



CHILDHOOD ADVERSITIES AND RESILIENCE AS PREDICTORS OF SUICIDAL IDEATION AMONG UNDERGRADUATES OF NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA

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Abstract

Thoughts of self-harm are precursor to the actual act of suicide. Such thoughts are caused by many factors but in this study, the role of childhood adversities and resilience were examined. Three hundred and fifty students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka were randomly selected from three faculties. Their ages range from 17 -25 (M=20.2 years, SD= 1.3) gender: girls consisted of 183 and boys 160. Three instruments were used for the study namely: The Child Abuse and Trauma Scale, Brief Resilience Scale for Adolescents and Suicide Ideation Scale. Cross sectional survey design and multiple regression statistics were employed. The ANOVA summary showed these determinants were significant at $F (df 4; 349) = F -3.130$. The regression co-efficient table showed that only emotional abuse significantly predicted suicidal ideation at $.12 P < .05$. Other independent factors were not significant predictors of suicidal ideation. Based on the findings, the researchers recommended approaches that factors that cause or contribute to childhood adverse experiences should be avoided in order to mitigate suicide ideation.

Keywords: Childhood adversities, Resilience, Predictors Suicide, Ideation.

Introduction

Increasing suicidal action in Nigeria is an existential threat to humanity in this contemporary time. The prevalence is more dominant at early and middle adulthood (Mars,



et al 2019). People do not just commit suicide; they take a long period of time to think about it. It takes a careful and intimate individual to notice an individual who is engaging in ruminating suicidal thoughts. Suicidal ideation sometimes graduates to the actual suicide. The thought is often neglected and attributed to part of life hassles by close associates. The neglect may be a result of the belief and tradition in African cultures that one killing himself/herself is an aberration (Uchendu, Ijeomone, & Nwachokor, 2019; Lester & Akande, 1994). That may have been a reason for the increase in suicide rate in Nigeria. According to Alabi, Ayinde, and Abdulmalik (2014), suicide is the second leading cause of death among Nigerian undergraduates. WHO (2000) postulated that the act of committing suicide, is not a disease but mental disorders are frequently found to be associated with it. The causes of the rising suicidal behavior have not been established hence the need to explore the role of childhood adversities and resilience on its occurrence.

Suicide action is an end result of repetitive, self-defeating and ruminating thought about self. Its prevalence among Nigerian undergraduates is high. According to Ogunleye, Azikiwe, Aroso, Tenibiaje and Solomon, (2019) about 80 undergraduate students of Nigeria universities committed suicide in 2018. Social media and newspaper publications are awash with suicide incidences nationwide. Suicidal ideation and suicide act is engaged in by people in other developmental stages especially early and middle adults as well as late adolescents phase. The high rate of ideation among adolescents may be related to the concept of identity versus role confusion (Erickson, 1968). At this stage of adolescents' lives, they place high premium on social evaluation and myriads of choices to make hence may be exposing them to extreme thoughts.

WHO (2000) noted that suicide thoughts usually precede successful suicide acts. It has three stages/trajectories, which entail that successful identification of stage one or two is an important step in fashioning help and intervention mechanism for prevention. The three stages are as follows: Stage one: ·Suicidal ideation, which refers to thoughts of engaging in



behavior aimed at ending one's life. Stage two: Suicidal plan, which refers to the formulation of a specific method and preparation towards ending his/her own life. Stage three: Suicidal attempt, which refers to engagement in potentially self-injurious behaviour with some degree of expressed intent to die.

Suicide has been associated with a lot of factors depression, alcohol abuse, antisocial behavior, mental illness, sexual and physical abuse, poor peer relationship, suicidal behavior among peers, family discord, and family history of suicide, broken homes, and social contagion are the predominant risk factors (Bridge, Goldstein, & Brent, 2006). With these factors above, it is important to assess other predictor variables that may be responsible for suicidal ideation/ behavior such as childhood adversities and resilience.

Childhood adversities entail negative experiences an individual had as a kid while growing up. Child adversities cut across three major areas such as: physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. In this study, it was assessed retrospectively; that is, account of childhood adverse experiences. Burgermeister (2007) opined that childhood adversity refers to the perception of negative events that have occurred during childhood. These events which are outside the control of the child, have the potential to impede or alter normal development, and cause harm or the potential for harm along with stress and suffering. According to Boivin and Hertzman (2012), early childhood is a sensitive period in human development during which the brain, especially the circuitry governing emotion, attention, self-control and stress, is shaped by the interplay of the child's genes and experiences. As children grow, the biological and environmental factors that determine their development become increasingly intertwined. Thus, early adversity and later developmental health are linked through the structural and functional development of specific brain and nervous system circuits, from executive function to responses to stress (Nwafor, 2014).



Brain development processes are, in part, governed by complex gene-environment interactions that affect the expression of genes. By gene-environment interaction, it means that (multiple) genes convey a general susceptibility that may result in a negative outcome depending on the child's experience of environmental stressors. The experience may become imprinted in the individual's brain and subsequently affect development outcome such as: identity formation, adjustment to environmental needs and career choice. Individuals exposed to adverse childhood experiences tend to be less equipped to take challenges when compared to others (Boivin & Hertzman, 2012). The early negative experiences may predispose the victim to engage frequently in suicidal thoughts.

On the other hand, resilience refers to an individual's ability to successfully adapt to life tasks in the face of social disadvantage or highly adverse conditions (Southwick, Douglas-Palumberi, & Pietrzak, 2014). It is also a consistent quality of an individual that allows him/her to quickly recover or bounce back in the event of negative experience (Salami, 2010). According to APA (2014) resilience is one's ability to bounce back from a negative experience with competent functioning. It is found in the average individual and it can be learned and developed by virtually anyone. As individual differences influence human behavior, the ability of an individual to successfully cope with negative challenges of living may intricately depend on individual difference. The personality differences may be responsible for people's resilience. It implies that different people's resilience and coping abilities will not be the same. No two people have the same level of resilience.

Some researchers have made hypothetical assumptions on the origin, causes, sustenance and consequences of suicide ideation and behavior. Such theoretical assumptions include the Joiner (2009) Interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behavior, O'Connor (2011) Integrated motivational-volitional model Klonsky & May (2015) three step theory of suicide ideation, which was adopted as theoretical framework for this study. Three step theory of suicide ideation postulated three core tenets: First, the theory hypothesized that



suicidal ideation results from the combination of pain usually psychological pain and hopelessness (which in this study is likened to childhood adversities). Second, among those experiencing pain and hopelessness, connectedness is a key protective factor against escalating ideation. Third, the theory views the progression from ideation to attempts as facilitated by dispositional, acquired, and practical contributors (in this study they are likened to resilience) to the capacity to attempt suicide. Empirical evidences have confirmed that these theoretical assumptions are critical for suicidal ideation and attempt.

In a survey study of 211 healthy adults, Bahk, Jang, Choi and Lee (2017) found that four areas of childhood adversities; childhood sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and childhood neglect directly predicted suicidal ideation respectively. Also, in a meta-analysis of 68 studies, Angelakis, Gillespie and Panagioti (2019) found that different types of childhood maltreatment, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse were related to two- to three-fold increased risk for suicidal ideation and attempts among adults. Harford, Yi, and Grant (2014) in a U.S national study examined associations among childhood physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse. The results revealed that Childhood physical, emotional, and sexual abuse was directly related to the risk for violent behaviors to self and others. Both internalizing and externalizing psychiatric disorders impact the association between childhood abuse and violence.

King et al (2019) studied relationships between suicidal ideation or attempts and family environment, participants' characteristics, and various risk behaviors among 1,285 randomly selected children and adolescents, aged 9 through 17 years. The results showed that compared with participants with suicidal ideation only, attempters were significantly more likely to have experienced stressful life events, to have become sexually active, to have smoked more than one cigarette daily, and to have a history of ever having smoked marijuana. After adjusting for socio-demographic characteristics, a statistically significant association was found between suicidal ideation or attempt and stressful life events, poor



family environment, parental psychiatric history, low parental monitoring, low instrumental and social competence, sexual activity, marijuana use, recent drunkenness, current smoking, and physical fighting.

Thompson, Kingree and Lamis (2018) found in a sample of 9,421 participants from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health who participated in four waves of assessments spanning 13 years that eight different adverse childhood experience ACEs such as: physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse, neglect, parental death, incarceration, alcoholism, and family suicidality were significantly related to suicidal ideation and suicide attempts in adulthood.

However, George and Moolman (2017) investigated the relationship between resilience and adolescent suicidal ideation among four hundred and ninety five (495) secondary learners in South Africa and found that high resilience predicted lower suicide ideation risk among the teenagers. In the same vein, Roy, Sarchiapone and Carli (2007) examined resilience in relation to attempting suicide among 100 abstinent substance dependent patients and the results showed that patients who had attempted suicide (N = 41) had significantly lower resilience scale scores than patients who had never attempted suicide (N = 59). This suggested the possibility that low resilience may be a risk factor for suicidal behavior

Kamble (2015) investigated resilience, suicidal ideation and depression among seventy adolescents. Analysis of data from Bharthiar university resilience scale and suicidal ideation scale revealed that there is significant correlation between resilience and suicidal ideation. Seigmann, Teismann, Fritsch, Forkman, Glaesmer, Zhang, Brailovskaia & Margraf (2017), in a cross-cultural study examined association between depression and suicide ideation among 2,687 Chinese students and 601 German students. Social support, satisfaction with life, self-efficacy, psychosocial stress resistance, and positive mental health were considered as resilience factors moderating the association between



depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation within both samples. Positive mental health moderated the impact of depressive symptoms on suicidal ideation in German and Chinese students. Life satisfaction moderated the impact of depressive symptoms on suicidal ideation in German students. Social support moderated the impact of depressive symptoms on suicide ideation in Chinese students.

From the theoretical and empirical evidences, there is need to jointly study childhood adversities, resilience and suicidal ideation.

Hypotheses

The current study hypothesized as follows:

- Childhood adversities (physical, emotional and sexual) will significantly predict suicidal ideation among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
- Resilience will predict suicidal ideation among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Method

Participants: three hundred and fifty (350) undergraduate students of faculty of Arts, Social Sciences and Education in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka participated in the study. They comprised of males (167, 47.7%) and females (183, 52.3%). Their ages range from 17-25 (M=20.2 years, SD= 1.3).



Instruments

Three instruments were used in the study, namely: Suicide Ideation Scale, Brief Resilience Scale and Child Abuse and Trauma Scale.

Suicide Ideation Scale is a 19 items scale developed by Becks, Kovacs and Weisman (1979). With scoring format of none = 0, Weak = 1, Moderate or Strong = 2. The Authors of the scale recorded the internal consistency for the Secure subscale Cronbach alpha =.79.

Brief Resilience Scale for Adolescents was developed by Smith, et al (2008). It has six (6) items, which were scored in five point likert format ranging from: Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree=2, Neutral =3, Agree =4, Strongly Agree=5. The original Author found Cronbach Alpha of .72.

The child abuse and trauma scale (CATS) was developed by Sanders & Becker -Lausen (1995). The instrument measures the retrospective perception of frequency of traumatic stress. The overall alpha reliability for the measure was high, Alpha reliabilities were acceptable for home atmosphere, neglect subscale α .86 physical punishment α .63 and sexual abuse subscales α .76.

Procedure

Three hundred and fifty undergraduates were administered with a questionnaire at Nnamdi Azikiwe digital library during university-wide computer based general studies examinations. Permission to administer questionnaire to students at the venue of the computer based general studies examinations was approved by Deputy Librarian in charge of digital library. Students were addressed collectively after their examinations. It took them about five minutes to complete the questionnaire. Students from three faculties (Arts, Education and Social sciences) participated in the study. Informed consents of participants were freely obtained before the administration of the questionnaire.



Results

Predictors	R ²	Df	F	Std error Of Estimate	β	Sig
	.035	4(345)	3.130	5.77804		
Physical abuse					.084	.133
Sexual abuse					.058	.284
Emotional abuse					.124**	.024
Resilience					.030	.571

**P<.01,

The three hypotheses were tested with multiple regression analysis using enter method showed that the variables contributed to 2.4 % of the variance in the suicidal ideation. The results are presented as follows: physical abuse did not predict suicidal estimate = .084, $p=.01$; sexual abuse did not predict suicide, estimate = .058, $p= .28$. However, emotional abuse predicted suicidal estimate = .124, $p=.024$ while resilience did not relate to suicidal ideation = -.030, $p =.571$.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study examined the predictive roles of childhood adversities (sexual abuse, emotional abuse and physical abuse) and resilience on suicidal ideation. Generally, two dimensions of childhood adverse experiences (physical and emotional abuse) and resilience did not predict suicidal ideation. The results of first hypothesis were inconsistent with earlier findings of Angelakis and Panagioti (2019), Harford, Yi and Grant (2014) and Thompson, Kingree and Lamis (2018). However, results were in agreement with the findings (e.g. Bahk, Jang, Choi & Lee, 2017).

Also, the result of second hypothesis disagreed with the findings of Kambl (2015) and George and Moolman (2017). However, some findings were in tandem with current result: (Roy, Sarchiapone & Carli, 2007; Seigmann, 2017). Theoretically, the results were in partial



agreement with the assumptions of Klonsky & May (2015) three step theory of suicide ideation which posited that suicidal ideation results from the combination of pain usually psychological pain and hopelessness (which in this study is likened to childhood adversities).

Additionally, the other assumption of the theory that the progression from ideation to attempts as facilitated by dispositional, acquired, and practical contributors (which was likened to resilience) to the capacity to attempt suicide.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of the study revealed the sensitivity of emotional wellbeing in individual existence. Its critical nature may have resulted to the fact that only emotional abuse predicted suicidal ideation among the tested factors. However, sexual and physical abuses were not related to suicidal ideation. Equally, resilience did not have any relationship with suicidal ideation. The study has both theoretical and practical implication.

Theoretically, the study has explained the relationship among childhood adverse experience and resilience on suicidal ideation. This study has also added to the body of knowledge on that construct. Practically, the result has implication for adolescents and early adults well being. The result showed that emotional abuse has significant relationship with suicidal ideation. Thus, parents, guardians, teachers, caregivers and other significant persons in the life of children and adolescents need to pay attention and be sensitive to their needs as that have shown to be critical to the development of emotional state. The finding of the study calls for further concerted effort to prevent the increasing menace of suicidal ideation. Emotional well being of children, adolescents and adults must be taken care of always.



Conclusion

Based on findings of this study and theoretical underpinning of three step theory, the authors recommend that factors that cause or contribute to childhood adverse experiences should be avoided to prevent and mitigate suicide ideation. The fact that repeated ideations/thoughts lead to attempts serve as a wake-up call for preventive measure to be put into place. Vigorous campaigns against behaviours or conducts that constitute emotional abuse should be taken very serious. This is due to the fact that life lost cannot be regained.

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