't share with anyone that are bothering you, then you can go to a consultant” (Priya).* These participants struggled to understand the terminology and responded to the interview questions with terms like “career counselling” or “consultation” in mind as these terms are widely used in their home country. A participant had a better understanding when asked about the circumstances she would go for counselling, she clarified she would seek help from career services rather than counselling. For example, *“Probably, as my degree is about to end and I have to think about my future regarding a job or PhD when I feel really under pressure or get anxiety, for that, I would definitely go and talk to someone but then probably I would go to career services rather than a mental health service or a counsellor because they would have better answers to my question” (Vicky).*

We can see that some participants struggled to give their views on counselling as they misunderstood the term “Counselling” due to cultural differences. As a researcher, I have used a person-centred approach to interviewing and as a result, I followed the conversation and explored participants’ understanding about counselling rather than correcting them which came as a unique finding in this study that participants had different understandings of the word ‘counselling’. However, in this theme most of the students expressed their preference for seeking counselling for career or academic related stressors.

#### **4.7 Main theme: Barriers to accessing counselling**

This theme represents the barriers for seeking counselling in the UK as reported by South Asian international students. There are four subthemes: *Lack of knowledge*, *Lack of resources*, *Not available in own language* and *taboo or stigma* which will be explained further using examples.

#### 4.7.1 Subtheme: Lack of knowledge

This subtheme explores the participants' knowledge of counselling services at campus, barriers to accessing the services, and how to find the services if needed.

Some of the participants remarked they did not know if the counselling services existed on campus.

*Sukriti: "Did you have counselling services at your campus?"*

*Sam: "I don't know about that, if we had them [counselling services] on campus or not."*

*Sukriti: "Do you know if you have counselling services at your university?"*

*Hifzul: "No, I do not know, and I have not asked anyone; they probably have them, but I have not asked anyone."*

However, a few of the participants reported they generally have an idea of how to find counselling services if needed by searching on Google and calling the university helpline.

*"I would do some search online and see the address, I will book an appointment and then I will just go."* (Faiza)

*Hilary: "I don't know the process, but I can Google it. If they are based at a company, I can talk to the receptionist and they can fix my meeting with a counsellor, they can give me the process".* (Hilary)

*"I think that a number of services are mentioned on the back of our student ID card which is good you can have a look, and also on the university website, there are lots of links where you can go, and the library does some courses."* (Claire)

#### 4.7.2 Subtheme: Lack of resources

The participants stated that they know where these counselling services exist and how to access them, but they believe these services are expensive or they do not have time to attend these services.

*"I think they can go to the NHS; I have heard it is expensive if you go for private."* (Hifzul)

*Sukriti: "Are there any other barriers to seeking counselling?"*

*Paula: "Time and money, especially if the student is overstressed and they feel they do not want to spend extra time out of their schedules to go for counselling, when they can be doing something more productive and they cannot afford much."*

*"I feel very positive about seeking counselling, and, if I was not busy, I would definitely go and attend counselling services." (Faiza)*

#### 4.7.3 Subtheme: Not available in own language

The participants described their concerns about language and communication in English and how these could be an issue to express themselves during the counselling session. As international students speak English as a second language, they might struggle to find words to convey their feelings to counsellors.

*"Language itself is a main issue, I cannot express some emotions completely in English but in my own language, the vocabulary is very vast so we are able to express these emotions more clearly in our language, so it can be a barrier." (Hifzul)*

*"If I'm not able to express myself, I'm not good with expressing because I don't have good communication skills, so it was difficult for me to open up and talk about my problems and issues because I was so afraid. Now I have done so many sessions and I think communication is very important." (Sarah)*

*"If I'm not able to convey problems in English, they might not understand properly and give a different answer which is difficult. If I can't convert properly, people understand something else." (Priya)*

#### 4.7.4 Subtheme: Taboo or stigma

The participants remarked that culture can be a huge barrier for them to access counselling services in the UK due to stigma and cultural differences. They described people in their culture as not willing to talk about their emotional problems which can be a barrier for them to seek counselling.

*Sukriti: "Are people in your culture or from the same religious background more open and willing to talk about their emotional problems?"*

*Maya: "I would not say everyone is, but it is very hard to discuss it with professionals; I want somebody who can give me religious and logical advice."*

*"In my home country, I used to think speaking about your problem is a weakness." (Sarah)*

*“I don't think so; they still have a very negative mindset about counselling they think you are mentally not well.”(Hifzul)*

Moreover, participants also stated that their cultural beliefs and values but also the cultural difference between client and counsellor can be a major barrier for them to seek counselling. They doubted that English counsellors or counsellors who are different from them culturally would be able to understand their problems. Here are some of the specific examples participants conveyed during their interviews:

*“Adjusting to a different culture is very difficult, so the person practicing as a psychologist might not be able to accept the culture of different people; for example, I am not a drinking person and here the culture is very much into drinking. I cannot accept all the aspects of these people's culture nor could I expect them (counsellors) to understand.” (Priya)*

*“Maybe for some issues that are related to a particular culture, it's in your culture it is okay to remain quiet and be more tolerant but if it clashes with the culture here where you prioritize your own needs first, this kind of thing can be a barrier; you will feel like your counsellor will not understand what you're going through.”(Paula)*

*“In my country, people are different; their mindset is very different so in case I have to go for counselling, I would like the other person to know my background. They should be able to understand my circumstances and the situations I have been in.”(Hifzul)*

During the interview, it was observed that the participants found culture was a barrier for international students to seek counselling. They strongly believed that counsellors in the UK would not be able to understand what they are going through due to difference in their cultural values. They have limited awareness if the services provided at the university counselling centres are multicultural or not. They suggested that if the counselling services start providing multicultural counselling or have counsellors from different nationalities or countries, they might attract students from South Asian countries.

#### **4.8 Main theme: Factors which encourage access to counselling**

This main theme represents the encouraging factors for seeking counselling in the UK as described by South Asian international students. There are four subthemes: *Increased awareness of mental health, Want directive counselling because I like answers, A counsellor who listens to me and can put themselves in my shoes and Making counselling services multicultural.* These subthemes will be explained further using examples.

#### 4.8.1 Subtheme: Increased awareness of mental health

Participants remarked that, if we talk openly about mental health, it is going to increase the awareness and knowledge, specifically among the younger generation. While a few participants believed that people in their home country are not open to talking about mental health issues and therefore might not be able to talk to a counsellor about how they feel due to stigma and prejudice, if we start increasing awareness about mental health services, it might encourage students from their home country to access such services. The following are specific examples demonstrating participants' beliefs that increasing mental health awareness could encourage South Asian international students to seek counselling.

*“I think we need to talk more about mental health, so that the next generation doesn't feel that there is a taboo and so they are more willing to be open about it. That is the first step and after that you can set up more counselling services and let everyone else be aware of it because we are not aware of it at all.”(Paula)*

*“I would say that different cultures have different beliefs; wherever you belong to the belief of a culture that is against mental health awareness, then you will have some hesitation to seek counselling but everything can be solved with education. So, if you are aware how to get help and where to get it, it would break that barrier. The barriers are made by the internal environment rather than the external.”(Maya)*

*“A mental health awareness campaign is crucial and good for people who need the awareness to be educated about it; here, there is education and awareness. And it is people's responsibility to understand the importance of mental health.”(Vicky)*

Many participants reported that one of the barriers to seeking counselling is the lack of awareness and knowledge about the importance of mental health and accessibility to such services. A participant advised that the university should make efforts to advertise these services *“There are so many international students who know the services do exist but they are not going to attend because they do not advertise the services properly. They should offer meetings to the international students and advertise the services properly” (Faiza)*. Participants strongly believed that people who are hesitant to seek counselling due to culture or personal attitudes should be educated about mental health counselling, which can encourage students to break through the barrier and take responsibility for their mental wellbeing.

#### 4.8.2 Subtheme: Want directive counselling because I like answers

Participants stated that another factor that might increase access to counselling is a directive approach to counselling. Many reported they would prefer to access counselling services if they offered solutions to their problems and a few participants believe talking about their problem makes it less stressful. However, participants lacked knowledge when asked about the types of counselling approach they knew. Two of the participants had knowledge about counselling approach due to exposure to psychology classes or prior experience of counselling while some of the participants confused counselling with career guidance.

*“I would probably want directive counselling because I like answers. I would like direction rather than free communication for me; the first step is self-help or if I'm going for counselling, I would need direct answers.”(Vicky)*

*“I prefer to get a good solution for the problem.”(Paula)*

*“I would like to first express myself and then get advice and if it is a more serious problem, then I would like to discuss it more like a debate or brainstorm to see the possible outcome of a situation; I would prefer a bit deeper conversation.”(Maya)*

Most of the participants preferred seeking directive counselling as their goal for seeking counselling would be to get a solution or advice for their problems. However, only a few participants reported their preference for a non-directive or person-centred approach. For example, one participant stated *“the person should listen to me well and understand whatever I say and should be kind in nature, sit with me, talk to me and get involved in the communication, understand what I am facing and be able to put themselves in my shoes and think what I am dealing with” (Hilary)*. The participant expressed her need to express her emotions to the counsellor and should be able to understand her problem from their perspective. Another participant remarked that she would go for counselling if she felt too overwhelmed and would prefer a solution-focused approach - if she needs a solution. For example: *“If you know why you are feeling that way and you want a solution when dealing with a problem, then I would go for a solution-focused approach or if you are too overwhelmed or you don't know what is happening, then you need someone to listen to you”(Faiza)*.

The need for advice or solutions seems to be prominent for some participants in deciding whether or not they would seek counselling. A participant expressed that she would prefer to try



a counsellor from a different cultural background and see their perception of the problem expressed by the participant. She stated: *“I would go for a different counsellor. I am interested in knowing what that person thinks, their mindset, how they will guide me, I look forward to that.”* (Hilary). The participant considered seeking solutions to her problem from a counsellor different from her culture as she seemed interested to know how they would approach her problems.

Participants expressed they need counselling to get solutions and access to directive counselling. If participants have more access to directive or solution-focused counselling, that might encourage more students to seek counselling. The participants’ reported preference for directive counselling might be due to lack of knowledge or awareness about the counselling approach while some of the participants had difficulty understanding the concept of counselling and misunderstood it as career guidance, which could be a reason for their preferring the directive approach.

#### 4.8.3 Subtheme: A counsellor who listens to me and can put themselves in my shoes

The participants talked about the factors that might encourage them to seek counselling i.e. personality of a counsellor. They expressed they prefer to visit a counsellor who has good listening skills and understands their problem through their perception by putting themselves in their clients’ shoes. These participants were afraid of being judged by the foreign counsellor due to the stigma and prejudice in their home country. As these participants are not comfortable talking about their mental wellbeing to a stranger, they prefer a counsellor who is non-judgmental. For example, one participant stated: *“the person should listen to me well and understand whatever I say and should be kind in nature, sit with me, talk to me and get involved in the communication, understand what I am facing and be able to put themselves in my shoes and think about what I am dealing with”* (Hilary). It was important for the participant that the counsellor should understand what they are going through and they should have good listening skills and perceive the situation from their point of view through empathy. Another participant stated she prefers her counsellor to be a mother, as the participant was herself a mother and believed a counsellor who is also a mother would be able to understand her better. For example, *“I would prefer to see a mother because mothers feel each other. This is what I think personally, they can put themselves in your shoes and give you a suitable advice”* (Faiza).

As the participants expressed their fear of judgment, many described their preference to see a counsellor who is non-judgmental and a trustworthy person. A participant stated *“I would prefer someone dear to me because I know they would not give me any wrong advice. Trust issues will be there in a counsellor but professionally, I know the sessions are confidential, you can trust them”* (Maya). Another participant mentioned that she would also prefer a non-judgmental person as she was afraid of being judged in her home country and a person who is warm and welcoming. She stated: *“I would prefer my counsellor to be tender, smiling and non-judgmental because I was afraid of being judged in my country”* (Sarah).

A participant mentioned that it is important for her that counsellor makes effort to understand her problems without judging her and she might be willing to try a counsellor from a different culture because they might not judge her as they do not have the same prejudices as in her home country. The participant tried to talk to a counsellor in her home country; however, she did not made efforts to understand the problems reported by participants. The participant believed the counsellor judged her due to religion or culture. The participant said: *“I think I would prefer a counsellor from different culture as I already talked to a counsellor from my culture, but she couldn't understand. I think here in the UK is better”* (Sarah). She believes that the counsellor in the UK might be able to understand her better without being judgemental towards her. Similarly, another participant stated: *“I don't know, I can try both and find out whether they will be able to understand me”* (Maya). Again, the culture is not important for these participants but it is important for them to be understood by the counsellor. However, it might an issue for culture-specific situations, where a counsellor from a different culture might not be able to understand the situation and offer them advice as they do not experience such issues in their culture.

The interviews revealed that participants would like their counsellor to understand them well by being non-judgmental and empathetic towards them. The participants might be willing to try counselling from culturally different counsellors either due to prior experiences with a counsellor from a similar culture or because of fear of being judged by a culturally related counsellor. It seems like the participants had a basic need of being understood by their counsellors if they are willing to access counselling.

#### 4.8.4 Subtheme: Making counselling services multicultural

The participants mentioned the need to make counselling services more multicultural in order to attract more South Asian international students. As we have explored in the interviews, participants struggle to talk about their emotional and mental health issues openly due to cultural differences. Therefore, it is important to make the environment of mental health services more multicultural, which might encourage them to seek counselling in future. The participants strongly believed the services provided at university counselling centres shouldn't overlook the importance of culture in therapy. They suggested increasing multicultural counselling, which could encourage students to seek counselling.

While the majority of the participants expressed their desire for a counsellor with good listening skills, warmth, and who is non-judgmental, a few of them stated the culture would be another factor for them to decide whether to go for counselling or not. They expressed their preference for a counsellor from the same culture or ethnicity as they would be able to understand them better. One participant reported culture would be a barrier for her to seek out a counsellor if they were different from each other culturally. She said *"I think language is not that important; however, culture is. For example, if I have a counsellor from my home country, he or she will understand me better than another one from another culture"* (Vicky). Another participant expressed similar views *"Maybe for some issues that are related to a particular culture, it's in your culture it is okay to remain quiet and be more tolerant but if it clashes with the culture here, where you prioritize your own needs first, this kind of thing can be a barrier, and you will feel like your counsellor will not understand what you're going through"* (Paula). They believe culture is important for them and being culturally different from the counsellor might be a barrier for the counsellor to understand what they are going through. Another participant said *"if I have to go for counselling, I would like the other person to know my background; they should be able to understand my circumstances and the situations I have been in. If a person doesn't know how life is in Bangladesh, for them it could be very difficult to give me suggestions"* (Hifzul). Most of the participants felt students from their home country would be comfortable seeking counselling if they have an opportunity to talk about their cultural values and stigma related to mental health in their country.

Many of them stated it is important for the counsellor to understand their culture and know where they are coming from. One participant stated it is important for the counsellor to

understand the root cause of the problem by exploring everything about the culture of the international student. More specifically, *“I think they need to ask about everything like culture, they need to know about the root of the problem, and not just know the appropriate technique or method to use in order to tackle the issue and help the student to overcome or cope with the issue by exploring their culture”* (Sarah). Another participant felt it is vital for the counsellors who are working with international students to do some research into the culture of their client to understand and get an overview of their culture and how it can affect the therapy. For example, *“they should do a bit of research; before the appointment, they can learn where the person is from then they should do some research about their culture to make it easier for them”* (Hilary).

The participants not only talked about what counselling services should do to make their experience better but also mentioned how they could make this happen. One participant suggested hiring counsellors from different cultures and who speak different languages could attract more international students for counselling, as they might be more comfortable in seeking help from someone who belongs to the similar culture or speaks same language. She said *“They should have people who speak different languages and hire different people to understand different cultures - and of a different age group can also make a difference; you might need advice from somebody older or somebody of the same age”* (Maya). She felt having counsellors from different age groups could be another factor encouraging people to seek counselling as some people would prefer to get advice from someone older, while others might want someone of similar age, as they would be comfortable in sharing their problems with young counsellors.

As mentioned before, language is itself a barrier for South Asian international students therefore having access to these services in their first language should be promoted. However, it might not possible due to the limited number of counsellors at the university; therefore, counsellors could make the process simpler for international students by using basic English and not using too much jargon to communicate during the counselling session so that their clients can grasp the language easily. One participant stated *“In terms of Indian language, it's very difficult to match the English level of these people so it should be matched to their standard by talking a bit slow, the rate of the speech should be average and use simple words rather than professional words”* (Priya).

The participants gave suggestions to improve the counselling services at university which seems to be doable. However, a few participants who strongly believed that, before improving the services, it is more important to increase the ways to access such services. One participant remarked *“There are so many international students who know the services exist but they are not going to attend because they do not advertise the services properly. They should offer meetings to the international students to advertise the services properly”* (Faiza). Similarly, another participant stated *“it is important for these services to distribute questionnaires to the students; people from my country are not good in expressing their feelings so it will be helpful for them to express or provide guidelines on how to access the services as some people are not aware”* (Vicky). They also talked about creating awareness not just at the university level but increasing awareness to access professional help in every culture when needed. *“I think this issue should be raised and everyone should be aware of where to go and how to talk about your problems. You should not feel afraid to seek help; no one should feel like they are lonely and that there is nobody to talk to, there should be more awareness about this in every culture; every culture should promote this a lot”* (Priya).

In sum, it is not only important to improve the services for this population by providing multicultural counselling but also to create more awareness and ways to increase accessibility for university counselling.

#### **4.9 Reflexive analysis**

The aim of this study was to explore the South Asian international students' perceptions towards counselling and this aim was accomplished using a qualitative approach. The participants shared their views on seeking counselling in the UK. They shared both positive and negative perceptions of seeking counselling. When participants talked about the cultural norms and stigma attached to mental health in their home country, I could relate to the prejudice discussed by the participants as a researcher and an international student. When participants expressed old-fashioned attitudes towards counselling, and how they think it is only for people who are crazy or mad, they were very biased. When I tell people in my home country, especially those from older generations, about my degree in psychology, they just laugh about it and ask, “Are you going to treat mad people?” While interviewing some of the participants, I felt they held beliefs

and attitudes towards mental health that were similar to what they have learnt from their culture. Being a trainee psychologist, it was frustrating to sit through some harsh comments on counselling; however, it was easier for me to understand those views as I belong to the same society, where mental health is never considered important and seems pointless to talk about. As a researcher and a South Asian international student, I tried my best to separate my thoughts from those of the participants, as I could relate to them very easily due to these same cultural values. I reflected on my feelings and thoughts by keeping a journal, which might have reduced prejudice towards the responses and limit the influence on my analysis. I used a person-centred approach during the interviews to facilitate an engagement that promotes authenticity. I was able to empathise with the participants who disclosed some difficult emotions during the interview while discussing their negative experiences of living in the UK as I have gone through the same process. Stiles (1993) reported that in order to ensure good quality in qualitative research, the researcher's 'personal orientation and personal involvement in the research' (p.593) needs to be known. I have therefore provided a reflexive component to my analysis (Creswell, 2007) that takes into account my own socio-cultural influences which affect the data interpretations through my own experiences. Reflexivity entails self-awareness (Lambert, Jomeen, & McSherry, 2010), which means being actively involved in the research process. It is about the recognition that as researchers, we are part of the social world that we study (Ackerly & True, 2010; Frank, 1997; Morse, 1991; Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991). It is a continuous process of reflection by researchers on their values (Parahoo, 2006) and of recognizing, examining, and understanding how their "social background, location and assumptions affect their research practice" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 17). The key to reflexivity is "to make the relationship between and the influence of the researcher and the participants explicit" (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009, p. 45).

I was glad to learn some participants had a better understanding of counselling either due to their prior experiences with counselling or their educational background. However, it was observed that a few participants struggled to understand the term "counselling" and misunderstood it as "career counselling", commonly known as "career services" in the UK. In some South Asian countries, career guidance services are promoted using the term "career counselling", which involve strategies to choose a career path according to the aptitude and ability of the client using some tools and psychometric tests, and is not to be considered as a mental health counselling.

The participants who had experiences with career guidance services misunderstood the terminology and gave their responses accordingly. As I have experience of similar career services in my home country, I could understand why participants misunderstood the questions. We can see that some participants struggled to give their views on counselling as they misunderstood the term “Counselling” due to cultural differences. As a researcher, my role was to explore their views and perceptions and not to educate them about different types of counselling, therefore I did not interrupt the process and gained their understanding about counselling. The researchers’ personal beliefs and values about the career counselling may have been reflected in the interpretation of findings.

Many participants responded they were afraid to seek counselling due to their fear of being judged and because they were not sure what happens to the information shared with the counsellor. I was conscious of my “insider” stance as a trainee psychologist and a South Asian international student and, as a result, I reminded the participants during the interviews that the role of the researcher is to explore their perception and not to judge them due to their way of responding. Moreover, the person-centred approach was used during the interviews to facilitate an engagement that promotes authenticity. However, this fear and prejudice could have affected the richness of the data as participants might have changed their responses which may have been valuable. An ‘insider’ is a researcher who personally belongs to the group to which their participants also belong (based on characteristics such as ethnicity, sexual identity and gender). It has been argued that the familiarity of insider status is advantageous when developing research questions, designing interview schedules, accessing and recruiting participants, and during data collection, analysis, and dissemination. It has been suggested that insiders are more aware of the lives of their participants than outsiders and are therefore in a strong position to conduct ethical research which keeps (often marginalised) participants at the top of the research agenda and represents their voices (e.g., Gair, 2012; Griffith, 1998; LaSala, 2003). However, there is also a possibility that the researcher as an ‘insider’ may reveal too much sensitive information in his/her research because of knowing the issue well (Smyth & Holian, 2008). The ‘insider’ researchers may sometimes overlook the confidentiality and sensitivity of the information because they have easy access to it. Also, greater familiarity can make insiders more likely to take things for granted and become blindsided. There are studies that suggest an insider may not

ask 'obvious' question and assumptions might not be challenged (Hockey, 1993, p. 202) and shared prior experiences might not be explained (Powney & Watts, 1987, p. 186; Kanuha, 2000, p. 442) which may affect the quality of data.

#### **4.10 Summary**

This chapter includes the findings of the analysis and my reflections on the research process. Seven main themes were identified from the analysis: Previous positive experiences of counselling, previous negative experiences of counselling, positive perceptions of counselling, negative perceptions of counselling, different understanding of 'counselling', barriers to accessing counselling, factors which encourage access to counselling. The main themes and subthemes were explored further by quotations from the interviews conducted with the participants. Overall, the findings provide an in-depth understanding about the perceptions of South Asian international students towards accessing counselling in the UK. The themes highlighted both positive and negative experiences of counselling in the home country and in the UK as reported by the South Asian international students. The findings also discussed their perceptions towards seeking counselling in the UK. The participants stressed on the importance of mental health and encouragement to seek counselling. The participants reported that they are likely to access to counselling during the times of distress or to improve their mental health. However, the most important factor seemed to be the academic or career related stressors. Other than positive perceptions, the participants also reported their negative views towards accessing counselling i.e. it is for mad people. They viewed counselling as negatively mainly due to stigma attached to mental health in their home country. The findings also gave an overview of the factors that facilitate and prohibit South Asian international students in accessing counselling. The participants indicated that lack of awareness about university counselling services at campus, lack of resources such as time and money could act as a barrier for South Asian international students in accessing counselling in the UK. Moreover, lack of availability of counselling services in the first language of students and stigma or taboo towards counselling could also be a hindrance. However, other factors such as increase of awareness about mental health, availability of directive approach to counselling, empathy or counsellor's ability to understand and use of multicultural counselling could encourage south Asian international



students in accessing counselling in the UK. The following chapter, *Discussion*, will further explore the themes explained in this chapter.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

In the last chapter, the themes which developed emerged from the transcript as a result of thematic analysis were outlined. The aim of this chapter is to explore both the research questions presented earlier in the thesis and how the findings answer the research questions. This section will explore the perceptions of South Asian international students towards seeking counselling in the UK and their views on the factors which are facilitative and prohibitive when seeking counselling. The findings which constructed from the data may improve our understanding of ways international students can experience counselling in a university setting. Furthermore, suggestions will be made, based on the findings from this research, on how university counselling services could be improved to cater better for the needs of South Asian international students. The strengths and limitations will also be discussed in this chapter. Areas for future research have also been identified and mentioned.

#### **5.2 Discussion of the findings**

The findings of this study provide first-hand and in-depth insight into South Asian international students' perceptions of accessing counselling in the UK and the factors that influence their perceptions about seeking counselling. Through the process of analysing the interview data, seven main themes developed: previous positive experiences of counselling, previous negative experiences of counselling, positive perceptions of counselling, negative perceptions of counselling, different understanding of 'counselling', barriers to accessing counselling, factors which encourage access to counselling. All of the participants spoke about their perceptions about seeking counselling as being either positive or negative. The participants' positive perceptions about counselling included their views on the importance of mental health and the need to encourage students to pursue counselling. The participants reported reasons for seeking counselling included dealing with academic or career-related stress and improving one's mental health. Meanwhile, the participants who viewed counselling negatively talked about the fear of judgement, either from their society or counsellor, and considered counselling as only being for

mad people. Moreover, four participants reported their prior experiences of counselling either in the UK or their home country and described their experiences as both positive and negative. Those who reported their experiences as positive summarised that the counselling sessions were helpful and they liked the approach used by their counsellor. The participants who reported their prior experiences of counselling negatively expressed that the counsellors couldn't understand their problems, were unable to give advice and did not address their counselling needs. Other key findings of this study were the factors that facilitate or prohibit seeking counselling in the UK reported by South Asian international students. Lack of knowledge and resources could prevent South Asian students from seeking counselling. Culture and language were considered crucial barriers by the participants to accessing counselling. However, the encouraging factors were creating awareness about mental health, a directive approach to counselling and an empathic or understanding nature of the counsellor. All of the participants stressed the importance of culture in therapy and considered the use of a multicultural approach to counselling as the most important factor that would encourage South Asian students to access counselling.

During the interview, participants were asked if they had any experience of counselling either in the UK or in their home country. One female participant stated that she has experienced counselling both in the UK and in her home country. She reported her experience of counselling in her home country quite vaguely and felt that her counsellor had not been very professional. She expected her counsellor to be a good listener and suggest techniques to help her solve her problems. In spite of having a negative experience in her home country, she was determined to seek counselling in the UK. She mentioned that she had decided to seek out professional help when she came to the UK due to extreme academic stress and psychological problems. She believed counsellors are more professional in the UK and people are encouraged to talk about mental health. She described her experience of counselling as very positive and found her sessions quite helpful. The participant revealed that her prior experience of counselling did not discourage her from seeking counselling in the UK when she was in need. A male participant also disclosed his experience of counselling when he was quite young. He mentioned that he had been asked by his teachers at school to go for counselling and he had not been given a choice about it. However, he mentioned that he really liked the counselling approach that had helped him to deal with his challenging behaviour. Both participants found the counselling they received

helpful and hence had a positive attitude towards seeking counselling and were willing to seek counselling again in the future. Previous literature suggests that prior utilisation of counselling services are predictive of future help-seeking behaviours among college students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds (Kahn & Williams, 2003). A few studies suggest that individuals are more likely to seek counselling when they have positive attitudes toward it (e.g. Ajzen, 1991; Cramer, 1999). In the present study, the participants had both positive and negative experience of counselling in the past and still had a positive perception about seeking counselling. This study provides a new insight that the prior negative experience of the participant had no impact on the perception towards seeking counselling.

The study demonstrates that participants had a different understanding towards the term 'counselling'. A number of participants reported their prior experience of 'career counselling'. These participants did not have a clear understanding of psychological counselling and misunderstood the concept of career guidance or advice as psychological counselling, in line with what they had experienced in their home country when selecting a career stream. In South Asia, career guidance services are referred to as "career counselling", and it involves strategies to choose a career stream according to the aptitude and ability of the client using certain tools and psychometric tests; it is not a type of mental health counselling. Two participants misunderstood the term "counselling", thinking it referred to services such as the career counselling they had experienced in their home countries. However, one of the participants found her experience of career counselling positive and helpful. She liked the approach used by the counsellor and found him very empathic and a good listener. The past literature suggests that if students do not seem to understand what counselling is, they will struggle to have any positive attitude towards it (e.g., Jarrahi, 2004). However, based on the findings of this study, the experience described by the participant seemed positive in spite of misunderstanding what counselling is in this context. These findings should be taken into account while making assumptions about international student's perception/experiences i.e. their understanding towards counselling may differ due to culture and nationality. When enquired about participant's perceptions towards counselling they were generally aware of the concept of counselling but their knowledge levels related to the counselling process and understanding about mental health services varied. They generally perceived counselling as seeing a therapist or a professional when they were facing problems of

a psychological nature. However, there were participants who stated that “*counselling is only for mad people*” or “*unless you are crazy you don’t see a counsellor*”. A South Asian international student in the present study insisted that students who sought counselling might be seen as “crazy” or severely ill in their home country, whereas seeking counselling may be considered “normal” in the UK. The participant described that people in the UK don’t have negative stereotypes towards seeking help whereas in their home country help seeking behaviour is not considered normal. Therefore, stigma appears to exist in Asian cultures regarding the use of counselling services. In sum, these responses from the participants seemed to reflect stereotypes or societal stigma towards seeking counselling or mental health services. The fact that seeing a psychologist is stigmatised resulted in certain participants not being open to seeking psychological help however, some of them would be open to seek counselling in the UK as the process of seeking counselling is not stigmatised in the UK as reported by them. Fred et al. (2010) made a comparison of attitudes towards counselling between college students and South Asian students and they found personal stigma was expressed by South Asian students. There have been studies conducted in Asia which have revealed that Asian students had positive attitudes toward seeking counselling yet they are not willing to seek counselling for psychological problems (Ma & Wang, 1997). On the contrary, views of South Asian international students were identified in the current study with participants reporting the need to seek professional help if their mental wellbeing is affected or they are unable to cope with stress. They described it as absolutely normal for an individual who is under stress and not coping to seek counselling. The participants were aware of the importance of taking care of one’s mental wellbeing as neglect could lead to severe problems. Some of the common psychological problems experienced by the participants were anxiety, feelings of isolation, a depressed mood and interpersonal issues. The students who acknowledged the importance of psychological wellbeing described these as possible reasons for seeking counselling in the future. Here, the participants who perceived counselling positively were willing to seek professional help for psychological problems. While previous research has shown that Asian students are unwilling to seek counselling in spite of having positive attitude, these findings demonstrates that South Asian international students were open for seeking counselling in the UK.

It has been noted that South Asian international students hold negative stereotype towards accessing counselling services; however, there were participants who believed that counselling is important and can be a great help when under stress. The possible explanation to this positive attitude towards counselling could be due to cultural diffusion. As international students come in contact with different ethnicities, religions, and nationalities could lead to enrichment in their attitudes and beliefs. Participants disclosed to the importance of seeking counselling when facing challenges such as interpersonal issues or academic related concerns. In spite of experiencing stigma towards mental health issues in their home countries, some of the participants talked very positively about counselling. This highlights the importance of understanding how stigma in international student's home country can influence their decisions in terms of determining whether to seek professional help or not. Participants who believed counselling would help had faith in the counsellors or knowledge of the importance of mental health. Such participants reported having prior experience through counselling or education. Similar distributions of attitudes were found in a study with Chinese university students (N = 853). Gao and Lu (2001) found that in a self-report survey, the majority of Chinese students perceived that it was normal to seek counselling, and reported that they might seek counselling in the future although they had never had a counselling experience. There have been limited studies in the past talking about international students' positive perceptions of counselling. This may be considered a unique finding that South Asian international students were willing to consider counselling as they felt it to be important to consider mental health needs.

Another prominent concern evident in this research was that career-related stress might act as a predictor of South Asian international students' willingness to seek counselling. It is likely that international students who experience stress related to academic pressure are more likely to pay attention to academic or career-related concerns in terms of seeking help (Lin & Kishimoto, 2003). In the present research, South Asian international students reported the primary reasons for seeking counselling to be career-related issues not certainly because they misunderstood counselling as 'career counselling'. Even, the participants who had greater understanding about the 'counselling' stated the need to seek professional help when facing academic stress. They also reported that any stress related to career or academic work should be considered important as it might have an impact on their mental health. This is consistent with findings in previous

research that indicated that Asian international students often present in counselling with a high prevalence of academic problems or career needs (Leong & Sedlacek, 1989). However, the current study indicates that participants had a better understanding about the impact of academic and career related stress on their mental health. During the interviews it was observed that participants stressed the importance of career and prioritising academic needs due to expectations from their families and adjustment to a different education system. As a result, they valued career goals more highly than other issues. In confirmation of this finding, a study by Poyrazli and Kavanaugh (2006) indicated that Asian students are likely to value their academic performance as it is their primary goal. There is a possibility that some of the participants thought counselling as 'career' counselling in the current study which might be the reason for them to consider career as an important reason affecting their willingness to seek counselling.

While previous research has shown that focused on exploring their views or attitudes towards seeking counselling, this study also demonstrates the factors that prohibit South Asian international students towards seeking counselling. In the current study, language was considered a huge barrier for South Asian students in terms of accessing counselling services. The participants in this study reported that general communication in English might not be a problem for them; however, expressing emotions in English may prove difficult. It is quite probable that English is a well established language in the region of South Asia due to British colonialism. It plays a widespread role in educational provision in South Asia. Recently, South Asian countries have also introduced multilingual education policies recognizing regional languages along with what has become the main language of higher education i.e. English (Giri, 2009; Rahman, 2010; Shamim, 2011). These policies aim to facilitate literacy and equity and develop learners' competence in local languages and English (Khubchandani, 2008; Rahman, 2010). They spoke about it being easier for them to express their emotions in their first language as compared to English. This difficulty has been previously identified (Rhee, 2015; Xie, 2007; Yoon & Jespen, 2008; Davis, 2010; Cheng & Merrick, 2017) as a prominent issue for international students during acculturation process. However, this study has identified English language as a factor that may discourage South Asian international students to access counselling in the UK as the major difficulty would be expression of their emotions and feelings in a second language. Some international students described their fear that they would struggle to understand the counsellor's

accent and that consequently, they might miss some important information in the sessions. The South Asian international students also indicated that due to potential communication problems, counsellors may not understand their emotions and this may have an impact on therapy, including in terms of developing a positive therapeutic relationship. Past literature indicates that a positive therapeutic alliance is the strongest predictor of positive therapy outcomes (Bohart, 2000; Hill & Knox, 2009; Norcross, 2002). If a counsellor is unable to fully understand a client, it may have a negative effect on creating an alliance. Language differences in counselling can lead to miscommunications, misdiagnoses, and misinterpretations. Lack of language or communication skills often emerges as a major stressor for clients, leading to inconsistency in the therapy. This study might suggest that language plays a key role whilst counselling international students as English is not their first language and any communication gap could have a significant impact on therapeutic relationship.

Moreover, stigma is another barrier that plays a key role in South Asian international students' perceptions toward seeking psychological services (Najmi, 2003; Xie, 2007). The findings of this study suggest that stigma is attached to mental health issues in the home countries of South Asian international students. They reported that South Asian international students are not likely to seek counselling in their home country as people over there strongly believes it is for crazy or mad people. The participants were more likely to seek support from their family or friends as they felt more comfortable with them as compared to a counsellor. Some students may see counselling as shameful and embarrassing because a cultural stigma is often attached to emotional expression in their home culture (Sue & Sue 1999). For example, seeking counselling, in Asian culture, can result in a feeling of a loss of face. In Asian social relations, face represents a person's social role or esteem gained by performing tasks or functions that are well organized by others in the community, and serves as a way to maintain group harmony. Disclosing ones problems to a professional or acknowledging ones problems can be considered as losing face for some Asian students (Sue, Zane & Young, 1994), conversely, the ability to hide emotions and control feelings can be considered as a sign of strength in Asian cultures (Kim, Atkinson & Umemoto, 2001). As discussed previously in the findings chapter, a participants reported that she considered speaking about problems is a sign of weakness on the contrary, she learnt from her positive experience of counselling in the UK that seeking help during the time of distress in a



sign of strength. Similarly, other participant mentioned that she would never be reluctant to seek counselling due to societal/cultural pressure however, she strongly believed that people or students from her country are likely to risk their wellbeing due to shame. The findings of this study indicate international students' willingness to seek counselling without the fear of judgement and feeling of shame as they have spoken about the importance of looking after one's mental health. This seems to be a contradictory finding in Asian culture where expression of mental health is considered losing face in society.

Another factor that could be considered a barrier is "fear of judgment". However, only a few participants mentioned fear of being judged in the counselling session. They were suspicious of whether the counsellors would judge them or regard them as crazy. This fear of judgement could have emerged from stigma related to counselling in their home country. While majority of the participants had a basic understanding that the sessions are private and confidential and the counsellors are non-judgement towards their clients. As an international trainee psychologist, I understand that fear among participants. I myself have struggled to adjust to different cultures, mainly due to my personal values and beliefs. During my training, I became aware that culture and ethnic differences would impact therapy. According to Khan (1991) counsellors hold personal values which can and do affect their work, sometimes to the detriment of the client and their community. Therefore, there is a need to focus on and understand the dynamics and social forces which make up the counsellor's frame of reference (Ahmed, 1986). It is possible for counsellors to judge clients with different cultural identities or values.

While many South Asian international students reported barriers such as stigma, and language, certain practical barriers were also raised, such as lack of knowledge about accessing counselling services, cost and time. Accessibility issues around counselling services were very common for South Asian international students. According to the views expressed by the participants, international students find psychological counselling centres expensive and feel they are unable to afford such services. The students are probably unaware of the fact that the services provided by the university counselling centres are free of charge. Russell et al (2008) emphasised that there is a general lack of awareness of university counselling services among international students about its existence, location, appointment procedures and absence of fees. Many participants reported a lack of awareness about how and where to access counselling, while only

a few participants had a better understanding of how to find information about accessing counselling, such as via Google, the NHS or the university website.

The majority of participants also expressed that they would struggle to seek counselling at the university due to time constraints. Students are already preoccupied with their academic commitments such as lectures, assignments and class projects and would hesitate to commit spare time to counselling sessions. One participant reported that if she was not so busy with her studies she would have considered going to a counsellor. Therefore, time constraints could be a potential barrier for international students as they struggle to maintain a balance between their academic and personal lives. Sometimes, international students are juggling their studies with part-time jobs due to financial difficulties and they find it difficult to maintain a balance. In such circumstances, they may not be able to visit a counsellor even if they are in desperate need of help. Furthermore, some of the participants pointed out that universities could help to make counselling more easily accessible for international students. Some of the participants pointed out the need for universities to provide adequate information about mental health services upon arrival or during the orientation week, as it is more challenging for international students to find out information on where to access such services. This practical measure has been recommended in other cited literature (Kambouropoulos, 2015; Mori, 2000; Okorochoa, 1998; Zhang & Dixon, 2003; Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Arthur, 2004). However, this study talks about the recommendations reported by the South Asian international students. They pointed out some measures which could be done to increase their accessibility to such services.

For participants in this study, the most important factor in their decision to seek counselling is counsellor's ability to understand their problems from students' perspective. Participants also reported the need for a counsellor who is empathic, a good listener and who can be in their shoes to understand what they are going through. They stressed the importance of the personality of a counsellor in order for counselling to have a positive impact on them. In order to develop a positive therapeutic relationship, conditions such as empathy, unconditional positive regard and counsellor genuineness are very important (Hackney & Cormier, 2009; Sharf, 2008). According to Ackerman and Hilsenroth (2003), a therapist's personal attributes, like being flexible, honest, respectful, warm, trustworthy, interested, confident and open, can have a positive influence in therapy. Another factor that might encourage South Asian international students to seek

counselling services is the approach to counselling being offered. Participants disclosed they would prefer to access counselling services if it involved being offered solutions to their problems. Here, the participants used the term “solution focused approach” to express their desire to find a quick solution to their problems in the counselling session rather than the Solution-focused (brief) therapy developed by Steve de Shazer (1982, 1985, 1994) and Insoo Kim Berg (1993) which is an approach to psychotherapy based on solution building rather than problem solving. However, some research studies have shown that international students favour a non-directive style of counselling (D’Rozario & Romano, 2000; Yau, Sue & Hayden, 1992). This is a unique finding amongst international students who may not be willing to explore their problems in depth, given the course pressure, lack of time and resources. The past studies demonstrating the preference of non directive counselling style included mainly White Americans and Asian students. However, the current study indicates the preference of South Asian international towards directive approach of counselling.

It is also worth noting that being multicultural or culturally aware is considered an encouraging factor for seeking counselling. As discussed above, cultural barriers were significant for participants and they strongly believed that counsellors would not have cultural knowledge about how their personal perceptions of their home country due to different cultural and personal values. They believed they would feel comfortable with counsellors from a similar cultural background. This finding is consistent with Lin’s (1994) study which found that a language and ethnic match between counsellors and clients is crucial for the effectiveness of therapy. According to Erdur et al (2003) clients who received counselling from counsellors with the same ethnicity at university counselling centres attended more number of counselling sessions than those with counsellors with different ethnicity. There is an assumption that ethnic matching might impact elements of therapy such as the therapeutic alliance, and thus have an indirect effect on therapeutic success (Flicker et al, 2008). Although the rapport between client and counsellor can be expected to increase when they share same ethnicity, a number of meta-analyses indicated that counselling outcomes were not significantly different between ethnically matched dyads and non-matched dyads (e.g., Cabral and Smith, 2011; Maramba and Nagayama-Hall, 2002; Shin et al, 2005). Maramba and Nagayama-Hall (2002) reported that ethnic matching

between client and counsellor had no effect on the total number of counselling sessions attended or early dropout rates.

This inconsistency in the research findings suggest that there may be other factors that influence the therapeutic process other than ethnicity alone. This suggests that although participants prefer ethnically/culturally similar counsellors, this match does not necessarily enhance counselling experiences and may not always be possible at university counselling centres. At the moment, universities may not have many counsellors from different cultural background or may have limited culturally specific knowledge to provide multicultural counselling. Sue (1998) stated that ethnic match might not be effective for everyone. Similarly, some South Asian students may not always be comfortable in opening up with a counsellor of same ethnicity as they might fear judgement due to preconceived notions within the same culture. The participants may not always embrace values or attitudes that are traditionally characteristic of their culture (Atkinson & Lowe, 1995; Karlsson, 2005). It has been suggested that therapists and clients who share similarities in terms of race, ethnicity, or culture may be highly dissimilar based on the set of norms, values, beliefs, and identifications that they hold (Cabral & Smith, 2011).

Because of how people identify themselves in different cultures it would be challenging to perfectly match client and therapist on every given identity variable such as race, ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, gender and sexual orientation. However, there were participants who were open to working with different counsellors if they were willing to increase their understanding of the client's culture This study suggests that ethnic match might not be necessary to encourage South Asian international students to seek counselling in the UK however, better understanding about the clients' problems and culture may be considered as an encouraging factor for students in seeking counselling. For instance, a participant reflected on her experience of counselling in the UK with a white counsellor and described her experience positively. While the counsellor and participant had different ethnicity she found her counsellor as understanding and respectful towards participant's problems and culture. Lin (1994) also suggested that due to cultural differences, counsellors may find it difficult to be more culturally sensitive as international students may have specific cultural needs. However, in this case the counsellor seemed to be fairly culturally sensitive towards the participant who found her experience positive in counselling. However, to be culturally sensitive towards client it is

advisable that culturally specific counselling strategies are incorporated when working with international students; this would involve adopting strategies that are consistent with the cultural values and life experiences of international students. Arthur (2004) makes a similar recommendation for using culturally specific knowledge when international students bring issues to counselling which are directly related to their culture. In the past literature, it has been mentioned that difficulty around culture is not specific to international students but that it can be tricky for counsellors too. Chen and Lewis (2011) found that when counsellors worked with culturally different clients and their families, they treated them exactly as they treated people in their own or the majority culture without regard for the beliefs and values of the culturally different client. This approach could possibly harm the alliance between counsellor and client. In order to encourage South Asian international students to seek counselling services, it is important to consider culturally specific strategies which can be used while working with them as they have culturally specific needs.

Participants also emphasised that increased awareness about mental health at university would de-stigmatise the concept among international students and encourage them to talk more openly about mental health issues. They strongly believed that it would be helpful to build a supportive environment on campus that would make international students feel more positive about mental health support services. Bektas (2008) recommended collaboration between counselling services and international student offices as they are likely to have contact with international students more often compared to counselling services. He suggested that it is worth making counsellors more available and visible at international student offices and that this would reduce certain barriers towards mental health issues and increase accessibility for international students. Participants also reported that marketing and awareness programmes by mental health support services could enhance the knowledge of international students. Similarly, Popiaduk and Arthur (2004) suggested strategies like marketing services, collaboration with international student service staff, incorporating non-traditional counselling strategies, providing group seminars, and fostering cross-cultural mentoring between faculties and international students to increase awareness of the importance of mental health; such measures may encourage international students to access such services. However the strategies described above such as de-stigmatisation, creating awareness and implying marketing strategies came from the South Asian

international students in this study. It has been claimed by the participants and past literature the importance of making students aware about counselling services at university and the ways they can access services when they are in need.

### **5.3 Implications of findings**

Counselling international students inevitably involves counselling across cultures. Even counsellors from the same country as international students should not assume they have similar worldviews. It can be common for counsellors to assume that international students will experience issues related to adjustment and, as a result, require counselling intervention. Such assumptions are based on defining a group according to its specific characteristics and can lead to assumptions about counselling issues and appropriate interventions. Counsellors need to be cautious about assuming that the needs of students from specific cultural groups are uniform. Pedersen (1991) argued that viewing international students only on the group level risks homogenising their experiences and ignoring the tremendous cultural variability within this student population. As there is an increase in international students at universities, it is important for counsellors to have better knowledge about counselling these students (Alexander et al., 1981). Therefore, counsellors working with international students require a repertoire of multicultural competencies (Arthur, 1997; Sue & Sundberg, 1996). Cornish et al (2010) defined Multicultural competence as “the extent to which a counsellor is actively engaged in the process of self-awareness, obtaining knowledge, and implementing skills in working with diverse individuals”(p.7). In particular, self-awareness requires being cognisant of one’s attitudes, beliefs, and values regarding race, ethnicity and culture, along with one’s awareness of the socio-political relevance of cultural group membership in terms of issues of cultural privilege, discrimination and oppression. Multicultural counselling competencies allow counsellors to consider the commonalities between culturally diverse students while respecting the unique circumstances and counselling needs of individual students. The voices of international students may not be heard by their counsellors who adopt a general approach in understanding their experiences. The counsellors are challenged to adopt a “culture-centred” perspective (Pedersen & Ivy, 1993) in which they need to consider the influences of the larger society along with the particular worldview of the client. However, this does not eliminate the need for counsellors to

examine the importance of other cultural characteristics such as race, gender, or religion while considering international students' experiences.

The current study suggests that some South Asian international students were interested in hearing the points of view of counsellors who belonged to a different culture to see commonalities and differences in the culture, but they also stressed the importance of considering different needs within counselling as international students belong to different cultures. It has been suggested in the literature that when counsellors are providing multicultural therapy, they need to be aware of the client's experience of acculturation (Dixon & Barletta, 2003) but not necessarily make assumptions about acculturative stress. Khoo et al. (2002) indicated that international students create difficulties for counsellors in terms of the need for cultural adaptation of techniques, counselling roles and boundaries. The participants pointed out that counsellors may struggle to understand their point of view as they do not belong to the same culture and hold different values. They suggested that it would be wise for them to adopt practices according to the needs of international students and keep in mind the cultural differences. While working with culturally diverse clients, counsellors need to adopt alternative approaches or techniques to fit the personal needs of clients (Beutler, Crago & Arizmendi, 1986; Stiles, Shapiro & Elliott, 1986). There is an increased need to consider the issue of culture in the counselling context (Corey, Corey & Callahan, 1993). Despite knowing the diverse and unique needs of international students, there is a dearth of literature regarding how to effectively support the students (Spooner-Lane et al., 2009). Therefore, there is a need for a strategy or a programme for international students that create an environment where they can receive better support (Gribble, 2014).

To better serve this population, the Multicultural and Social Justice Counselling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2015) framework provides essential information. In this, multicultural competencies are developed as an independent social justice movement devoted to increasing the relevance of mental health practice, research and training among diverse populations. This particular model is designed to prepare counsellors or psychologists to work with culturally diverse clients in global communities. The Multicultural and Social Justice Counselling Competencies framework (Ratts et al., 2015) highlights the facilitation of individual- and systemic-level changes to maximise the well-being of culturally

diverse clients. It enables individual counselling to be incorporated with advocacy work to address the problems which marginalised or underserved clients (e.g., international students) bring to counselling (Ratts et al., 2015). Specifically, this framework emphasises the ability of counsellors to develop four competencies for working effectively with clients: (a) attitudes and beliefs (self-awareness); (b) knowledge ;(c) skills; and (d) action (Ratts et al., 2015).

Counsellors need to critically examine their attitudes and beliefs about their own culture by continuously reflecting on their cultural values, heritage, and privileges. The process of self-reflection allows counsellors to increase their awareness of the values they possess as cultural beings; it also increases their awareness of various socio-cultural factors that influence individuals' psychological experiences and behaviours. In addition, counsellors must develop cultural knowledge of the experiences and worldviews of clients from different backgrounds and increase their awareness of how various socio-cultural factors influence clients' life experiences and well-being and shape their help-seeking behaviours (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016). In particular, understanding cultural differences in help-seeking behaviours and the expectations of mental health services can improve the quality of culturally responsive services for diverse clients (Abdullah & Brown, 2011). This framework also stresses the importance of counsellors' sets of skills to engage clients in a discussion of cultural factors and their potential impact on psychological well-being. Counsellors who are culturally competent are able to enable clients in reflecting on the impact of cultural factors and identify interventions that help clients develop healthier self-image and/or behaviours in a way that fits in with their culture (Ratts et al., 2015). Further, they are able to take action for systemic-level changes that maximise clients' well-being. Advocacy works could be incorporated and aligned with counselling to address systemic issues (e.g., access to resources, cultural stigma of counselling services) in the society by enhancing clients' help-seeking behaviours and providing safe environments for all clients. Therefore, counsellors or mental health practitioners need to improve the four competencies (i.e., attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, skills, and action) together in order to cater for the diverse needs of their clients. In this study, therefore, the researcher discusses these competencies as a framework for university counselling services/counsellors working with international students. The following section will provide information on how findings of this study contribute to the multicultural knowledge and use of competencies to



counsel international students effectively. I will also discuss the skills relevant to addressing the unique needs of international students throughout counselling and briefly describe the recommendations about how university counselling services and HEIs can maximise international students' wellbeing at a systemic level.

#### *Competency 1: Attitudes and beliefs*

Counsellors working with international students need to be aware of their own cultural beliefs and attitudes and how it will influence the psychological process. Counsellors need awareness of their stereotypes and preconceived notions towards client's culture. They must be able to contrast their own beliefs and attitudes to those of clients in a non-judgemental way. Therefore, a reflective-focused practice is likely to reduce counsellors' assumptions about international students where they reflect on their own attitudes and beliefs and how their perception affects their relationship with clients. Developing a reflective attitude toward one's own culture is the foundation of this framework in shaping counsellors' perceptions of the therapeutic relationship with clients (Wong-Wylie, 2007). One way to reflect on self, clients' worldview, and cultural difference is using the cultural auditing process (Collins, Arthur, & Wong-Wylie, 2010) As discussed previously, counsellors need to be aware of the international student's experience of acculturation (Dixon & Barletta, 2003); however, international students are more likely to be judged due to their experience of acculturative stress and assumptions are made that their needs are uniform. The participants in this study reflected on the importance of therapeutic relationship and how it is going to impact the international student's willingness to seek counselling in the UK. Therefore, it is important for counsellors working with international students to consider their attitudes and beliefs towards their own culture and their clients.

#### *Competency 2: Multicultural knowledge for working with international students*

The participants of this study noted that culture might be a barrier for some South Asian international students in accessing counselling services. Studies indicate that when international students identify strongly with their ethnic-based culture, they are less willing to use mental health services (Soorkia et al., 2011). On the contrary, some of the South Asian international students in the current study were willing to seek counselling in the UK in spite of there being stigma towards seeking counselling in their home country. They stressed the importance of

taking care of one's mental health; however, they did note the importance of considering cultural needs in therapy. Multicultural competent counsellors should have relevant knowledge regarding the impact of cultural factors on clients' worldviews, life experience, and behaviours. So far, we know that international students face unique challenges; however, counsellors need to develop an understanding of how cultural factors shape these students' help-seeking behaviours with regard to counselling services. Even though, in the literature, the mental health needs of international students are increasingly recognised, international students are less willing to use counselling services compared with domestic students (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007; Russell et al., 2008).

The participants also reported that limited English proficiency may discourage some South Asian international students from seeking counselling services because of their inability to express emotions in their second language. Another factor reported in this study affecting South Asian international students' perceptions of seeking counselling was insufficient knowledge about these services. Roberts and Dunworth (2012) indicated that international students have difficulty accessing information regarding the availability of mental health services offered by universities which highlights the importance of informing international students about the availability of support services on campuses. These findings indicate the need to take these factors into consideration when developing an approach to delivering the needs of international students.

### *Competency 3: Multicultural skills and interventions in session*

Having cultural self-awareness and knowledge would be insufficient for working with diverse clients unless transferred to demonstrable skills and interventions in practice (Ratts et al., 2015). Addressing diversity is crucial when working with international students because nearly all of their lived experiences are infused culturally. A participant mentioned that she would be willing to try a counsellor from a different culture to explore their perspective of her problem. In such circumstances, discussing differences in culture between counsellors and clients is an important step in the counselling process. Since participants also reported their fear of being judged due to having a different cultural background, international students should be given the space to express their cultural beliefs and values and the opportunity to correct the counsellor if the counsellor misunderstands their culture. In order to have a successful counselling session when

cultural differences exist, it is important for the counsellor to fully understand the client's concerns and ensure the client engagement (Sue & Sue, 2003); this could be achieved through, for example, brainstorming.

However, this technique requires warmth, empathy, positive regard, openness, and genuineness on the part of the counsellor. Similarly, most of the participants in this study reported their preference for a counsellor who would understand their problems without judging them. South Asian international students in this study describe commonly experienced acculturative stress such as homesickness, isolation, culture shock and academic pressure. To serve international students better, university counsellors may assist international students by providing psycho-education regarding common adjustment experiences and may attempt to normalise such experiences. In addition, developing coping strategies may be useful in the students' new environment. Counsellors should validate the students' experiences and should be encouraged to learn ways to promote well-being by establishing some of the coping strategies described by the participants, such as journal keeping, book reading, exercise, religion or spirituality.

#### *Competency 4: Actions for systemic-level change*

Culturally competent counsellors should address their clients' psychological well-being inside and outside the counselling session. Therefore, university counselling services are called on to advocate for systemic-level change both at the university level and at the university counselling centre level and provide outreach specifically tailored to international students (Ratts et al., 2015). The findings from the research have implications for providing and improving counselling services for South Asian international students in the UK. The implications are most relevant for university counselling services and HEIs in terms of how they can provide better services to this population, irrespective of their different needs.

In the present study, South Asian international students demonstrated their knowledge and understanding about counselling. However, few of the participants expressed negative beliefs and stereotypes about mental health issues due to preconceived notions in their home country. As a result, it is important to promote awareness about counselling services at the university campus for students who are not aware of the services. Most important, however, is to de-stigmatise the notion of mental health issues amongst South Asian international students. According to the

participants of this study it is important to disseminate information that makes them aware of counselling services as well as information on the importance of counselling to promote counselling services amongst South Asian international students or international students in general. HEIs could develop flyers, brochures, websites and reach out to international students through emails including information related to mental health and support services that may be relevant to them. The information may acknowledge the challenges faced by international students, FAQs about seeking counselling (such as language, culture, stigma and concern for confidentiality) and some shared experiences of counselling from South Asian international students. The flyers and website should also contain information regarding the counselling process and multicultural competency of the counsellors. A few participants, during the interviews, stated that they would contact counselling services by searching on the university website and calling the helpline number for their university; therefore, universities should take responsibility for providing the information to students in a detailed manner.

This information should be provided not only by counselling centres but also by HEIs at the beginning of each academic year as this is the period when most international students face challenges due to acculturation. Similarly, the participants in this study talked about promoting counselling services during the orientation week to create awareness about the existence of such services. It was observed in the literature that HEIs do provide this information during the orientation week; however, some students reported feelings of being overwhelmed with the information provided (Snider, 2001); hence, it would be useful for HEIs to circulate this information electronically before students' arrival on campus in order to allow them to process the information effectively. As participants in this study discussed the need to increase awareness amongst international students regarding mental wellbeing, HEIs should not only advertise the existence of counselling services on campus but also provide information on issues such as stress and anxiety which are perceived as being of less importance than academic goals for some international students.

Most of the participants in this study had a clear understanding about the process of counselling and how it works; however, there were participants who struggled to express their perceptions about counselling due to a lack of knowledge about the process. There were participants in the study who expressed their views about "career counselling" or "career services" not because they

lacked knowledge about counselling but because they misunderstood the terminology due to frequent use of these services by the students in their home country. As a result, this study suggests that it is important for university counselling services to increase awareness around the counselling process. It is crucial for university counselling centres to consider ways to support international students at the institutional level. Furthermore, university counselling services may hire counsellors with a background as international students, and this might make international students more comfortable about seeking counselling. It might make international students feel at ease knowing that counsellors can understand their adjustment difficulties (Yoon & Portman, 2004).

The findings of this study suggest that international students are more willing to seek counselling for academic concerns, notably when academic stress is immense. As a result, they might have contact with agencies supporting education needs. Therefore, universities may need to collaborate with agencies such as the students' union, student support services, immigration and international student offices or South Asian students' association in order to promote the use of university counselling services when necessary. Collaboration between these offices and university counselling centres might be a feasible way to assist international students on campus as they are more likely to have contact with these offices. Such agencies/offices and also university counsellors may attract Asian students by focusing on academic issues. They may be interested in promoting how their service is consistent and effective in addressing academic issues. This may be in a way which is aligned with South Asian international students' priorities and cultural norms. In this way, a message could be conveyed that counselling is not only for "mad" or "crazy" people but for any student who needs help. This may diminish the barriers to South Asian students seeking counselling. Once they experience counselling, the process may itself challenge their preconceived notions or perceptions of counselling. Amongst the cited recommendations (Barty & Raven, 2003; Arthur, 2008; Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007), the importance of building a supportive environment at campus was prominent. It has also been recommended that both formal and informal support networks should be built in support with other campus services. The educational institutions may improve the climate for culturally diverse students by creating appropriate policies and procedures in service delivery and offering guidance on how staff should respond to international students.

Counselling services at HEIs are limited in terms of resources to deal with an increased demand from students seeking counselling (Stallman, 2011; Woolfe, 1996); this can have a detrimental effect on the delivery of services. Stallman (2011) also reported that *“inadequate counselling support can negatively impact on students, universities, and the community through lost potential”* (p.249). As seen in the literature, emotional problems are increasing amongst international students whereas the available help is diminishing. Therefore, it is important for HEIs to provide enough resources to support services so they can provide better services to international students and be able to monitor the quality of services provided by counselling centres. Additionally, the counselling centres may focus on peak periods when academic stress is soaring, for example around mid-term exams or final exams. Focus groups or group sessions could be designed for Asian students during these peak periods as they are more likely to be stressed. This strategy may also increase the cost-effectiveness of counselling centres and help them to deal better with periods of increased demand. Moreover, language was also considered a barrier for participants for seeking counselling in the UK in this study. Thus, additional supports are important for both international students and staff members who work with multilingual students. English language centers could train their tutors specifically who work with multilingual students in order to help students feel more confident and supported in their academic writing and spoken English.

#### **5.4 Strengths and limitations of the current study**

A key strength of this study is its focus on South Asian international students, a population that is understudied in the literature. Although there has been research indicating help-seeking attitudes among students (mainly in the United States), this population and topic have not been directly examined. This study responds to a gap in the literature by directly engaging with students from South Asia. A fundamental strength of this study is that it explores in-depth the perspectives of participants about counselling in the UK and the factors that influence such perceptions. As a result, this study adopted a qualitative design with a naturalistic approach (Patton, 2001). The findings of this study may help practitioners, researchers and university counselling services to gain an in-depth understanding of South Asian international students’ perceptions towards seeking counselling. The findings may enable university counselling services and HEIs to assist international students during their transition to the new culture. Lastly, as a researcher and South

Asian international student, I viewed the data from a viewpoint that was consistent with that of the participants.

The results from this study have potential limitations as well. It is acknowledged that additional participants could have been recruited or could be recruited going forward, as each individual is unique and there is always something new to explore (Wray et al., 2007). Such a limitation is almost inevitable in a thesis written in fulfilment of an academic qualification as there are time constraints and the study is conducted by only a single researcher. However, the sample size of 11 participants enabled rich and meaningful data to be collected within a restricted time frame. It has been suggested by Sandelowski (1995) that the sample size for a qualitative study should be large enough to provide an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences or perceptions, yet small enough to produce a high-quality analysis in a timely manner. The study recruited participants from South Asian countries but the sample of the study lacked heterogeneity in terms of cultural background. This study also had more females than males (8 females, 3 males). Although the intention of the study was not to explore gender differences, it could have been more balanced in terms of gender. There have been consistent findings in the past literature regarding gender and help-seeking attitudes towards seeking counselling. It has been suggested that women tend to have more positive attitudes towards counselling than men (Chandra & Minkovitz, 2006; Gonzalez, Alegria & Prihoda, 2005) and that they are more likely to seek counselling in distress (Pederson & Vogel, 2007).

The other limitation of the study was in relation to the recruitment process. The recruitment was done via social media, sending emails to international societies in Manchester and research advertisements. Unfortunately, not many participants responded from different universities as a result, participants were selected only from four universities in North West England. A few of the participants were of the same gender and cultural background as the researcher, which may have influenced the decisions to participate and respond in a particular way. Moreover, I had a preliminary contact with a few participants as an acquaintance; as a result, they might have been more conscious about giving negative responses about counselling. A number of studies have shown that the results of an interview are more likely to be biased in a socially desirable way when participants are similar to the interviewers with respect to social distance (Dohrenwend, Colombotos & Dohrenwend, 1968; Weiss, 1968, 1969; Williams, 1968, 1969). If the participant

and interviewer belong to similar social groups, the interview is likely to be partly a social exchange and lead to a social desirability affect which may contaminate the data (Weiss, 1970). However, I do believe that having an “insider” view of the relationship with the participants might have allowed them to open up even more during the interviews and may have had a positive impact on the findings. Some participants had prior exposure to counselling or had an educational background which included modules on psychology and they tended to have positive responses towards counselling; however, the responses may have lacked cultural perspectives. Another factor that may have had an impact on the interviews is my role as a trainee counselling psychologist. The participants’ awareness of my role may have prevented the participants from fully disclosing their negative perceptions of counselling in order not to offend me (Levy et al., 1996; McCoyd & Shdaimah, 2007). It should be noted that the findings from this study should not be presumed to be applicable to South Asian population living in the UK based on the experiences shared by the participants in this study due to shared nationality. There are many complicated dimensions in the concept of ethnic groups including individual differentiation from others as well as positive/negative association with commonalities such as language and religion. However, such commonalities may not always be sufficiently present to form an ethnic identity.

Use of thematic analysis could be considered both a strength and a weakness in this study. Thematic analysis has been described as a flexible method of analysis due to not being “*wed to any pre-existing theoretical frameworks*” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.9). It can be an essentialist or constructionist method, yet can also “sit between the two poles of essentialism and constructionism, characterised by theories such as critical realism” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). Thematic analysis has also been criticised, however, on the grounds that it is “*poorly demarcated*” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.77) and a “*very poorly ‘branded’ method, in that it does not appear to exist as a ‘named’ analysis in the same way that other methods do*” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Therefore, a six-phase guide method was adopted for the present study to generate a rich and detailed account of the data.

The other potential limitation of this study may have been language. Few participants in the current study have expressed that if they are willing to seek counselling then language might be a barrier for them to express their feelings and emotions to their counsellor as English is not their first language. Due to the same reason i.e. lack of communication skills in English could have



had an impact on their responses and the richness of the results. Lastly, as a researcher and a South Asian international student, I tried my best to separate my thoughts from those of the participants as I could relate to them very easily due to having the same cultural values but this could have had a potential effect on my findings.

### **5.5 Recommendations for future research**

The findings of this study had some limitations which could be addressed in future research. Although the current study focused on a diverse range of South Asian international students, future researchers could possibly recruit more diverse international students across continents. Interviewing international students from a greater number of cultures may provide in-depth depiction of international students' perceptions of seeking support. Also, researchers could compare international and home country students' perceptions and attitudes towards seeking counselling as there is an assumption that international students are not willing to seek counselling due to stigma and other cultural barriers. A comparative study could possibly help to challenge this assumption. The comparison would help us to understand the similarities and differences in the needs and attitudes of international students in terms of seeking counselling. Another reason for a comparative study would be to enable university counselling centres to provide and promote counselling for all groups of students on campus including international and home students.

The current study focused only on the perceptions and attitudes of South Asian international students; however, in future studies, researchers could possibly explore South Asian international students' experiences of counselling in the UK. It may be of interest to explore counsellors' competencies that aid in providing better counselling services to international students. In terms of exploring the past counselling experiences of international students, researchers could possibly explore what students found helpful or unhelpful during sessions, their awareness about counselling services and different approaches used. Further studies could be done to explore the outcomes and satisfaction associated with international students working with counsellors trained in multicultural working. Students could elaborate on the approach used by the counsellors and whether or not it fits with their culture or values. The elaboration by the students might help inform counsellors and allow them to promote their services in an appropriate way for this population.

Use of both qualitative and quantitative research on this topic would be helpful. For example, using a qualitative methodology could help us to gain more knowledge about the similarities and differences between home students' and international students' perceptions of counselling. In contrast, a quantitative study could indicate group differences in terms of their needs and other factors. A quantitative study could focus on exploration of the relationship between acculturative stress and attitudes towards seeking help. Having a larger population, especially in a quantitative study, may help the results be more widely generalisable for a broader population. Other methodologies could potentially be used in future research like grounded theory as it is a theory-driven and much more flexible method for gathering new information in terms of developing an evolving theory.

In the present study, it was difficult to recruit male participants; therefore, further research could be done on male international students to explore their perceptions of seeking support for mental health. Moreover, gender differentiation could be done to explore help-seeking behaviour. The findings of this thesis stressed the importance of multicultural counselling and competencies; however, there is a lack of literature on the importance of incorporating such competencies in the field of counselling psychology. Additionally, there should be more research conducted that focuses upon the therapeutic approaches used by the university counselling services and their implications for culturally diverse clients. Participants who are willing to share their experiences of counselling could provide more information on counsellors' therapeutic orientations. This would provide more detailed understanding of the students' experiences of different therapeutic approaches to counselling. In the current study, participants described their prior counselling experiences as both positive and negative, which could be due to a number of factors such as the therapeutic approach used by the counsellor and other client- or therapist-related factors (Weston, Hodgekins & Langdon, 2016). Generally, there should be more research undertaken on the experiences of international students living in the UK. It is worth exploring acculturation experiences in order to understand how South Asian or international students in general adjust to a new culture. It would be helpful to explore what they found helpful or unhelpful when dealing with acculturative stress. This finding may help international students to cope with acculturation and prepare for adjustment in another country. It may provide critical information on how counsellors can better intervene to address cultural adjustment difficulties in this population.

This could potentially help in providing resources and training to professionals in order to ensure they deliver services that are maximally inclusive of international students.

Future studies may also explore the perceptions or experiences of counsellors working with international students. It may be helpful to understand how they work with culturally diverse clients and what they think they could do to provide better services for this population. Furthermore, language seemed to be a concern for some South Asian students in this study. Therefore, future interviews could be conducted in their first language and that could potentially reveal new findings. However, this process may be very challenging and require good communication and translation skills. It may be worth exploring information from students who have not necessarily received a counselling session, but who have considered or attempted to access counselling. This kind of information would inform a more detailed account of the barriers or hindrances to accessing university counselling services. As a result, it would help to identify the areas of development and ways to maximise the accessibility of university counselling services for international students. Alongside this, future studies could possibly explore the factors that facilitate accessibility to university counselling services for international students.

## **5.6 Summary**

In this chapter, the researcher has discussed the findings of the present study in relation to the research question. The findings were discussed in relation to six main themes: previous positive experiences of counselling, previous negative experiences of counselling, positive perceptions of counselling, negative perceptions of counselling, barriers to accessing counselling, encouragements for accessing counselling. Following this, the researcher discussed the implications of the findings for university counselling services and mental health professionals responsible for delivering counselling to diverse clients (e.g., counsellors, counselling psychologists and psychotherapists), specifically through the use of a multicultural approach towards counselling. In addition, the strengths and limitations of the study were discussed. Further, the researcher identified the areas for future research. In the next chapter, a summary of the key elements of the present study will be provided.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this qualitative study was to gain an in-depth understanding of South Asian international students' perceptions towards seeking counselling in the UK. This study also aimed to inquire the factors that facilitate and prohibit South Asian international students in accessing counselling. This thesis enabled the researcher to view international students through the lens of subjectivity and recognise the value of empathically engaging with these individuals to understand their experiences from their perspectives. In a context in which the number of international students is growing in UK higher education, their increased vulnerability to experiencing problems could lead them to access counselling services in the UK. However, very little is known about their perspectives on mental health and seeking counselling. The present study represented a great way to address this gap and contribute to the existing literature by exploring their in-depth perceptions of counselling in the UK in a university setting and the factors that influence their perceptions. The study involved semi-structured interviews and recruited 11 South Asian international students (8 females and 3 males) from South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Maldives. Six main themes constructed from the thematic analysis for research question one and two.

This study found that some participants perceived their prior experiences of counselling - either in the UK or their home country - as positive while others felt they were negative. Those who described their counselling experiences as positive reported that the counselling sessions were helpful, the counsellor helped them deal with their problems, and the approach used by the counsellor was useful. The participants who critiqued their prior experiences of counselling negatively remarked that the counsellors couldn't understand their problems, were unable to give advice, and thus did not address their counselling needs. However, their negative experiences had no impact on their attitude towards seeking counselling. All participants, who were international students from South Asia, were generally aware of psychological counselling but their knowledge related to the counselling process and understanding of mental health services varied. Some of them were not keen to seek counselling due to the stigma attached to mental health in their home country, due to time constraints, or accessibility issues. However, many also indicated the importance of mental wellbeing and openness to seeking counselling in the UK

because of their past experiences of counselling or exposure to counselling at school or work. While some participants reported the need for counselling for mental health-related issues, most of them were likely to seek counselling only if they were faced with career or academic-related stress. Certain participants reported that they had varied concerns about seeking counselling in the UK mainly due to language and cultural factors. They considered language as a barrier for seeking counselling in the UK. While they reported that communication in English would not generally be a problem for South Asian international students, they still considered it challenging to express their emotions in a second language. They would be more comfortable expressing them in their first language. In terms of culture, participants doubted the effectiveness of counsellors with a different cultural background to their own. They strongly believed that such counsellors would struggle to understand their problems, which could represent a major barrier to South Asian students seeking counselling.

The participants recommended that raising general awareness about the availability of mental health services or university counselling services could encourage South Asian students to access counselling in the UK. Moreover, they suggested this could be done during the first few days of university or during the orientation week, as this is when international students are more likely to face challenges due to acculturation. Furthermore, participants disclosed that they would have preferred to access counselling services if they were offered solution-focused counselling. Meanwhile, they expected counsellors to have interpersonal skills, such as good listening skills, openness, warmth, genuineness, and trustworthiness, as well as being culturally competent. During the interviews, it was also noted that international students may be confused about the term 'counselling' as counselling could mean something very different in their home country. For instance, a few participants reported their experiences of career counselling (career guidance) when asked for their opinions on counselling. Most importantly, participants suggested that international students might find counselling more useful beneficial if there were more counsellors from diverse cultural backgrounds.

## **6.1 Contribution to knowledge**

The present study appears to be the first to explore in depth, South Asian international students' perception towards accessing counselling and the factors that prohibit or facilitate them in seeking counselling in the UK, from their own perspectives. This study makes several original

and important contributions to the existing body of literature in the fields of counselling, counselling psychology, international students and higher education in the UK. It contributes by providing a greater understanding of diversity and the individuality of South Asian international students and how their perceptions have an impact on accessing counselling in the UK. While previous research has shown that Asian students are unwilling to seek counselling in spite of having positive attitudes, this study informs us that South Asian international students were open for seeking counselling in the UK. This study has offered evidence to alter our perspective on them, i.e. they are willing to seek counselling in the UK in spite of dealing with stigma around mental health issues in their home country. The current study also contributes by providing university counsellors a greater understanding that a flexible and multicultural approach to counselling may be helpful to ensure that the needs and preferences of South Asian international students are met. Additionally, this study provides valuable insight into South Asian students' perceptions of therapeutic relationships with university counsellors, the value of empathy, congruence and active listening and a problem-solving approach. It would be helpful for university counselling centres to understand what therapeutic factors/styles may encourage South Asian international students to seek counselling. However, some research studies have shown that international students favour a non-directive style of counselling. This study indicates a new finding regarding the preference of a more directive approach of counselling by South Asian international students.

The findings of this research could also be considered a contribution to multicultural counselling and international students since it has addressed an understudied population, i.e. South Asian international students and will help inform practice at these services in line with the perceptions of international students and in order to improve services for diverse students. The findings suggest that it is important for counsellors to understand factors influencing how South Asian international students experience acculturation and seek help in the UK. While working with South Asian international students, counsellors may need to fully explore the students' perceptions and expectations of counselling. This study may help counsellors provide more effective interventions by providing basic information about counselling or addressing the gap between the South Asian students' expectations and the services they can provide. This would enable counsellors to provide better services for South Asian international students. This study

sheds light on South Asian international students' understanding of the term 'counselling'. Some participants did not have a clear understanding of psychological counselling and misunderstood it with the concept of career guidance or advice. This particular finding provides valuable insight for HEIs and university counselling centres to advertise what kind of services they provide and how they are distinguished from other advice services. As this study suggests that language and culture would be the main factors preventing South Asian students from seeking counselling, these findings may inform counselling centres to recruit counsellors who can communicate in students' first language and provide culture specific knowledge or training to their counsellors in order to enhance international students' experiences. This may encourage such a population to seek professional help in the UK. These findings are also useful for HEIs in terms of promoting and providing better counselling services to South Asian international students.

## **6.2 Personal reflections**

The overall journey of my doctoral thesis has been exciting and yet, at times, anxiety-provoking. I had fluctuating positive and negative experiences as I went through the process of recruiting, writing and revisiting each chapter. However, writing was the most challenging part as I felt resentful about my lack of writing skills. At certain points, I felt like I was short of ideas and thoughts and the whole process felt very long and tedious. Another very frustrating part of conducting this research was recruiting participants as I aimed to recruit participants from different countries in South Asia but this proved a difficult task. It was also challenging to recruit male participants as they were not keen to talk about mental health openly. Nevertheless, it has been a great pleasure to complete this thesis and I feel that I have genuinely accomplished something useful in this study, making a contribution to the existing literature on counselling. As a South Asian international student, I felt close to the topic and could relate to the experiences described by the participants to some extent. It was a great opportunity to interview them about their experiences of living in the UK and the challenges they faced. Analysing the data has been a very rewarding part of my study as I became really fascinated with the findings. I started the data collection with a number of assumptions about South Asian international students, i.e. the idea that due to stigma and cultural prejudice they would have negative perceptions of counselling; however, I was quite surprised by the fact that participants were keen to talk about the importance of mental health and counselling. I expected participants would mainly talk about

the barriers that would hinder them from seeking counselling in the UK, whereas participants also made recommendations and suggestions about how counsellors could encourage help-seeking behaviour or provide better services to international students from their home country.

At the beginning of my practice, I was slightly aware that culture and ethnic differences would impact therapy. During my first year of this doctorate, I was struggling with the same acculturation process described by the participants in the current study. I always had a preconception that my clients would not be able to relate to me as I didn't share a similar cultural identity with them. My identification, i.e., my name, appearance and accent must be considered as that of an outsider. My personal situation has led me to do more research on areas such as differences and diversity. Surprisingly, I came across many pieces of literature which support the idea that cultural or ethnic differences between clients and counsellors can have an impact on the counselling process or their therapeutic relationships. Since then, cultural differences and multicultural counselling have been my primary theme in research papers, in order to find possible solutions. That is why I was interested in exploring how South Asian international students perceive seeking counselling in the UK. The findings of this study will help university counsellors to provide better services to this population while keeping in mind diversity and differences. I have made an attempt to capture their perceptions without imposing my personal thoughts and opinions. Conducting this study has made me more aware of my own biases and preconceptions when working with culturally different clients.

The whole process has led to a change in my perception and understanding of this topic. It has given me a new perspective on my views of international students. For instance, when participants talked about cultural and language barriers in seeking counselling, it reminded me of my own experience of personal therapy with a counsellor of a different nationality. Initially, I struggled to talk about my problems as I assumed that the counsellor wouldn't be able to understand from my cultural point of view. However, the counsellor made great efforts to understand my perspective and gave importance to my cultural values. On a professional level, my personal experience and findings from my study gave me a different outlook on counselling. I feel it is important to integrate research and practice. This study has led me to consider my own practice as a trainee counselling psychologist. I consider the subjective experiences of my clients and accommodate my clients' needs and preferences without compromising the key ingredients



of the therapeutic relationship i.e. empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard. Now, I am even more aware of the importance of culture and diversity within the therapeutic context. I believe this study is a valuable piece of work for practitioners to help them to integrate a multicultural approach while working with cross-cultural clients as it encourages therapists to tailor therapy to meet the needs of clients uniquely.

### **6.3 Summary of the thesis**

In this study, I aimed to explore South Asian international students' perceptions of seeking counselling in the UK. Students from South Asia make up the second largest population of international students in the UK and the literature review has acknowledged the challenges faced by them. Their increased vulnerability to experiencing challenges may increase their need to access counselling in the UK. The current literature focuses on the challenges and adjustment issues faced by the general population of international students or those from China; however, limited information is available on their perception of or behaviours around seeking help when faced with challenges. There is a lack of sufficient research exploring the views of "South-Asian" international students on counselling. This study has filled that gap by conducting a study which aimed to obtain rich information from South Asian international students and explore their perceptions of counselling while keeping in mind their cultural values. The current study adopted an exploratory design; therefore, a qualitative methodology was used. Eleven participants were recruited for this study in an attempt to include a heterogeneous sample made up of both genders across different cultures and countries. The students' perceptions of counselling were explored in-depth using semi-structured interviews and the data were analysed using thematic analysis. In order to ensure trustworthiness, a precise six-phase approach was followed, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) in order to stay grounded in the data and to reduce the influence of the researcher's philosophical assumptions in the study.

Seven main themes were derived from the thematic analysis: Previous positive experiences of counselling, previous negative experiences of counselling, positive perceptions of counselling, negative perceptions of counselling, different understanding of 'counselling', barriers to accessing counselling, factors which encourage access for counselling. The findings indicate that South Asian international students had a varied understanding of counselling and how to access counselling in the UK. It was found that, mostly, people in their home country view counselling

as a negative thing due to stigma around mental health issues. However, most of them showed an interest in seeking counselling when faced with challenges and stressed the importance of taking care of one's mental health at the same time as describing how counselling is considered only for "mad" or "crazy" people in their home country. The findings also suggest that students would be willing to seek counselling for a few reasons such as career- or academic-related issues or when they want a quick solution for their problems. This particular finding raised a question about whether they have a different concept of counselling in their home country as some of them offered their opinions about career counselling commonly known as career guidance in the UK. Four participants also reported their prior experience of counselling in the UK or in their home country as both positive and negative. Whereas, the prior negative experience of a participant had no impact on their perception towards counselling. Furthermore, the findings also indicate that language and cultural factors could be a barrier for South Asian students to seek counselling in the UK. They might not be able to communicate effectively in English or present their emotions fluently due to cultural diversity. The study also shows that certain approaches for counselling like a solution-focused approach, characteristics of a counsellor like warmth and empathy could act as factors which encourage students to access counselling. This study reports that promoting the use of counselling services and awareness about mental health on campus could reduce the stigma amongst international students and could encourage them to seek such services more in the future. Lastly, the use of a multicultural approach by counsellors may encourage students to access such services and might allow counsellors to tailor their traditional approach to meet the demands of this population.

A key strength of this study is that it appears to fill a gap in the literature by exploring South Asian international students' perceptions of seeking counselling in the UK. This area of research is not a commonly explored topic. The findings of this study could also be considered as a contribution to the existing body of literature in the fields of multicultural counselling, counselling psychology and higher education. The findings of the present study were also subjected to some limitations including sample size, use of other methodologies, cultural or background variants. Therefore, these limitations could lead to potential directions for future research. In spite of its limitations, this study has created knowledge and highlighted implications for university counselling centres and HEIs. Finally, I presented my reflections on

my own processes throughout this study. Completion of this thesis had added immensely to my academic learning as well as providing me with valuable skills which may be useful in my profession of psychology especially when working with culturally diverse clients.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Advertisements

### Recruitment Advertisement for Student Participants

Doctorate Research Student Seeking “South-Asian “International Student Participants to take part in a Counselling Psychology Research Thesis titled:

**‘South Asian’ international students’ perceptions about counselling in the UK: A qualitative exploratory study using thematic analysis**

Are you a “South-Asian “international student studying at the UK?

If yes, then I would like to invite you to take part in my Doctorate Thesis Research.

- This project is being undertaken as part of a Professional Doctorate level thesis in the Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester.
- The purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of “South-Asian “international students having counselling/ therapy who come to study in the United Kingdom and help counselling services to understand about the nature of diversity in international students and their perceptions in order to improve their practice.
- Interested participants will be invited to take part in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately one hour which will be audio-recorded. Interviews will take place within the campus.
- Findings from the study will be published in a thesis seminar paper to the University of Manchester and possibly published in scientific journals. Confidentiality is assured but can be at risk when it comes to safeguarding, and participants will not be identified in any part of the research.
- This study has been reviewed by the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee.

If you are interested to participate, please contact:

SukritiKainth  
Trainee Counselling Psychology  
University of Manchester  
[Sukriti.kainth@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Sukriti.kainth@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk)

## Appendix B: Interview Schedule

### Section 1 - Demographic Information and General Experience

What is your Age?

What is your Gender?

What is your religion?

What's your field of study/major?

What degree are you currently working on?

Where do you come from?

How long have you been in the UK and their experience living in the UK:

What, if any, have been your positive experiences?

What, if any, has been not so positive or been challenging for you?

### Section 2 – Perceptions toward Seeking Counselling

1. What is your understanding of counselling? Has your understanding of counselling changed since you came to the UK? (Compared to your understanding when you were in your home country).
2. How do you feel about the idea of someone seeking counselling when dealing with challenges in life? (how might this relate to views in the participant's home country generally).
3. Have you ever attended counselling? (If yes, go to question 4. If no, go to question 5.)
4. Can you tell me more about your previous counselling experience? (Probe for types of problems, location, length and frequency, type of counselling, procedure of seeking counselling, pre and post perceptions). Now go to question 7.
5. Have you ever thought about seeking counselling: yes or no? (If yes, go to question 6. If no, go to question 7.)
6. Under what circumstances, are you, or students from your home country, most likely to seek counselling (e.g., having difficulty adjusting to new culture, relationship difficulties, academic

concerns, difficulty in sleeping, conflict with parents, emotional problems, physical or mental health concerns)?

7. What concerns might you, or other students from your home country, have when deciding whether you would/should seek counselling? (Probe for self-concealment, loss of face, and values.)

8. Would there be any factors that may encourage you, or students from your home country, to seek counselling more? (e.g. the counselling approach or personality of a counsellor.)

9. When you experience some challenges in life that may cause some distress, how do you usually cope with those challenges in your home country and in the UK (e.g., talk to friends, counsellors, or self-help methods)? Can you please give me some examples? (Once again, explore if the participant believes these are indicative of people's coping strategies in their home country).

10. To what extent do you think culture or language plays a role in whether or not students from your country might seek out counselling in the UK? (Probe for barriers, facilitating help-seeking?)

### **Section 3 – Debrief**

1. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about how you think or feel about seeking counselling?

2. How did you feel about answering those questions?

### Appendix C: Extract of a coded interview transcript

<p>T: this is the first time I come to Europe, I learned so many things, about the culture and people it is Multicultural, new environment and I liked many things here in the UK. The positive thing was that I learned how to be independent I rely on myself which is very important.</p>	<p>Positive adjustment living in the UK- independency</p>
<p>S: When you were in your home country do you think you were independent?</p>	
<p>T: They do not encourage girls to be independent it is a very conservative Society, but personally I like to be independent it was always my dream to be independent. So it is really good for here for me in the UK. The negative thing is my PhD it is really challenging for me, I always feel anxious and stressed. UK is the best country in the higher education it is new for me and it is very different from my own country. I am not really confident I have a lot of confidence issues that's why you can say I am struggling with my studies.</p>	<p>Negative challenge- anxiety and stress related to studies</p> <p>Lack of confidence</p>
<p>S: what do you say you are struggling personally or in terms of your PhD?</p>	
<p>T: yeah, I am struggling with myself, it's hard for me to deal with my PhD so I need to feel good within myself in order to cope. My personal problem impact me and to my PhD.</p>	<p>Personal impact on studies</p>
<p>S: you said that your PhD makes you feel very anxious and stressed so what does that anxiety and stress about?</p>	
<p>T: Even the simple tasks I see it as very difficult for me sometimes I don't even understand myself , it is really hard for me I am trying to get better.</p>	
<p>S: Did you always struggle with yourself or it happened since you came to the UK?</p>	
<p>T: Before, It started in my home country from my childhood.</p>	<p>Adjustment issues since childhood</p>
<p>S: Okay, any other negative experience you had while doing your PhD?</p>	
<p>T: sometimes I feel anxious with other people, new people, I don't socialize a lot I used to stay alone this doesn't help me at all. It is really difficult. So it is double struggle withme and with my studies.</p>	<p>Struggle in socialisation affecting studies</p>

<p>S: what about adjusting to this culture?</p> <p>T: with the culture it is okay, I am very open-minded person I can accept other cultures and open to learn other people and other cultures, so this is not a real problem for me.</p> <p>T: In terms of language I feel like I need to improve my English for writing it is okay but when I talk I don't have that confidence. I can express myself better when I write. But for speaking I feel anxious that doesn't help me to express myself.</p> <p>S: so now we will move on to the second section of the interview which is your perception about counselling, what do you think counselling is what is your perception about counselling?</p> <p>T: It's all about talking, listening communication interaction so you have a problem you go to a counsellor you speak about your problems and the counsellor listen to you and give you advice so it is all about that talking and listening.</p> <p>S: are there any changes about your understanding about counselling since you came to the UK?</p> <p>T: In my country I did not even know what it is counselling, it is not encouraged in my country even when you have psychological problems people don't understand you if you have psychological problems you keep them to yourself even I tried to speak to a counsellor in my home country the lady said help yourself it is not that difficult I think it was not very professional, but when I came to the UK it is very encouraged and people are aware about it.</p> <p>S: People in your home country they do not talk about psychological things what do they actually do that, do they keep it to themselves?</p> <p>T: yeah or maybe they talk to friends but personally I did not talk to anybody even my parents were not aware.</p> <p>S: How do you feel about the idea of seeking counselling?</p> <p>T: it is very good it is a really good thing, in my home country I used to think speaking about your problem is a weakness but actually it is a strength I learned it here in the UK, it is a sign of strength it is good to talk to somebody and to be listened to it is very helpful and it helped me a lot.</p>	<p>Acceptance to new culture</p> <p>Inability to express in English</p> <p>Counsellor giving advice, Required listening and communication skills</p> <p>In home country, counselling is not encouraged</p> <p>Counsellors were not professional</p> <p>In the UK, there is more awareness</p> <p>Keeping within, not even telling parents</p> <p>Talking about problems is a sign of strength</p>
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## Appendix D: Initial codes extracted from the data

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In my country I did not even know what it is counselling

I did not talk to anybody even my parents were not aware

50% might see a professional if you are crazy

Studies is your priority rather than seeking help from a professional

So unless you are crazy you don't go to seek counselling

Have the opportunity to control myself and prioritize my studies

I lose this control in my life I would definitely go to seek counselling.

They can put themselves in your shoes

Would prefer to see a mother because mothers feel each other

People in my home country can risk their wellbeing because of what people might think about them.

The counsellor should give suggestions according to the client and not according to his business

Overall counselling is a very good thing

They should have people who speak all different languages

If they would say that I was crazy and seeking counselling I don't care

People are understanding importance of mental health

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If I have a counsellor from my home country he or she will understand me better

Hire different people to understand different cultures and age groups

I am a strong person and I will deal with any kind of challenges.

To be honest instead of going to a counsellor I might go and meet any of my family members

Should not give his opinions

I discovered a lot of strengths thanks to the counsellor

They should offer meetings to the International students and advertise the services properly

Language is not that important however culture is

I realized that the person is doing business over there

Comfortable in chatting about my problems

The lady helped me to discover a lot of things about myself

Harder for people to go get help regarding mental health

It's harder to understand British humor

Do not advertise the services properly

Who are part of the University they are free and who are not they charge for counselling

Not good with expressing because of good communication skills

Would go if I am stuck somewhere , and for my career

Started missing my family

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Counselling is guiding someone

Don't think so people are open about mental health issues

Gave me suggestions to focus on my studies

When the water is above the level you need someone to guide you or talk to you

Express those emotions more clearly in our language

I would choose for my career

Problems will be culture

The person should listen to me well and understand

It is important to be more aware of mental health

Negative experience would be the accent

I do not believe in counselling

Psychologist it's like a crazy doctor if you are crazy you go there

Talk to people like close member of your family or friends

Part of the cultural shock

Cannot express some of the emotions completely in English

Because of stigma associated with mental health

Career services rather than a mental health service or a counsellor

Really hard to translate in English

Counselling is for someone who are depressed

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Culture is against the mental health awareness

Would like direction rather than free communication

Different mindset in my country

Counsellor is British or from different culture, they might find the problem completely irrelevant

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## Appendix E: Thematic Maps

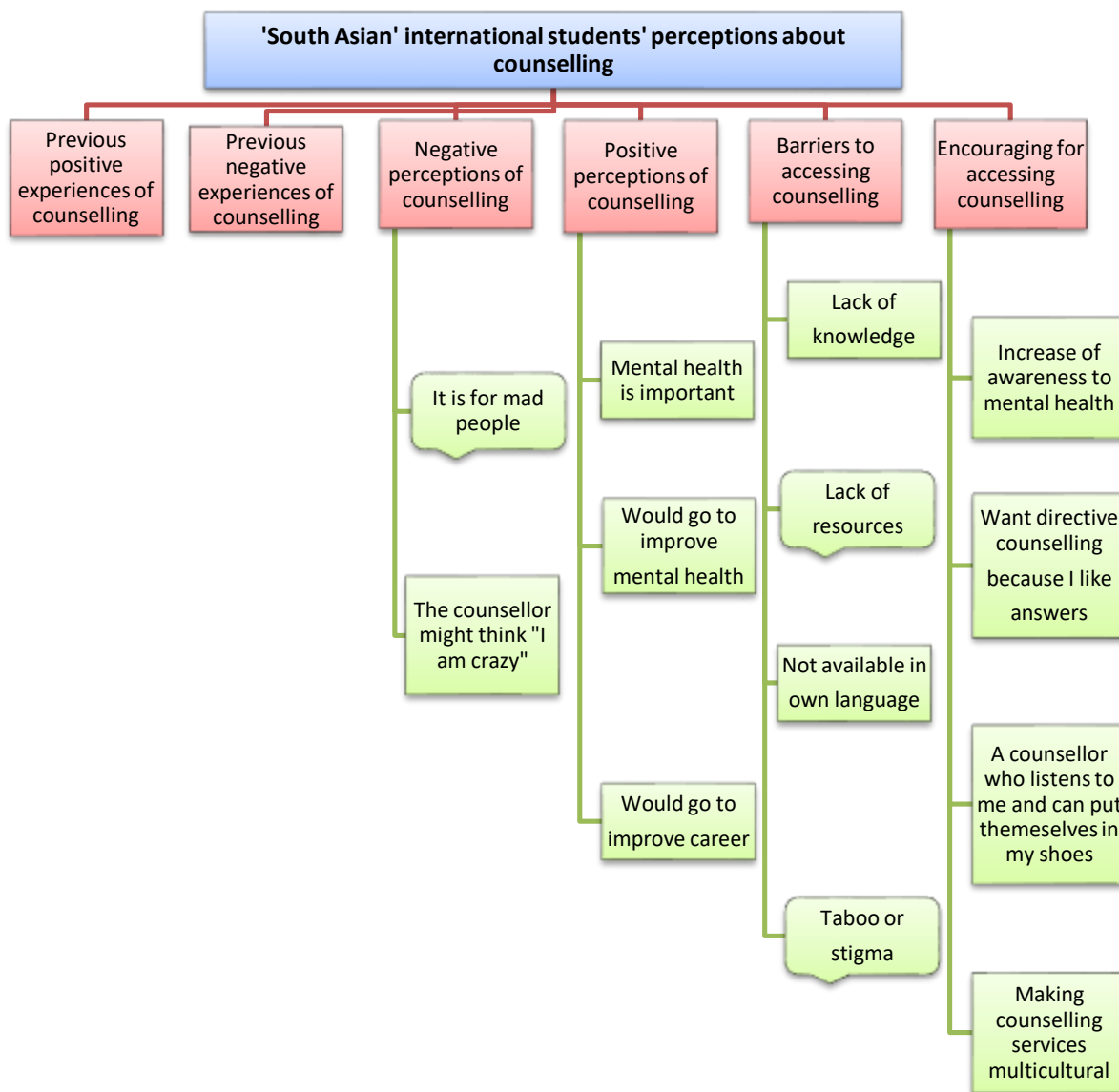


Figure1: Thematic map illustrating main themes and sub-themes

## Appendix F: Turning codes to themes

Codes	Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The lady helped me to discover a lot of things about myself</li> <li>• Gave me suggestions to focus on my studies</li> <li>• I discovered a lot of strengths thanks to the counsellor</li> </ul>	Previous positive experiences of counselling
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative experience would be the accent</li> <li>• I realized that the person is doing business over there</li> <li>• The counsellor should give suggestions according to the client and not according to his business</li> <li>• To be honest instead of going to a counsellor I might go and meet any of my family member</li> <li>• Should not give his opinions</li> </ul>	Previous negative experiences of counselling
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counselling is guiding someone</li> <li>• I would choose for my career</li> <li>• It is important to be more aware of mental health</li> <li>• Comfortable in chatting about my</li> </ul>	Positive perceptions of counselling

problems

- people are understanding importance of mental health
- Overall counselling is a very good thing

- 50% might see a professional if you are crazy
- So unless you are crazy you don't go to seek counselling
- Don't think so people are open about mental health issues
- I do not believe in counselling
- Psychologist it's like a crazy doctor if you are crazy you go there
- Counselling is for someone who are depressed

Negative perceptions of counselling

- Culture is against the mental health awareness
- Really hard to translate in English
- Different mindset in my country
- Because of stigma associated with mental health
- Do not advertise the services properly
- Cannot express some of the emotions completely in English
- Part of the cultural shock
- Problems will be culture
- Express those emotions more clearly in

Barriers to accessing counselling

our language

- Would like direction rather than free communication Encouraging for accessing counselling
  - The person should listen to me well and understand
  - They can put themselves in your shoes
  - If I have a counsellor from my home country he or she will understand me better
  - They should offer meetings to the International students and advertise the services properly
  - They should have people who speak all different languages
  - Hire different people to understand different cultures and age groups
-



**‘South Asian’ international students’ perceptions about counselling in the UK: A qualitative exploratory study using thematic analysis**

**Appendix G: Consent form**

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below

**Please  
Initial  
Box**

1. I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

3. I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded

4. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes

5. I agree that any data collected may be passed to the research supervisor

6. I agree that any data collected may be published in anonymous form in academic books or journals

**7. Whether you wish to receive a written feedback about the interview and research**

I agree to take part in the above project

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

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Name of person taking consent

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Date

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Signature

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**‘South Asian’ international students’ perceptions about counselling in the UK: A  
qualitative exploratory study using thematic analysis**

**Appendix H: Participant Information Sheet – International Students**

You are being invited to take part in a research study as part of a Doctorate Thesis in Counselling Psychology. The aim of the research is to explore the ‘South-Asian’ international student’s perception of therapy.

Before you decide to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

**Who will conduct the research?**

Researcher: SukritiKainth

Ellen Wilkinson Building  
The University of Manchester  
Oxford Road, Manchester. M13 9PL

**Title of the Research**

An exploration into ‘South-Asian’ international student’s perception about therapy in the UK

**What is the aim of the research?**

The aim of this research is to explore ‘South-Asian’ international student’s perception of having a therapy in the UK. In particular it will focus upon what individuals feel to be unhelpful and helpful within past relationships with therapists and how much they are comfortable in seeking professional help.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been invited to participate because you are a ‘South-Asian’ international student who is living and studying in the UK.

**What would I be asked to do if I took part?**

If you decide to take part, you will be invited to participate in a semi-structured interview with the researcher which will last approximately one hour. The interview will take place in a private room at either the University of Manchester or Manchester College on a day and time that is convenient for you. The researcher will ask you questions regarding your perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of working with a counsellor in the UK.

Following the meeting you will be asked if you would like to review a summary of the interview. This will be sent as a password protected word document via an agreed email address within a month of the interview. At this stage you will be invited to comment on whether the summary captures your thoughts as you intended.

There are no foreseeable risks to take part in this research, and there is no obligation to answer any questions in the interview that you do not want to answer.

### **What happens to the data collected?**

The interview will be audio recorded and will be transcribed by the researcher. The audio recorded material will then be destroyed following transcription. The data will be analysed using thematic analysis to look for themes and participants will have the option of reviewing the themes as part of member checking to ensure the validity of the analysed data.

A summary of the findings will be made available to all individuals who take part and would like to find out more. If you are interested, the researcher will ask for an email address to send a brief summary of the work to once it has been completed. There is no obligation to provide contact details for this.

### **How is confidentiality maintained?**

Confidentiality will be maintained through data encryption and secure storage procedures. Interview participants will be contracted before signing consent forms and made aware of the strict confidentiality of all disclosed information during the semi-structured interview with the researcher. ID numbers will be allocated to participants to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. All collected data will be encrypted and stored securely in a file that is password protected with only the researcher and researcher's supervisors having access to this file. Once collected data from audio recording is transferred securely to the encrypted file, it will be destroyed from the audio electronic device.

Transcribed interviews and data analysis documents will be stored using the same procedures. Any hard copies of transcribed or analysed data will be locked securely in a storage device which only the researcher will have access to. Collected data will not be shared with anyone else other than the research team. Participant anonymity will be ensured in all aspects of data collection, analysis, and dissemination. No identifiable information for participants will be used at any point in the research process. All collected data will be destroyed five years after dissemination of the findings.

### **What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. It will not be possible to withdraw from the study following 2 weeks from the interview.

### **Will I be paid for participating in the research?**

There is no payment for taking part in this research.

### **What is the duration of the research?**

The duration of this research will involve a one-time semi-structured interview with the researcher which will last for approximately 1 hour.

### **Where will the research be conducted?**

The interview will take place at the University of Manchester at a day and time that is convenient for the participant.

### **Will the outcomes of the research be published?**

Findings from the study will be published in a thesis submitted for assessment at the University of Manchester. Further publications in scientific journals and academic books are also likely.

### **Contact for further information**

Researcher Contact Information:

SukritiKainth : [Sukriti.kainth@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Sukriti.kainth@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk)

Research Supervisor Contact Information:

Dr Terry Hanley: [Terry.hanley@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Terry.hanley@manchester.ac.uk)

### **What if something goes wrong?**

Please contact my research supervisor if you need help or have any questions related to the project:

Dr Terry Hanley: [Terry.hanley@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Terry.hanley@manchester.ac.uk)  
0161 275 8815

If there are any issues regarding this research that you would prefer not to discuss with members of the research team, please contact the Research Practice and Governance Co-ordinator by either writing to 'The Research Practice and Governance Co-ordinator, Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL', by emailing: [Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk), or by telephoning 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093