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Individual Characteristics predisposing undergraduate students to Suicide Ideation in the University of Cape Coast, Ghana.

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of the study was to find out the individual characteristics predisposing undergraduate students to suicide ideation in the University of Cape Coast.

Methodology: A mixed methods approach was used in which a quasi-experimental research design, specifically, the pre-test, post-test and control group design was combined with a qualitative phase. A total of 30 undergraduate students from four colleges of the University of Cape Coast in the Central Region of Ghana were non- randomly assigned to two treatment groups Individual Psychology and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (IP and CBT) and one control group. Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation was used for the collection of data for the study. To assess the individual characteristics that predispose undergraduate students of UCC, Chi square test for association was employed as an appropriate tool for the analysis.

Findings: The study revealed that age, gender, program of study and level of study of the students have significant association with students who are predisposed to suicide ideation.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: It was recommended that constant screening of suicide ideation be done as part of the University's program to be organised by the Counselling Center. This is to help educate and create more awareness on suicide ideation and bring in more people per the screening to benefit from counselling therapies which in turn will help reduce suicide ideation on our campus.

Keywords: *Suicide ideation, Suicide, Undergraduate students, Individual Characteristics.*

Introduction

A few years back in 2000 we saw suicide dominating newspaper headlines, television stations and the media in general. With some calling for national prayers to exorcise Ghana from any bad, this created fear and panic. Some years down the line, 2018 the situation has not become any better but rather it has grown worse.

Suicide is a public health issue in the world and a leading cause of preventable deaths. In the United States of America, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2012) reports that for every completed suicide, young adults between the ages of 15 and 24 have attempted suicide approximately 100 to 200 times. It is important in the pursuit of suicide prevention to recognize the causes of suicide ideation and to recognise high-risk populations. Knowledge of risk factors that reduce suicidal behaviour and protective factors that improve resilience and coping skills are key components of suicide prevention. Suicidality or suicidal behaviour occurs in a spectrum that ranges from the concept or intentions of suicide, to conversations linked to suicide, suicide attempts and eventually suicide (CDC, 2012).

Risk factors for suicide consist of characteristics or conditions that contribute to the risk that a person may take his or her life (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention [AFSP], 2014). Lamis, Malone and Ellis (2010) point out that oftentimes mental health facilities and suicide prevention centers are unable to detect college students most at risk for suicide and that only a small percentage of those individuals experiencing suicidal behaviour have contact with mental health services. Therefore, recent emphasis has been on assessing suicide proneness by focusing on risk factors (Lamis et al., 2010). AFSP emphasizes that potential for suicide is greater when multiple risks are present. Risk factors can be based on individual, relational or environmental characteristics.

According to AFSP (2014), over 90% of the people who die by suicide have a mental disorder at the time of their death. In many cases these disorders have not been acknowledged, diagnosed or professionally treated (AFSP, 2014).

Individual risk factors published by the CDC (2012) that raise the possibility of suicide include: past suicide attempt(s), a history of mental illnesses, misuse of alcohol and narcotics, feelings of hopelessness, physical illness, loneliness, and impulsive or violent tendencies. The CDC (2012) estimates that in the past, approximately 20 percent of suicide-dying individuals have attempted suicide. One of the most reliable predictors of potential suicidal behaviour, particularly in the adolescent population, is a prior suicide attempt (Van Orden, Witte, Braithwaite, Selby, & Joiner, 2010).

The purpose of the study was to find out the individual characteristics that predisposes undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast to suicide ideation. Based on the above, the current research focused on answering the research question below in order to guide the conduct of the study:

Research Question: What are the individual characteristics among the undergraduate suicidal students which predispose them to suicide ideation?

Research Methods

Specifically, this study rests on the pragmatic philosophy, which placed emphasis on the use of all approaches to understand the research problem other than on the methods. A major principle underpinning the pragmatic epistemology is that knowledge is always based on experiences. One's perception of the world influences the individual's social experience (Morgan, 2014). Pragmatism does not consider or view knowledge as reality rather, it is constructed with a purpose to better understand and manage one's existence and take part in the world (Goldkuhl, 2012). According to Goles and Hirschheim (2000), pragmatists orient themselves towards solving practical problems in the real world. Pragmatists believe that the process of acquiring knowledge is a continuum rather than two opposing and mutually exclusive poles of either objectivity or subjectivity.

The research approach used for this study was the mixed methods approach. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) explained mixed methods research "as the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or languages into a single study" (p. 17). Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2015) further stated that the mixed methods design is a combination of the quantitative and qualitative methods in any way suitable to address a particular research question. Specifically, the embedded mixed methods approach was used in this study. Mixed methods research is an approach to inquiry involving collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, integrating the two forms of data and using distinct designs that may involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks. For the quantitative phase, the study employed the quasi-experimental design, specifically, pre-test, post-test and control group. Data in qualitative study is richer in a language sense. The subjectivity of the researcher and of those being studied is a part of the research process. Researcher reflections on the actions and observations in the field; their impressions, irritations, feelings and so on, become data in their own right, forming part of the interpretation Barron (1999). Therefore, the researcher employed the qualitative aspect to allow participants express themselves and better explain those individual characteristics which predispose them to suicide ideation. An adopted form of Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation and an interview guide developed and vetted by experts were used in data collection

Population

The total number of regular undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast is 18,699. This includes students in all the five colleges of the University College: Humanities and Legal Studies, College of Health and Allied Sciences, College of Education Studies and College of Agriculture and Natural Sciences. The target population was undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast and the accessible population was those who answered the screening inventory.

The multi-stage sampling technique was employed for the study. In the first stage, the purposive sampling was used to the University of Cape Coast for the study. From the five colleges of undergraduate students of the University, the researcher purposively selected four colleges of regular undergraduate students since undergraduate students of CODE, the fifth

College, do not stay on campus but are scattered geographically and the researcher may not have access to them. From the colleges, one faculty each was purposively selected. Again, using the same purposive sampling method, four departments were chosen for the study. The targeted respondents from each of the department were subjected to the screening of the Beck's Scale of Suicide Ideation. A non-random criterion was then used to select 30 respondents, which means not every individual had the chance of being included in the study, from the various colleges based on the students that responded to the items on the Beck's Scale for Suicide Ideation.

The inclusion criteria were as follows;

- The person should be an undergraduate regular student of the University of Cape Coast.
- The person should be a student of any of the four colleges of the University indicated by the study.
- The student could be of any level of study.
- The student could be of either gender.
- The student should undergo screening to obtain a total score ranging from 19-38 to qualify for the intervention.

The targeted respondents from each of the department were subjected to the screening of the Beck's Scale of Suicide Ideation. A non-random criterion was then used to select 30 respondents from the various colleges based on the students that responded to the items on the Beck's Scale for Suicide Ideation. The total sample size was 30. After the quantitative data collection, a convenience sampling was used to select eight (8) participants to be interview for the qualitative analysis and interpretation. For the qualitative phase of this study, the convenience sampling method was used to select eight (8) participants for the study. This was guided by Creswell (2014) who stated that up to ten (10) participants are enough in a phenomenological study. Therefore, four (4) participants were conveniently sampled from each treatment group, that is, IP and CBT, adding up to eight (8), to be interview for the qualitative analysis and interpretation.

The researcher sought to determine possible individual characteristics among the undergraduate students which predispose them to suicide ideation. To assess this, Chi square test for association was employed as an appropriate tool for the analysis. The Chi-Square statistic is most commonly used to evaluate Tests of Independence when using a cross tabulation (also known as a bivariate table). Cross tabulation presents the distributions of two categorical variables simultaneously, with the intersections of the categories of the variables appearing in the cells of the table. The Test of Independence assesses whether an association exists between the two variables by comparing the observed pattern of responses in the cells to the pattern that would be expected if the variables were truly independent of each other. Calculating the Chi-Square statistic and comparing it against a critical value from the Chi-Square distribution allows the researcher to assess whether the observed cell counts are significantly different from the expected cell counts. The results are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1**Table 1: Results of Chi Square Test**

Individual characteristics	Chi-square (χ^2)	Degree of Freedom (df)	Likelihood Ratio	Linear-by-Linear Association	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Rks
Gender	2.667 ^{a*}	28	3.452	1.278	.008	Assoc
Age	4.889 ^{a*}	27	5.684	.067	.006	Assoc
College	8.889 ^{a*}	26	11.367	2.773	.017	Assoc
Programme of study	5.000 ^{a*}	27	4.601	.151	.015	Assoc
Level	6.667 ^{a*}	27	7.548	.228	.004	Assoc

Source: Field Data (2020).

(n=30)

Rks*= Remarks

Table 1 presents the Chi-square test of association of the individual characteristics among the undergraduate students which predispose them to suicide ideation. The results indicate that all of the demographic characteristics (age, gender, program of study and level of study) of the students have significant association with students who are predisposed to suicide ideation. For instance, gender of the students gave a result to mean that it influences on the suicide ideation of the students χ^2 (df=28) = 2.667, $p < .05$.

For Age, χ^2 (df=27) = 4.889, $p < .05$; For College χ^2 (df=26) = 8.889, $p < .05$; For Program of Study χ^2 (df=27) = 5.000, $p < .05$; and for Level χ^2 (df=27) = 6.667, $p < .05$. Hence, it was found that all the individual characteristics (Gender, Age, College, Programme of Study and Level of study) of undergraduate students of UCC predispose them to suicide ideation.

From the interview sessions,

IP 3 had this to say

The background of the individual (student in this case) is important to me especially when it comes to thinking suicidal- Financial background to be precise.

CBT 1 had this to say

For me, financial and academic issues contribute a lot to predisposing the individual to suicide ideation. Sometimes situations are hard at home already and they have managed a little for you to come to school with. Its not easy at all at all.

IP 2 also said this:

I think financial issues contribute a great deal and predisposes the individual to think suicidal

Form the interview, financial and academic problems expose students to think suicidal.

Discussion

Suicide does not occur in a social vacuum. Family, gender and school history of suicide increases risk of suicide; this effect is independent of familial history of mental disorder, and is thereby partly suggestive of a social transmission effect. Exposure to suicidal behaviour of family or friends is also associated with these behaviours in adolescents. Maternal suicidal behaviour could be more strongly associated with off spring suicidal behaviour than is paternal suicidal behaviour, and children are more likely to be affected by parental suicidal behaviour than are adolescents or adults.

The results of this study also indicate that all of the demographic characteristics have significant association with students who are predisposed to suicide ideation. The following are the demographics;

- i. age,
- ii. gender,
- iii. college and
- iv. level of the students

For instance, gender of the students gave a result to indicate that, it influences on the suicide ideation of the students χ^2 (df =28) = 2.667, $p < .05$. According to the results of the interview sessions, financial, academic and relationship issues were also outlined as some factors which predispose the individual to suicide ideation and these factors are consistent with literature. According to Schwartz (2006) University and college students are among the groups of people affected more with suicide ideation and its related issues than the general population. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students. This may be as a result of the range of issues and challenges faced by university students, such as academic and social pressures, adaptation to a new social environment, and financial burdens (Sreeramareddy, Shankar, Binu, Mukhopadhyay, Ray, Meneze, 2007; Cliniciu, 2013; Goodman, Huang, Wade, Kahn, 2003) and this confirms an aspect of the results. Moreover, common risk factors for suicide such as mental and substance use disorders are very common among university students (Dachew, Bisetegn, & Gebremariam, 2015; Cliniciu 2013). Suicide thoughts, also known as suicide ideation, are considered to be an important precursor to suicide (Arria, O'Grady, Caldeira, & Vincent, 2009).

The above studies have outlined some underlying factors that predispose students to suicide ideation and they confirm results from the interview session. Moreso, the other aspect of the findings of the study indicated that the age of the students, gender (that is, whether male or female), the program one studies at the University and the level the undergraduate students find

themselves are part of individual characteristic that predispose these undergraduate students to suicide ideation. However, in a longitudinal study by Nam, Hilimire, Jahn, Lehmann and DeVylder (2018) on predictors of suicide ideation among college students, they reported that age, gender, sexual orientation showed no statistically significance association with suicide ideation. A reason that may account for this could be the differences in the setting of the study as well as the characteristics of the participants. The researcher therefore concluded that, age, gender, level of study and programme of study, financial, academic and relationship issues all predispose undergraduate students of University of Cape Coast to suicide ideation.

Conclusion

Gender, age, level of study and colleges of students influenced suicide ideation among regular undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast who are suicidal. Again, financial, academic and relationship issues were also accounted as being some other factors that influence suicide ideation among undergraduate students of University of Cape Coast. It was therefore recommended that Counselling Day Out should be organized regularly by the Counselling Centre and the Department of Guidance and Counselling of the University in the various halls and hostels, department and faculties, to educate and create awareness on suicide ideation and how students can be helped out using counselling therapies. Also, this study may help generate discussions among major stakeholders in education on the need to introduce mental health services in the universities and other public institutions to help deal with the problem.

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