

Gratitude-Based Community Counseling Service Program In Improving Subjective Well-Being Of Aceh Students Experiencing Social Anxiety

Amelia Azizunnisa¹, Isep Zaenal Arifin², and Aep Kusnawan³

¹²³*Postgraduate Study Program in Islamic Guidance and Counseling, Sunan Gunung Djati State Islamic University, Bandung*

e-mail:ameliaazzizunisa@gmail.com

ABSTRACT. This study aims to identify the social anxiety and subjective well-being of Acehese students living away from home in Bandung City and to develop a gratitude-based community counseling program as an intervention. Using the Research and Development (R&D) model by Sugiyono, the study proceeded through the stages of problem identification, data collection, product design, expert validation, and revision. Data were gathered through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving 10 informants from the *PANGLIMA* community, consisting of its Chairperson, Members, and Alumni. The results reveal three central themes of social anxiety: (1) adaptation difficulties related to language, cultural differences, and the new environment; (2) low self-confidence accompanied by fear of negative evaluation; and (3) withdrawal from social interactions. Subjective well-being was found to be in the low-to-moderate range, characterized by limited social support, recurring negative emotions such as loneliness and stress, and unstable life satisfaction influenced by academic pressure. Based on these findings, a gratitude-based community counseling program was developed, consisting of structured gratitude exercises, self-reflection sessions, communal religious practices, and the strengthening of peer social support. The novelty of this study lies in integrating gratitude as a coping strategy within a community counseling framework to simultaneously reduce social anxiety and enhance students' subjective well-being. The program offers practical implications for improving students' adaptability, emotional resilience, and sense of belonging within their community.

Keywords: Social Anxiety, Community Counseling, Subjective Well-Being

INTRODUCTION

Students who migrate from their home regions to pursue higher education often face significant adaptation challenges, including low confidence and homesickness, which may lead to culture shock when encountering new and unfamiliar environments (Alquzairi & Rozaq, 2024; Maizan et al., 2020). Research shows that international or out-of-region students frequently experience anxiety, confusion, and emotional discomfort triggered by differences in climate, culture, and social habits, which can develop into social anxiety when adaptation is not managed well. Although initial excitement about studying at top universities is common, insufficient preparation often results in difficulties interacting with new social environments (Suwanda et al., 2024; Almukdad & Karadang, 2024).

If left unaddressed, social anxiety can persist and negatively affect students' ability to form relationships and cope with academic demands. Migrant students, including Acehese students in Bandung, are more vulnerable due to their distance from family and familiar social support systems, which contributes to loneliness, decreased self-confidence, and reduced subjective well-being (Zheng et al., 2023; Mardiyah et al., 2025). Oppedal, Keles, and Roysamb (2022) found that

perceived discrimination predicted lower subsequent subjective well-being among unaccompanied refugee youth, and that higher well-being in turn predicted reductions in perceived discrimination and ethnic identity crisis over time. Studies find that migrant students often report low subjective well-being, including dissatisfaction, unhappiness, anxiety, and lack of gratitude, as well as school environments that contribute to their resilience and well-being (OECD, 2018).

Factors influencing subjective well-being include personality, culture, religiosity, and social support (Rahmadani & Izzati, 2021). Gratitude has been shown to correlate positively with happiness, optimism, and life satisfaction, and negatively with anxiety, stress, and depression (Rama Dani et al., 2021; Dini et al., 2023). For Acehnese students, gratitude is deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions, reflecting values passed down through generations. Gratitude also functions as a coping strategy capable of strengthening resilience during stressful situations and improving subjective well-being. However, no existing research has developed a gratitude-based counseling model specifically tailored to Acehnese migrant students, making this study's focus a novel contribution.

Coping plays a crucial role in maintaining subjective well-being, especially for students experiencing social anxiety while living far from home. Effective coping, as described by Lazarus & Folkman, involves dynamic efforts to manage internal and external demands that are perceived as burdensome (Rahmadani & Izzati, 2021). Gratitude-based coping is therefore relevant for Acehnese students, who often rely on culturally embedded values to navigate stressful conditions (Novi Elisadevi et al., 2025; Ubaidah, 2025).

Social anxiety significantly impacts students' daily functioning, decreasing positive affect and increasing negative emotions such as sadness, fear, and guilt (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Social support from family, peers, and community becomes crucial in restoring emotional balance. In Bandung, the Acehnese Student Intergenerational Association (*PANGLIMA*) serves as a community that provides social support, motivation, and cultural connection through activities such as gatherings, discussions, and religious events, helping students adapt to their new environment.

To enhance the well-being of Acehnese migrant students, community counseling programs based on gratitude are needed. Community counseling emphasizes collective support and aims to improve communication skills, self-potential, and emotional resilience (Budiyo, 2022). Gratitude-based counseling can strengthen happiness, life satisfaction, and coping abilities among students experiencing social anxiety. This study aims to develop and test the effectiveness of a gratitude-based community counseling model in improving subjective well-being and reducing social anxiety among Acehnese students living away from home in Bandung.

Acehnese students were selected as research subjects because of their unique cultural, religious, and linguistic characteristics, as well as the academic motivations that bring them to Bandung. These factors create distinct adaptation challenges that influence their social and academic experiences. Therefore, this research fills an important gap by proposing a counseling intervention rooted in cultural and religious values to support the well-being of Acehnese migrant students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review represents theories related to the research topic, namely: a) *Social Anxiety*: Defined as social discomfort, fear, and anxiety in certain social situations. It can be triggered by unfamiliar situations and concerns about negative judgment from others, which can exacerbate anxiety and lower self-confidence. b) *Subjective Well-Being*: It is an individual's ability to evaluate life satisfaction and the balance between positive and negative emotions. Factors that influence subjective well-being include age, gender, education, religiosity, marital status, culture, personality, social support, and coping. c) *Gratitude as Coping*: Gratitude has a positive correlation with various aspects of subjective well-being, such as happiness, self-satisfaction, and optimism. It

also has a negative correlation with negative emotions, such as depression, stress, and anxiety. Gratitude can be a source of internal strength and positive coping when facing difficulties while living away from home.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a Research and Development (R&D) approach, as it aims to design and produce a gratitude-based community counseling service program that can be tested and implemented within the context of the Acehnese student community in Bandung. The R&D approach is considered suitable because this research not only explores phenomena but also focuses on developing an applicable counseling service model that responds to the identified needs of the community (Borg & Gall, 1983).

The research procedure follows several stages, including: (1) identifying and analyzing problems related to social anxiety and subjective well-being among Acehnese students living abroad; (2) designing a gratitude-based community counseling service program as an intervention model; (3) developing the program based on theoretical and empirical findings; and (4) validating the developed program through expert judgment and limited trials to ensure its feasibility and effectiveness.

Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation to identify the characteristics, needs, and existing conditions of the target community. The data sources consisted of the Chairperson, Members, and Alumni of the *PANGLIMA* (Aceh Student Intergenerational Association) community. Data analysis was conducted qualitatively using Miles and Huberman's model, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

Through this R&D approach, the final product of this study is a structured gratitude-based community counseling service program aimed at improving the subjective well-being of Acehnese students experiencing social anxiety while living away from home.

FINDINGS

Acehnese students living away from home in Bandung experience social anxiety and difficulty adapting to their new environment. This condition causes them to feel anxious, afraid of interacting with new people, and isolated.

Subjective well-being They tend to have low self-esteem, as evidenced by their anxious, withdrawn behavior and dissatisfaction with their lives. Researchers also found that although the *PANGLIMA* community had been established, there was no specific counseling program to address this social anxiety issue. Problem-solving tended to be individualized, with students relying on their own personal strategies.

DISCUSSION

The State of Social Anxiety among Acehnese Students Living Abroad in Bandung City

The social anxiety of Acehnese students living abroad in this study is characterized by fear or anxiety during social interactions. This condition encompasses several forms of anxiety, such as difficulty adapting, fear of negative judgment, a tendency to withdraw, and obstacles in communicating and building social networks. All of these aspects will be explained based on data obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants, principal informants, and supporting informants.

Key Informant

Social anxiety among Acehnese students living abroad is indicated by passive behavior and limited interaction, such as preferring solitude over mingling during community activities. While this behavior is not always readily apparent, findings from interviews with the head of the *PANGLIMA* community suggest that this anxiety is latent. This suggests that social anxiety can manifest in seemingly ordinary behaviors that carry profound meaning.

The cognitive model according to Clark and Wells (1995) also makes it clear that social anxiety is not always expressed explicitly in the form of total avoidance of social situations, but can appear in the form of excessive attention to oneself (self-focused attention), the belief that one will be judged negatively, and the existence of safety strategies (safety behaviors) such as not speaking or keeping a distance, to avoid embarrassment or bad judgment from others.

Informant A

Bowlby emphasized that this is related to attachment, that a safe and warm relationship with parents during the developmental period forms an attachment that becomes the basis for establishing social relationships (Guy-Evans, 2025). From the results of the researcher's interviews with informants, it can be concluded that there are indicators of social anxiety experienced by informants after being in a new environment. Difficulty in adapting or adjusting to a new environment puts pressure on interacting with new people, the lack of self-confidence experienced by informants adds to the informant's anxiety. Therefore, the condition of social anxiety experienced by informants can worsen the informant's emotional condition, and being far from parents makes informants even more lonely in a foreign country.

Informant B

Based on interviews, informant B experienced social anxiety after moving to Bandung. Initially, he felt a mixture of enthusiasm and nervousness due to being in an unfamiliar environment without close friends. This anxiety stemmed from the feeling of not knowing the people around him and the difficulty of social adjustment.

Furthermore, the informant revealed that feelings of homesickness were amplified when he was physically ill. Fatigue due to the density of college activities combined with emotional stress made the informant more mentally vulnerable. This indicates a link between suboptimal physical condition and emotional vulnerability in facing challenges while away from home. Homesickness is a feeling of sadness, longing, and anxiety due to separation from home and those closest to him. Homesickness is an individual's emotions when separated from their place of residence and the emergence of negative thoughts and emotions that arise due to unfamiliar surroundings (Sri Suryani Mimah & Oktaviani Adhi Suciptaningsih, 2024)

Informant C

From the researcher's interview with informant C, there were difficulties in interacting with classmates, differences in speaking style and language accent made it difficult for the informant to adjust, spontaneous responses that made the informant raise his voice slightly became a negative perception by his friends who considered the informant easily offended. The informant is also a sensitive person, especially regarding appearance if someone criticizes him directly, it makes him lose his self-confidence, the informant is also a person who has difficulty controlling himself, so that he is anxious about socializing and activities that can make him lose his identity.

Informant D

From an interview with informant D, the social anxiety he experienced was more related to the physical environment of his crowded residence, traffic jams, and unfamiliarity with locations and

transportation access in an unfamiliar place. The informant also felt awkward interacting with the opposite sex, lacked confidence in his appearance, and felt anxious about his limited knowledge of his hometown.

Informant E.

The informant's concern about the accent used in communication indicates a form of social anxiety in linguistic identity. Fear of negative judgment causes barriers to communication and decreases self-confidence, as discussed in chapter 2. One form of social anxiety is the informant's lack of self-confidence.

Homesickness The feelings typically felt by students living away from home were also felt by the informant: a sense of alienation and a longing for family, which typically provides a sense of security and comfort. Physical separation from the primary social environment, namely family, gives rise to emotional alienation. This also serves as a basic need for belonging and love after physiological and safety needs are met.



Figure 1 Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Based on Figure 1, after physiological needs and a sense of security, next there are social needs that informants need. (Milla, 2022) Based on the results of the interview with informant E, the researcher can conclude that the overall condition of social anxiety is more related to the difficulty of establishing relationships with friends because it is difficult to adapt to the language style, accent or dialect used, resulting in misunderstandings and confusion from the person they are talking to, the informant has difficulty building good relationships because of the limitations of the language style which is not informal or standard, causing difficulty in understanding the direction of the conversation, and the feeling of homesickness is also one of the adaptation challenges that need to be overcome by the informant because one of the basic needs is not met, namely the social need regarding internal functions such as family.

Supporting Informant

A supporting informant, an alumnus who once served as the chairman of *PANGLIMA*, revealed that he did not have direct knowledge of the current state of social anxiety among *PANGLIMA* members. This was because he rarely interacted with the current management, especially since he was busy with personal activities that prevented him from often joining activities or gatherings. According to him, the informant only learned about the difficulties of adapting from the stories of several members who directly conveyed personal problems to him. The informant also added that he was personally willing to help if any *PANGLIMA* members were experiencing difficulties or facing problems while away from home.

Subjective Well-being Conditions of Acehnese Students Living Abroad in Bandung City

This study examines the subjective well-being of Acehnese students living away from home, as measured by their levels of happiness, life satisfaction, and emotional balance in their new environment. The focus is on three aspects: life satisfaction, positive affect (happiness, gratitude), and negative affect (anxiety, stress).

Key Informant

McMillan & Chavis explained that the subjective well-being of *PANGLIMA* student members is in line with the sense of community theory, namely the feeling that community members have a sense of belonging, the feeling that each member influences one another and the group, and the shared belief that members' needs will be met through their commitment to being together (Barwin et al., 2024)

Students who share a sense of community will feel comfortable developing relationships with other members of the community, allowing them to build strong partnerships and obtain the support and information needed to solve problems. Social support has been shown to enhance a sense of belonging, reducing loneliness and improving adaptability (Barwin et al., 2024)

Interviews demonstrated that Meugang events within the *PANGLIMA* community are not merely social gatherings, but also important avenues for building solidarity and strengthening cultural identity. These activities can positively contribute to the subjective well-being of Acehnese students living abroad, ultimately supporting their mental health and success in pursuing education outside their hometown.

Informant A

The main components of the informants' subjective well-being included life satisfaction, positive affect, and low levels of negative affect. The informants' life satisfaction was driven by achieving personal goals, namely successfully pursuing education outside their hometown. Positive affect reflected feelings of joy and pride, while low levels of negative affect stemmed from their ability to accept the current situation.

According to Seligman's PERMA theory, personal achievement and the presence of meaning in experiences contribute to the informants' subjective well-being. The primary motivation for surviving and living abroad stems from strong internal support, particularly from parents. A sense of responsibility and a desire not to disappoint parents are key drivers, despite the challenges of interacting and adapting to the new environment.

Informant B

The informants' experiences of moving away from home not only presented challenges but also provided a means for developing life skills, increasing independence, and fostering a positive mindset. Hedonics emphasizes that an individual's ability to find meaning and learning in life experiences is a key factor in subjective well-being.

Informants added that one source of happiness as a student living away from home is successfully completing academic tasks previously considered difficult. Success embodies a sense of satisfaction, self-confidence, and an awareness of one's ability to be independent and develop despite being far from family. Informants view this achievement as a turning point that strengthens one's self-confidence that academic challenges can be faced independently, while also serving as a source of ongoing motivation.

Individual relationships with different people will provide different aspects of social support. There are six aspects needed for someone to feel socially supported, namely: a) *Guidance* (guidance), namely the presence of another person who provides guidance and information. Guidance is usually

provided by parents, teachers, or mentors. b) *Reliable alliance* (reliable companion), that is, where there is an individual who can be relied upon to provide real assistance. Family is usually a strong kinship. c) *Reassurance of worth* (confidence in self-worth), namely the recognition of the abilities, capabilities, and value of others. Reassurance of worth is usually given by coworkers. d) *Attachment* (attachment), namely an emotional connection with another person who provides a sense of security, such as a close friend, partner, or family. e) *Social integration* (social integration), namely a sense of belonging to a group of people who have the same things to do, interests, and hobbies. This component is usually obtained from peers. f) *Opportunity of nurturing* (the opportunity to provide care), the feeling that someone can depend on him or her for comfort. This is often present in mother-child and partner relationships.

Social support also serves as a buffer, helping individuals cope with stress. For students living away from home, this function is crucial to help them cope with difficulties adjusting to their new environment. Students with strong social networks are better able to manage negative emotions, maintain academic motivation, and assess their quality of life more positively.

Informant C

Interview results showed that the informant had a high level of life satisfaction with his academic achievements, particularly in his mastery of Arabic. This ability gave him a sense of pride and personal satisfaction, especially when he was able to help his friends.

Informant D

Based on the interview results, the informants felt neutral or quite satisfied with their lives as students living away from home. In this context, social support can be viewed from two perspectives: received social support (support actually received) and perceived social support (the individual's perception that such support is available).

Gratitude can be divided into two categories: situational and characteristic. Gratitude can be defined as a person's feeling of thankfulness for something in their life. On the other hand, gratitude can be defined as special appreciation, admiration, or respect for something received.

Factors such as religion, cultural influences, and upbringing can influence a person's tendency to feel grateful; however, gender, personality, and cognitive traits are some of the individual factors associated with gratitude.

Emmons & McCullough revealed that factors influencing gratitude are divided into three points; 1) emotions and well-being, namely when someone has a sense of gratitude, it is easy for him to feel positive emotions and subjective well-being. Gratitude has a tendency to be the basis for positive emotional experiences and subjective well-being. 2) prosocial nature, namely gratitude can show sensitivity and concern for others. 3) Religion or spirituality, namely gratitude is the same as gratitude which includes acknowledging the positive involvement of others for one's well-being. So in this case, grateful people also tend to focus on others who have a role in improving the quality of their lives with words such as luck, coincidence, god, and divine concepts. (Sanjaya et al., 2023; Diniz et al., 2023).

Informant E

Based on the results of interviews with informants, it was found that the level of subjective well-being was in a relatively balanced condition between satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The informant stated that he felt 50% satisfaction, especially related to new experiences that are not available in his hometown, such as entertainment facilities in big cities and opportunities for academic and non-academic experiences. However, on the other hand, he also experienced dissatisfaction in the same portion, although the factors behind this dissatisfaction were not explained in detail. This

indicates that the informant's subjective well-being is at a moderate level, influenced by a combination of positive and negative affect.

Supporting Informant

Based on interviews with supporting informants, who are alumni and former leaders of the *PANGLIMA* community in 2017, it was found that the subjective well-being of Acehnese students living abroad in Bandung is influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. The level of happiness and life satisfaction depends not only on individual experiences, but also on family background, including economic conditions and emotional support from home. Although the majority of Acehnese students expressed a positive attitude towards life in Bandung, dissatisfaction often arises from the academic aspect, especially when there is a mismatch between personal interests and the study program they are pursuing. Some students even try to transfer to other universities to align their fields of study with their interests.

Efforts to address these issues are carried out through active communication, seeking joint solutions, and utilizing the *PANGLIMA* community secretariat facilities as a space for gathering and mutual support. Economic factors are also a factor that can influence a person's subjective well-being. Changes in income can cause a person's subjective well-being to fluctuate. A decrease in income has the consequence of increasing stress in individuals, meaning that people with high or relatively established status are more consistently happy than those with low economic status.

A Gratitude-Based Community Counseling Service Program to Improve the Subjective Well-Being of Acehnese Students Experiencing Social Anxiety in Bandung City

Based on the results of interviews with key informants regarding the role of the *PANGLIMA* community for Acehnese students living abroad, information was obtained that the existence of the *PANGLIMA* community has a very significant role in supporting the social and emotional life of Acehnese students living abroad in Bandung. Informants emphasized that the moments of togetherness presented by this community are able to replace the family atmosphere usually felt in their hometown. Activities such as eating sahur and breaking the fast together, celebrating Islamic holidays, and carrying out collective culinary activities such as cooking and eating together, become a means of building a sense of togetherness and reducing loneliness. Informants revealed that the atmosphere of togetherness created provides a more pleasant feeling than being with the nuclear family, due to the dynamics of warm and joking group interactions.

In addition to formal activities, the *PANGLIMA* community also has informal routines, including casual get-togethers or hangouts after class. In these informal forums, topics of conversation often turn to future planning, such as job prospects after graduation, the choice of returning to Aceh or settling abroad, and sharing ideas and career plans.

Based on the results of interviews that researchers have conducted with key informants, primary informants and supporting informants, the activities that have been carried out both formally and informally are only to strengthen the sense of family for Acehnese students who live abroad, establish positive social relationships between community members and can create a sense of emotional security for Acehnese students who live abroad.

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