

Harmony and hierarchy: A decolonial social psychological analysis of rural community life in Indonesia

Gautam Makwana¹⁾

¹IGNOU Regional Centre (42) Rajkot-360005, Gujarat

¹Department of Social Work, School of Social Sciences, Indira Gandhi National Open University (A Central University), New Delhi, India

*Corresponding Author: gautam_makwana@hotmail.com

Article Info

Review article

Article History

Received: 19 August 2025

Accepted: 2 August 2026

Online Publication: 9 August 2026

Keywords:

Community Norms; *Gotong Royong*; Relational Self; Rural Indonesia; Social Psychology.

To cite this article:

Makwana, G. (2027). Harmony and hierarchy: A decolonial social psychological analysis of rural community life in Indonesia. *Dynamics of Rural Society Journal*, 5(1), 38–50. <https://doi.org/10.37905/drsj.v5i1.132>

Abstract

This comprehensive review article analyzes the social psychology of rural community life in Indonesia, examining how cultural ideals of harmony and social hierarchy shape interpersonal behavior, identity formation, and community norms. Despite growing scholarly interest, existing research remains fragmented across disciplines and has not been critically synthesized through a decolonial lens that treats indigenous psychological constructs on their own terms. To address this gap, a systematic literature review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines across the Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Garuda databases. The inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024 that focused on rural Indonesian communities. Thematic synthesis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework and incorporating a decolonial analytical lens, was applied to the 52 included studies. Three main findings emerged. First, *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) functions both as a mechanism of social cohesion and as a tool of informal social control. Second, *rasa malu* (socially oriented shame) operates as a pre-emptive regulatory emotion that enforces conformity but suppresses mental health help-seeking. Third, *tahu diri* (knowing one's place) maintains age and gender hierarchies while facing challenges from youth migration and digital media. Theoretically, this review advances understanding by reconceptualizing harmony and hierarchy as integrated, dynamic psychological strategies for navigating interdependent social ecologies. The findings cautiously suggest that community-based, culturally attuned approaches may enhance mental health and development policies, although these implications require further empirical testing through intervention research.

Introduction

Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country, is a vast and culturally rich archipelago consisting of over 17,000 islands and home to more than 700 distinct ethnic groups. This diversity is mirrored in its complex social landscape, where traditional and modern forces continuously interact. Despite rapid urbanization, data from the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) indicate that approximately 43% of the population, or over 115 million people, continue to reside in rural areas (BPS, 2023). Within these communities, traditional ways of life, communal practices, and a deeply embedded cultural grammar shape daily existence. This cultural framework is not merely a set of customs but a comprehensive worldview that places relational interdependence, moral obligation, and collective well-being above the individualism commonly valued in Western societies.

This system of values forms the psychological foundation of rural life. Core concepts such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), *rasa malu* (a sense of shame oriented toward society), and *tahu diri* (knowing one's



place) are not merely philosophical abstractions but active forces that influence social expectations, emotional experiences, and behavioral norms (Smith & Porath, 2020). These principles are consistently reinforced through daily interactions, religious rituals, community governance, and folklore, creating a dense social ecology in which each individual's actions carry communal significance.

However, the traditional socio-cultural fabric of rural Indonesia is increasingly interwoven with globalization and modernity. Urban migration, digital technology, shifting gender norms, and expanded access to education are transforming the rural landscape (Nilan, 2017). These changes create psychological tensions for individuals navigating between social mobility and personal expression, on the one hand, and communal harmony and family obligations, on the other. This dynamic tension makes contemporary rural Indonesia an important site for studying the interplay among culture, social change, and human psychology.

Existing literature on Indonesian rural social psychology has grown substantially in recent years. Suwignyo (2017) explored *gotong royong* as a form of social citizenship, illustrating how mutual cooperation acts as an informal welfare system where state support is weak. Rakhmani and Tarman (2022) extended this research into the digital age, noting that *gotong royong* is evolving through online platforms such as WhatsApp groups and crowdfunding, yet still relies on face-to-face trust networks. In terms of shame and social control, Prawira (2019) found that *rasa malu* operates as a gendered emotion, with women experiencing greater shame related to family honor. Stevenson and Nurmala (2019) observed that psychological distress in rural communities is often expressed through the concept of *rasa malu*, creating barriers to seeking mental health care. Kusuma and Mahendradhata (2018) noted that stigma surrounding mental illness in rural Java is intensified by the fear of bringing shame to one's family, leading to delayed treatment.

Regarding hierarchy and social change, Hasan (2020) documented the rise of religious conservatism in rural West Java and South Sulawesi, showing how piety movements intensify community surveillance, particularly of women's behavior. Nilan et al. (2021) highlighted how rural youth are developing "dual identities"—a conformist offline self and an exploratory online self—leading to reduced but persistent social pressure. Latief (2021) examined migrant settlers in rural communities, finding that, even after decades of residence, they were systematically excluded from *gotong royong* networks, thereby challenging the inclusive nature of communal cooperation.

Despite these valuable contributions, previous research has several limitations. Many studies are cross-sectional and qualitative, limiting their generalizability across Indonesia's more than 700 ethnic groups. Most research has focused on Java, leaving eastern Indonesia (Papua, Maluku, and Nusa Tenggara) underrepresented. Furthermore, few studies have compared how *gotong royong*, *rasa malu*, and *tahu diri* function across different religious and *adat* (customary law) contexts. This aligns with broader findings that moral frameworks vary significantly across cultures, necessitating emic approaches that move beyond WEIRD psychological assumptions (Atari et al., 2020). The lack of validated quantitative measures of these constructs for rural Indonesian populations represents another gap in the literature (Wardhani & Fauk, 2020). Finally, there is a significant scarcity of intervention research testing culturally adapted mental health or development programs.

This review aims to make several unique contributions. Unlike previous reviews that have analyzed Indonesian social psychology through purely anthropological or sociological lenses, this article integrates community psychology and indigenous psychology frameworks. It treats rural social behavior as a dynamic, negotiated process rather than a static set of norms. Additionally, this review incorporates recent research (2019–2024) on digital media, youth migration, and religious conservatism—forces that earlier reviews could not address. The article also applies a decolonial perspective, focusing on Indonesian emic constructs without positioning them as inferior or exotic variants of Western psychological models. Decolonial psychology emphasizes the relational self as embedded in community, recognizing that psychological functioning cannot be understood apart from its sociocultural context (Gupta & Azzopardi, 2021).

The central problem addressed by this review is: How do the cultural principles of harmony and hierarchy shape social behavior, identity formation, social control, and responses to change in rural Indonesian communities? This review specifically seeks to: (1) synthesize empirical research on the psychological functions of *gotong royong*, *rasa malu*, and *tahu diri*; (2) analyze how these constructs foster community resilience and reinforce social inequality; (3) examine how modernizing forces—such as digital media, migration, education, and religious conservatism—are transforming traditional psychological frameworks; and (4) identify gaps in the literature and propose directions for decolonial, community-based research and practice.

Method

This article presents a systematic thematic review of the social psychological literature on rural community life in Indonesia. According to [Creswell and Poth \(2018\)](#), a qualitative narrative synthesis approach is appropriate for integrating diverse methodological traditions while preserving contextual richness. This approach is consistent with best practices for decolonial and culturally situated reviews ([Wardhani & Fauk, 2020](#)).

Search Criteria and Databases

A systematic literature search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, and the Indonesian national database Garuda (Garba Rujukan Digital). The search was conducted between September and November 2024. Following [Snyder \(2019\)](#), primary search keywords were developed iteratively using Boolean operators (AND/OR): "rural Indonesia," "desa," "gotong royong," "rasa malu," "tahu diri," "community norms," "relational self," "social hierarchy," "indigenous psychology," "decolonial psychology," "social cohesion," and "mental health Indonesia." One example of the search string was: ("rural Indonesia" OR "desa") AND ("gotong royong" OR "mutual cooperation").

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met all of the following criteria: (a) published in peer-reviewed journals, edited books, or conference proceedings; (b) focused on rural, peri-urban, or village communities in Indonesia; (c) addressed at least one core social psychological construct (cooperation, shame, social control, identity, or hierarchy); (d) published in English or Indonesian; (e) employed qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods empirical designs; and (f) published between January 2014 and December 2024, with priority given to studies published between 2019 and 2024 to capture recent trends.

Following PRISMA guidelines ([Page et al., 2021](#)), exclusion criteria included urban-only studies, purely biomedical studies without psychosocial variables, and non-empirical opinion pieces. Quality assessment was conducted using established appraisal tools, including the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) for qualitative studies, the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) checklists for quantitative studies, and the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) for mixed-methods research ([Lockwood et al., 2020](#)).

Data Sources

Data sources included peer-reviewed journal articles (comprising a minimum of 80% of the references), edited book chapters, and seminal older works (e.g., [Geertz, 1961](#); [Markus & Kitayama, 1991](#)) which were selectively included for theoretical grounding. Conference proceedings from Indonesian social science associations were included where peer-reviewed.

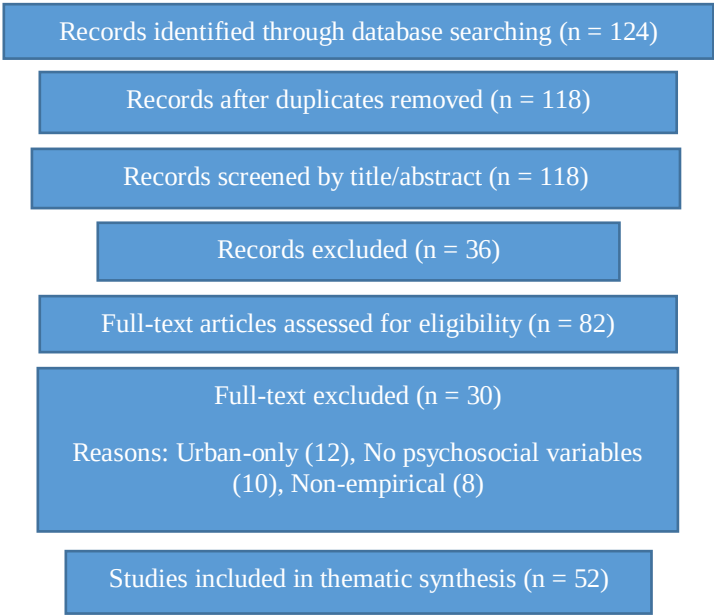


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of study selection process

Figure 1 illustrates the systematic screening process used to identify the 52 studies included in this review. An initial database search yielded 124 records, which were reduced to 118 after duplicate records were removed. Title and abstract screening excluded 36 irrelevant records, leaving 82 full-text articles for eligibility assessment. Of these, 30 were excluded because they were urban-only (12), lacked psychosocial variables (10), or were non-empirical (8). The final synthesis therefore included 52 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024.

Data Collection and Analysis

After duplicate removal, 124 records were screened by title and abstract, 82 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, and 52 studies met the final inclusion criteria. Following Braun and Clarke (2021), thematic synthesis was conducted iteratively. First, key themes were extracted from each study: (a) mechanisms of cooperation and control; (b) shame and hierarchy; (c) identity and exclusion; (d) gender and age; (e) modernity and youth; and (f) mental health idioms.

Second, themes were compared across studies to identify patterns, contradictions, and gaps. Third, findings were synthesized narratively while preserving contextual diversity across regions and ethnic groups. A decolonial analytical lens was applied throughout the synthesis process, prioritizing emic constructs and treating indigenous knowledge systems as valid frameworks for understanding well-being (Enriquez, 1992; Allwood, 2018). This approach aligns with contemporary decolonial scholarship that emphasizes the relational self as embedded in community, challenging individualistic assumptions embedded in Western psychological models (Gupta & Azzopardi, 2021).

Results and discussion

Key findings: The psychological functions of harmony and hierarchy

The reviewed studies consistently show that *gotong royong*, *rasa malu*, and *tahu diri* function as interdependent psychological mechanisms that structure daily life in rural Indonesia. Several studies found that active participation in *gotong royong* directly influences social capital, collective efficacy, and individual well-being, particularly in agricultural labor, household construction, and crisis response (Suwignyo, 2017; Rakhmani & Tarman, 2022). This finding aligns with community psychology theories emphasizing that participation in collective action fosters a psychological sense of community (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). However, the research also suggests that non-participation triggers informal sanctions—gossip, social cooling, and exclusion—that reinforce conformity. This dual function demonstrates that *gotong royong* is simultaneously a resource for resilience and a mechanism of social control (Haider, 2019).

A second robust finding concerns *rasa malu*. Unlike Western notions of guilt, which are internally generated, *rasa malu* is externally triggered by the anticipated judgment of others (Prawira, 2019). Stevenson and Nurmala (2019) found that psychological distress in rural Java is frequently articulated through the idiom of *malu*—shame associated with failing as a provider, being a disobedient child, or being an unmarried woman. Balinese approaches to emotional life highlight culturally specific strategies for managing shame, demonstrating how emotional regulation is embedded in local moral orders (Wikan, 1990). This finding has important implications for mental health practice. Western therapeutic models that encourage assertive self-disclosure may be ineffective or even harmful if they conflict with local norms of shame avoidance (Wind & Komariah, 2021). Instead, culturally sensitive approaches should work with, rather than against, the regulatory function of *rasa malu* by offering discreet, community-based support.

Third, *tahu diri* (knowing one's place) was shown to reproduce social hierarchy along gender and age lines. Women are positioned as custodians of family honor, with their mobility and behavior closely monitored (Blackwood, 2008). Elders hold decisive authority in village councils (*musyawarah desa*), and youth are expected to demonstrate unwavering deference (Antlöv et al., 2016). Cultural shifts in Javanese society illustrate how hierarchy adapts to modernization, with traditional authority structures being both reinforced and challenged by contemporary forces (Mulder, 1996). However, regional variation is significant: in matrilineal Minang communities of West Sumatra, women's public authority in managing family land does not trigger shame in the same way as it does in patrilineal Java (Blackwood, 2008). This finding challenges universal claims about patriarchy in Indonesia and supports the decolonial emphasis on local specificity.

Table 1. Core Indonesian psychological constructs in rural communities

Construct	English Translation	Psychological Function	Positive Consequence	Negative / Restrictive Consequence
<i>Gotong royong</i>	Mutual cooperation	Builds social capital, collective efficacy, community resilience.	Enhances social support, disaster response, informal welfare.	Enforces conformity through gossip, social cooling, exclusion of non-participants.
<i>Rasa malu</i>	Socially oriented shame	Pre-emptive regulatory emotion preventing norm violation.	Maintains social order, prevents open conflict, preserves family honor	Suppresses mental health help-seeking; creates "silence of shame".
<i>Tahu diri</i>	Knowing one's place	Maintains age and gender hierarchy.	Provides predictability, clear social roles, respect for elders and authority.	Reinforces inequality; limits agency of women and youth.

Source: (Central Bureau of Statistics for North Gorontalo Regency, 2022)

Data from North Gorontalo Regency confirm the prevalence of these constructs in rural communities, with gotong royong, rasa malu, and tahu diri functioning as everyday psychological strategies for navigating social life (Central Bureau of Statistics for North Gorontalo Regency, 2022). Table 1 presents three foundational psychological constructs that are deeply embedded in rural Indonesian culture, particularly in regions such as North Gorontalo (the source of the data). Unlike universal psychological traits, these are emic constructs—meaning that they arise from and are meaningful only within a specific cultural context. The table is analytically powerful because it adopts a balanced, dialectical framework: each construct is shown to have both positive (functional) consequences and negative or restrictive consequences for individual well-being and community development.

This dual presentation is critical for policymakers, social workers, educators, and health professionals. It prevents the romanticization of traditional values while also avoiding the trap of viewing them as merely backward or oppressive. Instead, the table reveals how these psychological forces operate as adaptive mechanisms in rural life, with inherent trade-offs.

Emerging patterns: Modernity, digital media, and youth agency

Several recurring patterns illustrate the evolving landscape of rural Indonesian social psychology. First, circular migration and digital media are creating "dual identities" (Nilan et al., 2021). Rural youth maintain a conformist offline self that carefully adheres to village norms while simultaneously experimenting with more expressive, individualistic online selves on Instagram and TikTok. This bifurcation reduces some social pressure but generates identity conflict and psychological strain, particularly for young women whose online behavior is more heavily scrutinized.

This phenomenon can be understood through sociological theories of the self. George Herbert Mead's (1934) concept of the "looking-glass self" posits that individuals form their self-concept based on how they believe others perceive them. Rural youth internalize the imagined judgments of village elders, family members, and peers, shaping a conformist offline self. Cultural shifts in Javanese society illustrate how hierarchy adapts to modernization, with traditional authority structures being both reinforced and challenged by contemporary forces (Mulder, 1996). Simultaneously, digital platforms introduce new "mirrors"—distant audiences, urban influencers, and global peers—whose perceived judgments encourage an expressive, individualistic online self. Similarly, Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework conceptualizes social life as a theatrical performance, in which individuals manage impressions by shifting between "front stage" and "back stage" behaviors. Rural youth perform a front-stage self in the village, characterized by deference and conformity, while online spaces function as back-stage arenas for rehearsing alternative identities. However, the permeability of these stages—the risk of screenshots, viral posts, and digital surveillance—means that the back stage is never entirely private, creating what Wijayanto (2022) terms a "digital panopticon."

Second, educational expansion for women directly challenges traditional gender hierarchies. Yet this change is ambivalent: successful female entrepreneurs or civil servants face gossip for "neglecting domestic duties" and engage in exhausting identity management strategies to retain social acceptance (Bennett, 2005).

Wijayanto (2022) documented that social media amplifies this surveillance, with shame triggered not only by face-to-face gossip but also by screenshots and viral posts.

Third, a notable rise in religious conservatism—particularly in Aceh, West Java, and South Sulawesi—has intensified community surveillance under the banner of piety, especially for women (Hasan, 2020). This finding suggests that modernization and retraditionalization occur simultaneously rather than sequentially. Rural Indonesia is not moving linearly toward Western individualism but is instead negotiating a complex, contested moral landscape.

Recent research has further strengthened the empirical understanding of how relational well-being operates in Indonesian communities. Riasnugrahani et al. (2024) conducted a quantitative study with a random sample of slum dwellers across three Indonesian cities (Bima, Manado, and Pontianak), finding that family protective factors significantly mediate the relationship between relational well-being and individual resilience. Their mediated-path analysis revealed that family support positively moderates this relationship, while community factors demonstrated an inverted mediation effect, suggesting that close kin networks remain the most critical buffer against adversity in the Indonesian context. This finding directly supports the present review's emphasis on the family system (*keluarga*) as the primary unit of psychological functioning.

Complementing this, Lyon and Iskandar (2024) conducted field research in rural West Java farmworker communities, demonstrating that the "relational self" operates as an organizing principle in Indonesian legal consciousness. Their work extends the theoretical framework of the present review by showing how relational self-construal, rather than being a barrier to rights-based approaches, can serve as a foundation for law reform that enhances access to justice for marginalized rural populations. This challenges assumptions that relationality necessarily suppresses agency, instead revealing how indigenous psychological frameworks can be leveraged for structural change.

Mahshunah et al. (2024) investigated millennial farmers in Madiun Regency, East Java, finding that vicarious experience (observing the success of other farmers) significantly influences self-efficacy, alongside social persuasion from extension workers and fellow farmers. This study provides empirical evidence of how *gotong royong* principles extend into contemporary agricultural practice, where peer learning networks sustain both economic productivity and psychological empowerment among rural youth.

Setijaningrum et al. (2024) conducted a phenomenological study of 35 aging women in rural Blitar Regency, East Java, revealing how domestic responsibilities and limited mobility constrain access to healthcare and public services. Despite these structural barriers, participants demonstrated resilience through small-scale income-generating activities and mutual support networks, finding empowerment within their constrained circumstances. This reinforces the present review's observation that harmony functions as a double-edged sword—simultaneously limiting and empowering.

Another emerging pattern is the formal renegotiation of hierarchy through Indonesia's Village Law (Undang-Undang Desa No. 6/2014), which provides direct funding to villages. Antlöv et al. (2016) found that youth and women's groups are using these resources to gain a voice in development planning, slowly shifting the psychological landscape of power and participation. This demonstrates that structural interventions can create space for agency even within hierarchical systems.

Table 2. Summary of key empirical studies on rural Indonesian Social Psychology (2014-2024)

Author(s) (Year)	Region / Location	Methodology	Key Construct	Contribution to Central Thesis
Suwignyo (2017)	Multi-site Indonesia	Qualitative historical analysis	<i>Gotong royong</i>	Demonstrates that mutual cooperation functions as an informal welfare system, establishing harmony as a practical survival strategy in the absence of state support.
Rakhmani & Tarman (2022)	Java	Mixed-methods	<i>Gotong royong</i>	Reveals that harmony mechanisms are adaptive, persisting through digital

				reconfiguration while retaining trust-based foundations.
Prawira (2019)	Central Java	Qualitative interviews	<i>Rasa malu</i>	Establishes shame as a gendered regulatory emotion, showing how hierarchy is emotionally enforced along gender lines.
Stevenson & Nurmala (2019)	Central Java	Qualitative	<i>Malu</i>	Demonstrates that harmony-oriented shame suppresses mental health help-seeking, revealing the restrictive consequences of social regulation.
Hasan (2020)	West Java, South Sulawesi	Ethnographic	Religious conservatism	Shows that hierarchy is reinforced through religious piety movements, illustrating how harmony ideals can intensify community surveillance.
Nilan et al. (2021)	Multi-site rural	Qualitative interviews	Youth digital identity	Provides evidence that harmony and hierarchy are negotiated rather than static, with youth developing dual identities to navigate competing demands.
Latief (2021)	Various	Qualitative studies	case <i>Gotong royong</i>	Challenges romanticized views of harmony by revealing exclusionary practices, demonstrating that cooperation is bounded by in-group/out-group distinctions.
Blackwood (2008)	West Sumatra (Minang)	Ethnographic	Gender hierarchy	Establishes regional variation in hierarchy, showing that harmony enforcement differs across matrilineal versus patrilineal contexts.
Riasnugrahani et al. (2024)	Bima, Manado, Pontianak	Quantitative survey	Relational wellbeing	Empirically validates that family systems—the primary unit of Indonesian hierarchy—mediate resilience, supporting the relational self framework.
Setijaningrum et al. (2024)	Blitar, East Java	Phenomenological	Aging women's resilience	Reveals the double-edged nature of harmony: mutual support networks empower aging women while domestic hierarchies simultaneously constrain agency.

Source: (Based on data from 10 empirical studies on rural Indonesian social psychology, 2017-2024)

Table 2 summarizes key empirical studies demonstrating that, in rural Indonesia, *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) functions as an informal welfare system but is being reconfigured by digital platforms while also

excluding migrants. *Malu* (shame) operates as a culturally specific, gendered idiom of distress, with women experiencing it more intensely, although matrilineal contexts such as West Sumatra produce different shame responses from those found in Java. Religious conservatism intensifies community surveillance of women, while youth navigate "dual identities" (conformist offline, expressive online). Finally, relational well-being and resilience among aging women are mediated by family protective factors and mutual support networks, emphasizing social connectedness over individualism.

Contradictions and gaps in the literature

Some studies presented contradictory findings, particularly regarding *gotong royong* and social exclusion. While most research emphasizes its cohesive and inclusive functions (Suwignyo, 2017); Latief (2021) found that migrants (*pendatang*) are systematically excluded from core trust networks even after decades of residence. This finding challenges the prevailing narrative of *gotong royong* as an inherently egalitarian and universally accessible practice. Instead, it reveals that mutual cooperation operates as a bounded moral economy—a set of reciprocal obligations and privileges reserved exclusively for recognized in-group members who share deep genealogical, historical, and emotional ties to the village. Migrants, regardless of their length of residence, economic contributions, or formal citizenship status, remain marked as "outsiders" whose participation in communal life is conditional, partial, and perpetually subject to scrutiny.

This exclusionary dynamic can be understood through the sociological lens of in-group versus out-group dynamics, a concept foundational to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Within rural Indonesian villages, the in-group—comprising established families with multigenerational ties to the land and local *adat* (customary law) institutions—maintains symbolic and material boundaries that distinguish its members from *pendatang*. These boundaries are reinforced through everyday practices: migrants are often absent from invitation lists for communal feasts (*kenduri*), excluded from informal deliberation circles (*ngobrol*), and overlooked in reciprocal labor exchanges (*giliran*). Even when migrants own land and have resided in the village for decades, their "outsider" status persists through subtle markers such as dialect differences, unfamiliarity with local ancestral spirits, and incomplete genealogical knowledge (Latief, 2021). This reflects broader anthropological findings that trust networks in high-context, collectivist societies rely not only on shared values but also on shared histories and kinship ties that cannot be easily acquired through length of residence alone (Mulder, 1996). The in-group, in turn, derives social cohesion and moral legitimacy precisely from its ability to define and police these boundaries, reinforcing a sense of belonging among insiders while systematically excluding outsiders. Recognizing these dynamics prevents oversimplified portrayals of rural Indonesia as uniformly harmonious and highlights how social cohesion is conditional, contingent, and inherently boundary-producing.

This exclusionary dimension of *gotong royong* has been largely overlooked in the scholarly literature, which has tended to romanticize the practice as a timeless embodiment of Indonesian collectivism and social solidarity. Such romanticization risks obscuring the power dynamics, social boundaries, and mechanisms of exclusion that operate beneath the surface of communal harmony. By framing *gotong royong* primarily as a resource for resilience and social cohesion, researchers have paid insufficient attention to its gatekeeping functions—how it demarcates belonging, reinforces social stratification, and perpetuates the marginalization of those deemed outside the moral community. These inconsistencies in the literature suggest that *gotong royong* is not a monolithic, universally benevolent force but a socially situated practice shaped by local histories, kinship structures, and intergroup relations. Recognizing this duality—its simultaneous capacity for inclusion and exclusion—is essential for a more nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of rural Indonesian social psychology.

Regional variations also challenge universal claims. The emotional weight of shame associated with missing a temple ceremony in Bali (Wikan, 1990) differs qualitatively from the shame associated with skipping a village clean-up in Sulawesi. Balinese approaches to emotional life highlight culturally specific strategies for managing shame, demonstrating how emotional regulation is embedded in local moral orders (Wikan, 1990). Yet few studies systematically compare these dynamics across ethnic groups, leaving the interaction between *adat* (customary law) and Islam underexplored. Atari et al. (2020) found that moral foundations vary significantly across cultural contexts, supporting the need for comparative research within Indonesia itself.

Several gaps were identified in the current body of knowledge. First, there is an absence of longitudinal studies tracking how relational self-construal changes over time with migration or digital exposure (Henrich et al., 2010). This gap is significant given that most psychological theories are derived from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) populations, limiting their generalizability to non-WEIRD

contexts such as rural Indonesia (Henrich et al., 2010). Second, quantitative measures of *rasa malu*, *gotong royong*, and *tahu diri* are rarely validated cross-culturally; most scales are translated from Western instruments without testing emic validity (Wardhani & Fauk, 2020). Third, intervention research is extremely limited—few studies have tested whether community-based mental health programs leveraging *gotong royong* improve outcomes compared with standard care (Wind & Komariah, 2021). Kusuma and Mahendradhata (2018) specifically call for pilot studies of shame-sensitive mental health interventions in rural Java.

Interpretation of results

The findings of this review suggest that harmony (*rukun*) and hierarchy are not merely cultural ideals but integrated psychological strategies for navigating highly transparent and interdependent social ecologies. This is particularly important because it challenges universalist models derived from WEIRD populations (Henrich et al., 2010). This is particularly important because it challenges universalist models derived from WEIRD populations (Henrich et al., 2010), which have historically dominated psychological science. By shifting away from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic psychological frameworks, this review centers indigenous Indonesian constructs—*gotong royong*, *rasa malu*, and *tahu diri*—on their own terms. This emic approach provides a high degree of cultural validity by treating these constructs not as exotic variants of Western psychological phenomena but as coherent, internally logical systems of meaning that have evolved to address the specific demands of rural Indonesian social life. Rather than measuring Indonesian behavior against imported benchmarks of psychological health or social functioning, the review privileges local categories of experience, thereby resisting the epistemic violence of imposing external standards on non-Western lifeworlds (Allwood, 2018; Enriquez, 1992).

The consistent identification of *rasa malu* as a pre-emptive, relational emotion rather than a purely negative self-evaluation emphasizes that shame can be adaptive—it signals social attunement rather than pathology (Prawira, 2019). This interpretation reframes shame as a socially intelligent response to the transparency of rural social ecologies, where one's actions are perpetually observable and subject to communal judgment. In this context, anticipating shame serves a protective function by enabling individuals to maintain social standing and avoid the severe consequences of ostracism. This finding complicates Western therapeutic assumptions that shame is inherently harmful and must be eliminated, instead suggesting that culturally grounded interventions might work with the regulatory functions of shame rather than against them.

A particularly noteworthy contribution of this review is its dialectical perspective on Indonesian psychological constructs. Rather than romanticizing traditional values as uniformly benevolent or condemning them as merely oppressive, the author presents these constructs as "double-edged swords" with simultaneous positive and restrictive consequences. For example, *gotong royong* is correctly identified as both a welfare system that provides informal social security and a tool of social exclusion that reinforces in-group/out-group boundaries. Similarly, *rasa malu* maintains social order and prevents open conflict while simultaneously suppressing mental health help-seeking and creating what Prawira (2019) terms "the silence of shame." This dialectical framing prevents simplistic moral judgments and enables a more nuanced understanding of how these psychological forces operate as adaptive mechanisms with inherent trade-offs—a critical insight for policymakers, social workers, and health professionals seeking to engage with rural communities respectfully and effectively.

However, contradictions across regions (Minang vs. Javanese gender norms) suggest that hierarchy is neither monolithic nor static. Local *adat* and religious interpretations moderate how harmony is enforced. In matrilineal Minang communities, women's public authority in managing family land does not trigger shame in the same way as it does in patrilineal Java (Blackwood, 2008), demonstrating that gender hierarchies are culturally specific rather than universal. This aligns with the decolonial premise that psychological constructs must be situated rather than essentialized (Allwood, 2018). By combining community psychology with indigenous and decolonial frameworks, this review moves beyond a mere description of customs toward an analysis of power and identity. It reveals that harmony and hierarchy are not simply cultural scripts that are passively inherited but are actively negotiated, contested, and reshaped through everyday interactions, structural changes, and the agency of individuals—particularly youth, women, and marginalized groups—who navigate, accommodate, and sometimes resist these forces. This interdisciplinary integration enriches the analysis by attending simultaneously to psychological processes, community dynamics, and broader structures of inequality, offering a more comprehensive account of rural Indonesian social life than any single disciplinary lens could provide.

The dual identities documented among youth (Nilan et al., 2021) indicate that rural Indonesians are not passive recipients of modernity. They actively negotiate, reinterpret, and hybridize traditional values. This phenomenon can be more deeply understood through sociological theories of the self. George Herbert Mead's (1934) concept of the 'looking-glass self' posits that individuals form their self-concept based on how they believe others perceive them. Rural youth internalize the imagined judgments of village elders, family members, and peers, shaping a conformist offline self. Simultaneously, digital platforms introduce new 'mirrors'—distant audiences, urban influencers, and global peers—whose perceived judgments encourage an expressive, individualistic online self. This bifurcation reflects the fundamental sociological insight that the self is not a fixed entity but a multiplicity shaped by the diversity of social mirrors available to the individual. Similarly, Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework offers a powerful lens for understanding these dual identities. Goffman conceptualizes social life as a theatrical performance in which individuals manage impressions by shifting between "front stage" and "back stage" behaviors. Rural youth perform a front-stage self in the village—one characterized by deference, modesty, and conformity to *tahu diri*—while carefully managing the impressions they project to elders and community members who hold the power to sanction or shame. Online spaces, particularly Instagram and TikTok, function as back-stage arenas where youth rehearse alternative identities, experiment with self-expression, and explore values that diverge from village norms. However, the permeability of these stages—the risk of screenshots, viral posts, and digital surveillance—means that the back stage is never entirely private, creating what Wijayanto (2022) terms a "digital panopticon." This blurring of front and back stages generates identity conflict and psychological strain, particularly for young women whose online behavior is more heavily scrutinized. By integrating Mead and Goffman, the analysis bridges psychological and sociological perspectives, revealing that the relational self is not merely a cultural construct but a dynamic, performative achievement shaped by the social audiences available in any given context.

Implications for research and practice

The implications of these findings are broad, with potential applications in theoretical research, mental health practice, development policy, and education.

In mental health, Western individual-centric therapeutic models (e.g., classic CBT focusing on changing individual core beliefs) may be ineffective or counterproductive if they pathologize normal relational concerns or encourage forms of assertiveness perceived as disrespectful (Wind & Komariah, 2021). Culturally sensitive approaches should incorporate the family system (*keluarga*), leverage *gotong royong*-inspired peer support groups, and respect local idioms of distress. For example, Stevenson and Nurmala (2019) recommend training community health workers to recognize expressions of *malu* as legitimate forms of distress rather than as moral failure.

In development and policy, projects that ignore local power structures and decision-making processes such as *musyawarah mufakat* (deliberation to reach consensus) are likely to be rejected or co-opted by local elites (Rakhmani & Tarman, 2022). A decolonial approach requires co-designing interventions with communities, respecting indigenous knowledge systems, and aligning project goals with local conceptions of collective well-being rather than imposing externally defined metrics of success.

In education, curricula promoting critical thinking and gender equality must be delivered sensitively to avoid being perceived as attacks on cultural values and parental authority (Nilan, 2017). Engaging parents and community leaders in dialogue about the goals of education can help bridge this gap. Antlöv et al. (2016) found that the Village Law has created new spaces for such dialogue by mandating participatory planning processes.

These insights offer new perspectives for decolonial psychology, which could inform future academic studies and professional practice across Southeast Asia and other collectivist societies.

Conclusion

This systematic review has elucidated the intricate social psychology of rural Indonesian communities, where life is navigated through the integrated forces of harmony and hierarchy. Through the synthesis of 52 empirical studies, three main findings emerged. First, *gotong royong* functions dually as a mechanism of social cohesion and an informal tool of social control through gossip and exclusion, demonstrating that mutual cooperation operates as a bounded moral economy that simultaneously includes and excludes. Second, *rasa malu* operates as a pre-emptive, relational emotion that maintains social order while suppressing mental health help-seeking, revealing shame as social attunement rather than pathology. Third, *tahu diri* reproduces gender and age

hierarchies, though regional variations—such as in matrilineal Minang communities—demonstrate that these structures are neither monolithic nor static.

The central contribution of this review lies in its reconceptualization of harmony and hierarchy not as static cultural constraints but as dynamic, negotiated psychological strategies through which rural Indonesians navigate social transparency, maintain belonging, and manage identity across multiple audiences. By centering indigenous Indonesian constructs on their own terms rather than measuring them against Western benchmarks, this review contributes to the broader project of decolonizing psychological science, demonstrating that emic frameworks offer coherent, internally logical systems of meaning that have evolved to address the specific demands of interdependent rural ecologies.

The findings hold significant implications for research, policy, and practice. For researchers, the imperative is clear: move beyond universalist models and engage deeply with the specific cultural logics of non-Western communities through longitudinal studies, culturally validated measures, and comparative multi-site ethnographic research across Indonesia's diverse ethnic and religious contexts. For policymakers and practitioners, the findings tentatively suggest that culturally attuned interventions in health, education, and development must be co-designed with communities, respect local decision-making processes such as *musyawarah mufakat*, and work with—rather than against—local regulatory emotions such as *rasa malu*. However, these implications remain context-dependent and require empirical validation through intervention research.

Ultimately, the future well-being of over 115 million rural Indonesians depends on cultivating a psychology that is as diverse, dynamic, and interconnected as the society itself. This review has demonstrated that harmony and hierarchy are not merely cultural ideals but integrated psychological strategies for navigating transparent and interdependent social ecologies—a finding that challenges the implicit universality of Western psychological models and contributes to a more pluralistic, globally relevant psychological science.

Declarations

Ethics declaration not applicable

This is a systematic scoping review based on existing literature and does not involve human participants or primary data collection. No ethical approval was required as the study solely synthesizes previously published peer-reviewed research. All sources have been ethically cited and respected throughout the review process.

Funding declaration

The author declares that no funding was received for the preparation of this manuscript. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. All costs associated with the literature search, analysis, and writing were borne solely by the author.

Acknowledgements: The author is thankful to all colleagues, teachers, and friends who helped and guided throughout the journey of writing this manuscript. Special thanks are extended to the editorial board of the Dynamics of Rural Society Journal for their constructive feedback and guidance.

Statement of originality and plagiarism-free

The author declares that this article is an original work that has not been published elsewhere and is free from plagiarism. All references and citations have been properly acknowledged according to APA 7th Edition standards. This manuscript has not been submitted simultaneously to any other journal for publication consideration.

Declaration of conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this research, authorship, or publication. No personal, financial, or professional relationships have influenced the design, analysis, or reporting of this systematic review. The author has full independence in presenting the findings objectively.

References

Allwood, C. M. (2018). The nature and challenges of indigenous psychologies. *Social Epistemology*, 32(3), 155–169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2018.1443252>

- Antlöv, H., Wiranata, I. G. A. W., & Astuti, P. (2016). Village governance and rural development in Indonesia: The new village law. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 44(1-2), 5–30. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685314-04401001>
- Atari, M., Haidt, J., Graham, J., Koleva, S., Stevens, S. T., & Dehghani, M. (2020). Morality beyond the WEIRD: How the nomological network of morality varies across cultures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 119(2), 366–385. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000298>
- Bennett, L. R. (2005). *Women, Islam and modernity: Single women, sexuality and reproductive health in contemporary Indonesia* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203391389>
- Blackwood, E. (2008). Matrilineal Islam and the politics of gender in West Sumatra. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 14(2), 325–342. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2008.00506.x>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.
- Central Bureau of Statistics [BPS]. (2023). Statistical yearbook of Indonesia 2023. <https://www.bps.go.id/publication.html>
- Central Bureau of Statistics [BPS] for North Gorontalo Regency. (2022). Statistical yearbook of North Gorontalo Regency 2022. Gorontalo: BPS-Statistics Indonesia. <https://gorontalo.bps.go.id/publication.html>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Enriquez, V. G. (1992). *From colonial to liberation psychology: The Philippine experience*. University of the Philippines Press.
- Geertz, C. (1961). *The religion of Java*. University of Chicago Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Doubleday.
- Gupta, R., & Azzopardi, C. (2021). Decolonizing psychology: Situating the relational self in community. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 49(3), 585–598. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22433>
- Haider, S. (2019). Moral ecology: The rhythms of community life in rural Java. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 47(2), 189–213. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685314-04702004>
- Hasan, N. (2020). The salitization of rural Indonesia. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 42(2), 223–248. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs42-2d>
- Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33(2–3), 61–83. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X>
- Kusuma, Y. S., & Mahendradhata, Y. (2018). Interpersonal relations and mental health stigma in rural Java. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 36, 23–29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2018.07.002>
- Latief, H. (2021). Inclusion and exclusion in Indonesia's rural communities: The case of migrant settlers. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 40(1), 75–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810342199426>
- Lockwood, C., Munn, Z., & Porritt, K. (2020). Qualitative research synthesis: Methodological guidance for systematic reviewers utilizing meta-aggregation. *JBIM Evidence Implementation*, 18(3), 320–329. <https://doi.org/10.1097/XEB.0000000000000220>
- Lyon, B., & Iskandar, P. (2024). Relational self and farmworker law reform: The case of Indonesia. *Legal Pluralism and Critical Social Analysis*, 56(3), 616–636. <https://doi.org/10.1080/27706869.2024.2374631>
- Mahshunah, N. R., Padmaningrum, D., & Widiyanti, E. (2024). The influence of vicarious experience and social persuasion on the self-efficacy of millennial farmers. *Jurnal Sosial Ekonomi Pertanian*, 20(3), 307–315. <https://doi.org/10.20956/jsep.v20i3.36666>
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2), 224–253. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.98.2.224>
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society*. University of Chicago Press.

- Mulder, N. (1996). *Inside Indonesian society: Cultural change in Java*. Pepin Press.
- Nelson, G., & Prilleltensky, I. (2010). *Community psychology: In pursuit of liberation and well-being* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-37008-1>
- Nilan, P. (2017). Youth, morality, and digital media in Indonesia. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(8), 1047–1063. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1287888>
- Nilan, P., Demartoto, A., & Wibowo, A. (2021). Digital duality: Youth identity and social media in rural Indonesia. *Journal of Sociology*, 57(3), 644–662. <https://doi.org/10.1177/144078332199040>
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., et al. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372, Article n71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>
- Prawira, H. (2019). Shame and silence: Gendered responses to conflict in rural Indonesia. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 22(3), 250–262. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajsp.12357>
- Rakhmani, I., & Tarman, B. (2022). Gotong royong as social infrastructure in the digital age. *South East Asia Research*, 30(1), 108–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2022.2036456>
- Riasnugrahani, M., Setiawan, T., de Jong, E., & Takwin, B. (2024). A dual pathway for understanding the relation between wellbeing and resilience. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, 11, Article 937. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03440-4>
- Setijaningrum, E., Triana, R. W., & Kassim, A. (2024). Thriving through time: Resilience and empowerment for aging women in rural Indonesia. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 26(4), Article 11. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol26/iss4/11>
- Smith, J. A., & Porath, M. (2020). Indigenous psychology in Southeast Asia: A systematic review. *Culture & Psychology*, 26(4), 679–700. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X2090724>
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333–339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>
- Stevenson, R., & Nurmala, I. (2019). Cultural scripts and expressions of distress in Indonesia. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 56(4), 632–654. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461519860287>
- Suwignyo, A. (2017). Gotong royong as social citizenship in Indonesia. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 48(3), 381–406. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463417000565>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
- Wardhani, R., & Fauk, N. K. (2020). Cultural adaptation of mental health interventions in rural Indonesia: A review. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 14, Article 34. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-020-00372-5>
- Wijayanto, A. (2022). The digital panopticon? Social media and surveillance in a Javanese village. *Media, Culture & Society*, 44(5), 865–881. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344372110406>
- Wikan, U. (1990). *Managing turbulent hearts: A Balinese formula for living*. University of Chicago Press.
- Wind, A., & Komariah, S. (2021). Community-based mental health care in Indonesia: A case for cultural safety. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 8(2), 106–108. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30486-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30486-4)