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SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP AND PERSONALITY TRAITS AS CORRELATES OF SUICIDE RISK IN YOUNG ADULTS

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Abstract

This study investigated social relationship and personality traits as correlates of suicide risk in young adults. Fifty (50) participants aged between 19 and 30 years were selected from the Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital, Enugu State. Suicide Risk Questionnaire, Big Five Inventory (BFI), Personality Traits, and Social Connectedness Questionnaires were used for data collection. Results showed that social relationship was negatively and significantly correlated with suicide risk, $r(50) = .36$, $p < .05$. Of all personality dimensions, only neuroticism showed a positive significant relationship with suicide risk, $r(50) = .56$, $p < .01$. Other personality traits showed negative but non-significant correlations with suicide risk: extraversion ($r(50) = -.185$, $p > .05$), agreeableness ($r(50) = -.229$, $p > .05$), conscientiousness ($r(50) = -.187$, $p > .05$), and openness ($r(50) = -.25$, $p > .05$). Based on the findings, it was recommended that family and peer support should be strengthened to boost self-efficacy in overcoming vulnerability to suicidal ideation and behavior during emerging adulthood.

Keywords: Suicide risk, Social relationship, Personality traits

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Introduction

National statistics have shown a noticeable increase in the cases of suicide across Nigeria. People continue to jump off the Lagos Third Mainland Bridge into the lagoon or ingest “Sniper,” a disinfectant and all-purpose cleaner, which has turned into a popular and easily available poison, to commit suicide. In a country where suicide is erroneously associated with spiritual causes, this trend is undoubtedly challenging. The recent deaths of individuals such as Bimbo Ogbonna, Adetutu Adedokun, and a popular chartered accountant with Globacom, who committed suicide at her residence in Osapa London, Lekki, Lagos on Friday, 27 May 2022, have raised a pressing question: why is suicide becoming more common in Nigeria?

In Nigeria, cases of suicide have increased exponentially among the populace, especially among youths (Kennebeck, Bonin, Brent, Blake & Bolomon, 2021). The number of individuals experiencing suicidal thoughts is rising drastically. Some of these individuals have successfully executed suicide, whereas others have only entertained the thought without acting on it

(Gronvold, Aabland & Ekeberg, 2020). Estimating the number of people that have engaged in suicidal behavior in Africa might be difficult due to poor statistical systems. However, non-fatal suicidal behaviors are much more frequent and are estimated to occur 10–20 times more often than actual suicides. The estimated global annual prevalence of self-reported suicide attempts is approximately 3 per 1,000 adults, and about 2.5% of the population makes at least one suicide attempt during their lifetime (Borges, Nock, Haro & Hwang, 2010).

It is estimated that between 22% and 38% of adolescents have thought about suicide at some point in their lives (Borges & Bromet, 2008). This alarming trend motivated the present researcher to investigate the risk factors that lead to suicidal behavior. Therefore, this study sought to identify possible variables that correlate with suicide risk among young adults, with a view to developing preventive measures—particularly focusing on social relationships and personality traits.

Suicide is defined as the act of intentionally terminating one's own life (Shneidman, John & Sons, 1985). According to the World Health Organization (2020), approximately 1.53 million people die from suicide annually, while 10–20 times more attempt it globally. These figures represent an average of one death every 20 seconds and one attempt every one to two seconds. Suicide risks are characteristics of a person or their environment that increase the likelihood of dying by suicide. Such risk factors include psychopathology, aggression, impulsivity, family conflict, social isolation, unemployment, and physical illness (Borowsky et al., 2001).

Psychopathology also known as abnormal psychology is the study of mental disorders and maladaptive behaviors. It has been linked to suicidal risk among adolescents and young adults who experience emotional and peer-related problems (Judit & Balazs, 2005). According to Shaffer, Fisher, Parides, Flory, and Gould (1996), about 90% of suicidal adolescents and young adults have at least one psychiatric disorder.

Aggression has also been found to relate to suicidality in mood disorders. Straub et al. (1992) compared groups of depressed women with suicidal ideation, violent suicide attempts, non-violent suicide attempts, and depression without suicidality, and found that aggression scores differentiated between groups. Similarly, Mann et al. (1999) found higher lifetime aggression rates among suicide attempters compared to non-suicidal patients. Impulsivity, acting without adequate thought or conscious judgment has also been highlighted for its role in facilitating suicidal acts among those with suicidal ideation (Mann et al., 2015; Bryan & Rudd, 2006). Consequently, the American Association of Suicidology (2013) identified impulsivity as both a chronic and acute suicide risk factor.

Family conflict, defined as persistent struggle or disagreement among family members has also been identified as a risk factor for suicidal behavior (Yug & Shotao, 2018). Freudenstein et al.

(2011) reported that adolescents with severe suicidal behavior often perceived their parents as less caring and more overprotective compared to their peers with mild or no suicidal tendencies. Likewise, social isolation, unemployment, and physical illness have all been implicated in the literature as predictors of suicidal behavior (Lawrence, Martin & Mathias, 2016; Whitlock, 1986; Kposowa, 2001). Social isolation, in particular, has been described as one of the most powerful and consistent predictors of suicide across diverse populations (Conwell, 1997; Joiner & Van Orden, 2008).

Social relationships refer to the quality of social interaction among individuals. Studies (Smith & Christakis, 2008; Walen & Lachman, 2000) have shown that poor quality social relationships marked by conflict and low emotional support are strongly associated with suicide risk. Furthermore, personality traits have been identified as internal predispositions that influence behavior and vulnerability to mental health challenges. According to the Five-Factor Model by Costa and McCrae (1992), personality can be captured under five broad domains extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness all of which can influence suicide risk differently (Brezo, Paris & Turecki, 2005).

Against this background, the present study aims at investigating whether social relationships and personality traits will correlate with suicide risk. Specifically, it seeks to understand why some individuals who appear socially connected still experience suicidal tendencies and to identify personality traits most strongly linked with suicide risk among young adults.

According to WHO (2017), the sharpest increase in suicide deaths occurs between early adolescence and young adulthood. Suicide ranks as the second leading cause of death among youths and the tenth among the general population (CDC, 2017). Many individuals who have considered or attempted suicide first do so before their mid-20s (Kessler, Borges & Walters, 1999). Therefore, adolescence presents a critical window for suicide prevention. In Nigeria, the alarming rate of suicide among university students and other young adults (Ojoye, 2018; Ogbe, 2020) necessitates research into risk factors that can be identified and addressed.

Several factors such as access to lethal means, family history of suicide, prior self-harm, history of neglect or abuse, and romantic breakups have been associated with suicide risk. However, there remains a gap in understanding the roles of social relationships and personality traits in suicidal behavior among young adults. This study therefore seeks to fill that gap by examining these two variables as correlates of suicide risk.

Statement of the Problem

Suicide has become a public health crisis in Nigeria, particularly among young adults in higher institutions. While numerous studies have examined sociocultural and economic determinants, limited research has explored the psychosocial correlates particularly social relationships and personality traits, that predispose individuals to suicidal behavior. Understanding these underlying factors is critical for developing effective prevention strategies. Hence, this study was designed to examine the relationship between social relationships, personality traits, and suicide risk among young adults in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework / Empirical Review

The study is anchored on three major theories that explain suicidal behavior: the General Strain Theory (GST), the Learned Helplessness Theory, and the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide.

General Strain Theory (GST) was developed by Agnew (1992). It posits that individuals who experience strain or stress are more likely to engage in maladaptive behaviors, including crime and suicide, as coping mechanisms. Agnew identified three main sources of strain: (1) failure to achieve positively valued goals, (2) loss of positively valued stimuli, and (3) exposure to negative stimuli. These stressors can lead to frustration, anger, or hopelessness, which may precipitate suicidal ideation or behavior.

Learned Helplessness Theory (Seligman, 1967; Maier & Seligman, 1976) explains that when individuals are repeatedly exposed to uncontrollable and stressful situations, they may develop a state of helplessness and fail to act even when opportunities for change exist. This psychological state, marked by passivity and hopelessness—has been strongly linked to depression and suicide risk.

Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (Joiner, 2005) emphasizes two critical interpersonal constructs—thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness—which, when combined with the acquired capability for self-harm, can result in suicide. Thwarted belongingness refers to a sense of social isolation or lack of meaningful connection, while perceived burdensomeness involves the belief that one's existence is a burden to others. These constructs align with the variables under investigation in this study, namely social relationships and personality traits.

Empirically, numerous studies have reported associations between psychological, relational, and personality variables and suicidal behavior. For instance, Bridge, Goldstein, and Brent (2006) found that about 90% of individuals who died by suicide had at least one mental disorder, with affective and substance-use disorders being most common. Similarly, Bastia and Kar (2009) linked suicide to stressful life events, including unemployment and relationship problems.

Moreover, Conwell (1997) and Joiner and Van Orden (2008) emphasized social isolation as one of the most powerful predictors of suicidal ideation and attempts.

Furthermore, personality traits such as neuroticism and low conscientiousness have been linked to heightened suicide risk (Brezo, Paris & Turecki, 2005). Aggression and impulsivity, in particular, have been shown to increase vulnerability to suicidal acts (Bryan & Rudd, 2006). Therefore, empirical evidence suggests that social relationship quality and personality characteristics jointly influence suicide risk.

Hypotheses

(i) Social relationships would significantly correlate with suicidal risk in young adults.
(ii) Personality traits would significantly correlate with suicidal risk in young adults.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in the study were (50) fifty in-patients young adults in Federal Neuro-psychiatric Hospital, Enugu State. They comprised of (26) twenty six male patients and (24) twenty four female patients. Their age ranges from 19 – 30, with a mean age of 23.94 and a standard deviation of 3.139. Data collected showed that three (3) patients were traditionists, two (2) were Muslims, thirteen were Anglican (Christian 1), ten (10) were Catholics (Christian 2), fourteen (14) were Pentecostals (Christian 3) and seven (7) were different religion not mentioned. Thirty seven (37) patients were Igbos, three (3) patients were Hausa, three (3) were Yorubas, three (3) patients were Ijaws and four (4) were of different tribes not mentioned. In terms of education, no patient reports to have had only primary education.

Instruments

Three instruments were used in this study for data collection, they were: Suicide Risk Questionnaire, Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI), and Social Connectedness Scale.

Suicide Risk Questionnaire (SRQ)

The Suicide Risk Questionnaire (SRQ) was developed by Beck (1979) to measure suicide risk. The instrument is a 30-item questionnaire divided into two parts: Part I consists of 15 items on suicidal ideation, while Part II is a 15-item Depression Risk Questionnaire. All items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale format ranging from 1 = (Strongly Disagree) to 5 = (Strongly Agree). Sample items include: “My family would be better off without me” (Item 2) and “I won’t be in your way much longer” (Item 7).

Validity and Reliability

In a mixed sample of psychiatric outpatients and inpatients, Reynolds (1991b) reported an average correlation (r = .62) between the SRQ and research ratings of suicidal ideation as measured by the suicide item of the Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression. Osman et al. (1999) also provided evidence of the SRQ's reliability, reporting a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .85 and a test retest correlation over a one-month period, indicating satisfactory internal consistency and stability.

Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI)

The Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI) is a 44-item scale developed by John, Donahue, and Kentle (1991) to measure personality traits based on five broad dimensions: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = (Strongly Disagree) to 5 = (Strongly Agree). Sample items include: "I see myself as someone who is outgoing and sociable" (Item 2) and "I see myself as someone who is helpful and unselfish with others" (Item 7).

The five dimensions are described as follows:

Extraversion – high energy, sociability, dominance, and positive emotions.

Agreeableness – empathy, trust, caring, and forgiveness.

Conscientiousness – self-discipline, dutifulness, and achievement striving.

Neuroticism – emotional instability, anxiety, irritability, and nervous tension.

Openness to Experience – imagination, curiosity, and intellectual engagement.

Validity and Reliability

BFI has a mean convergent validity coefficient ranging between .75 and .85 with the Big Five instruments developed by Costa and McCrae (1992) and Goldberg (1992), respectively. Divergent validity coefficients obtained by Umeh (2004) with the University Maladjustment Scale (Klein & Muntz, 1961) were: Extraversion (.60), Agreeableness (.13), Conscientiousness (.11), Neuroticism (.39), and Openness (.24). John et al. (1991) reported a Cronbach alpha

coefficient of .80 and a one-month test retest reliability of .85, indicating satisfactory psychometric properties.

Social Connectedness Scale (SCS)

The Social Connectedness Scale (SCS) is an 8-item instrument developed by Lee and Robbins (1995) to evaluate an individual's sense of belongingness, bonding, and connection to the social world. All items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale format ranging from 1 = (Strongly Disagree) to 6 = (Strongly Agree). Sample items include: "I feel disconnected from the world around me" (Item 1) and "I catch myself losing all sense of connectedness with society" (Item 6).

Validity and Reliability

The SCS demonstrates strong psychometric properties, with a high internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach alpha = .92) and a one-month test–retest reliability of .96 (Lee & Robbins, 1995). The scale also showed a mean convergent validity coefficient of item scores equal to or greater than 3.5, corresponding to "slightly agree" to "strongly agree." Based on self-psychology theory (Kohut, 1984), social connectedness reflects an independent yet socially integrated sense of self.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to the patients. The total number of the copies of the questionnaires distributed was fifty three (53) copies. Two copies were not properly filled, one copy got lost, while 50 copies were properly filled, returned and were used as the actual data in the study.

Design and Statistics

The study was a survey study that adopted a correlational design, which is suitable in explaining the relationship between paired variables. Data was analyzed sign Pearson Product Moment Correlation Statistics.

RESULTS

Table 1: Pearson product moment correlation coefficients of variables of the study (N=50)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Suicide Risk	1						
2. Social Relationship	-.360*	1					
3. Extraversion	-.185	-.053	1				
4. Agreeableness	-.229	.063	.155	1			
5. Conscientiousness	-.187	-.138	-.072	.558**	1		

6. Neuroticism	.569**	-.267	-.334*	-.161	.040	1	
7. Openness	-.250	.011	.441**	.405**	.328*	-.206	1

Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed); *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

The correlation result in Table 1 showed that social relationship is negatively significantly correlated with suicidal risk, ($r(50) = .36$, $p<.05$).This implies that increase in social relationship would yield decrease in suicidal risk. Of all the personality dimensions, only Neuroticism which showed a positive relationship with suicidal risk is significant, ($r(50) = .569$, $p<.01$) indicating that increase in trait of neuroticism gives rise to the increase in suicidal risk. Other personality traits (dimensions) showed negative but not significant correlation with suicidal risk, extraversion($r(50) = -.185$, $p>.05$), agreeableness($r(50) = -.229$, $p>.05$), conscientiousness($r(50) =-.187$, $p>.05$), and openness($r(50) =-.250$, $p>.05$).

Summary of Findings

1. Social relationship showed a negative significant correlation with suicidal risk.
2. Neuroticism showed a positive significant relationship with suicidal risk.
3. Extraversion did not show a significant relationship with suicidal risk.
4. Agreeableness did not show a significant relationship with suicidal risk.
5. Conscientiousness did not show a significant relationship with suicidal risk.
6. Openness did not show a significant relationship with suicidal risk.

Discussion

The present study examined social relationship and personality traits as correlates of suicide risk in young adults.

Hypothesis one stated that, social relationships would significantly correlate with suicidal risk in young adults. Following the results obtained, this hypothesis was rejected. This emphasizes the greater importance of social relation (family, friends and significant others) in protecting emerging adults from suicidal ideations or risks. This is because social relationship most especially family support perhaps represents a more enduring and consistent construct which perhaps are more fleeting and short lived in nature (Tabac et al; 2016). No matter how worse life conditions may be for an individual, the family remains the constant and persistent source of help. This notion is supported by an African proverb which asserts that there is no fool who is disowned by his family (How Africa n.d). This result is in corroboration with the findings of Purcell et al; 2012, M.Wang et al, 2013) which shows the importance of family connectedness and support in buffering the individual against suicidality. Shilubane et al, (2014) findings are inconsistent with the study as it shows that only the family support is significant in lowering suicidal ideation while friends and significant others supports were not.

As Shneidman, 1987, in his work Shneidman's cubic model of suicide agrees with the findings as his work proposes that an unmet need for "affiliation" is one of several needs that contributes

to suicide when unmet. So also Joiner (2005), and Orden, Witter, et al, (2005) in their interpersonal theory of suicide, proposed that the need to belong and to carry supportive relationships is so powerful that, when thwarted, contributed to a desire for suicide. But in contrast Frydenberg and Lewis (1991) in their study showed that male adolescents sought less social support and had more negative help-seeking behaviours. The findings could be associated with social roles attributed to males such as being strong and independent.

Also the second hypothesis which states; that personality traits would significantly correlate with suicide risk in young adults was rejected. The finding showed that there was no significant correlations between openness to experience and agreeableness personality traits with suicide risk in young adults. This implies that individual with these personality traits has no tendencies to suicidal risk; since such individual who is open to experience has tendency towards fantasy, creativity, feelings, thinking, ideas and thoughts, tends to be curious about their inner experiences and external world as a consequence of their behaviour. The agreeable personality is inclinated towards sympathy, trust, cooperation and altrusion, cooperative and willingness to help others and have in mind that others will be helpful in future, as according to Ryder et al; 2005 in his work support the findings.

Extraversion and conscientiousness has no significant correlation with suicide risk in young adults; it means that conscientious individual tends to be persevering and responsible, has the ability to plan, organize and carry out cognitive tasks. They also show capability, self-orientation and competence, are purposeful, strong-willed, motivated, well organized and determined. But, neuroticism was found to have significant correlation with suicide risk in young adults. This implies that a neurotic personality has an emotional instability and manifestation of negative emotion ranging from anxiety, anger and depressed mood, are at the risk of depression thereby leading to suicidal ideation. This is in agreement with Ryder et al (2005) in his study on personality correlates of undergraduate's suicidal ideation which found that there was association between neuroticism and suicidal ideation. Kerby (2003) also found that low conscientiousness, low extraversion and high neuroticism participants predicted suicide ideation in male and female and that there is no differences between the two gender in suicide ideation, Heised et al (2006) also reported that there was relationship between suicide ideation and increased neuroticism and openness among older adults. Although in the work of Steunenberg, Beekman et al (2006), Tyssen et al (2004) disagrees with the findings as their found neuroticism personality as its negatively associated with the severity of depressive and anxiety symptoms which are the main properties that triggers suicide risk.

Implications of the findings

With the way suicide has become the leading problem among youths and young adults, the results from the study has far reaching implications for the society and also for the clinician to become aware of the factors that would lead to this suicide risk, and thereby sensitize the general public on the personality traits that has lesser or no control over these risks factors which help to

restructure such individual behaviours through intervention programmes and will play a role in preventing the suicide risks as well as in prevention of mental health problems in the future.

Limitations

This study was conducted at one psychiatric facilities in southern Nigeria where most of the participants were Christians.

The research was restricted to only one psychiatric hospital; results from similar investigations, in psychiatric in other regions of Nigeria may or may not confirm the present findings.

Finance was a major limitation of the study. Lack of fund restricted the researcher to conduct the researcher only in one hospital. The findings from other states hospitals in Nigeria may or may not confirm the present results.

Suggestion for Further Studies

As suicide is the leading cause of death especially among the youths today, there is need for future studies to investigate on how family, peers/significant others can be strengthened given its importance in predicting lower suicidal ideation/risks factors that leads to suicide its self.

Studies should be widened beyond the scope of this study, thus this research should be replicated in other areas like schools, industries, public sectors, banks, and among adults. It is also advised that researchers should find a way of persuading students to make themselves available in research of this nature as the findings will help inculcating morals to the youths and society.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made.

There is need for family, peer and significant other support to persist through the period of emerging adulthood not withstanding that this life stage is characterized by more independence in lifestyle, and autonomy in the making of enduring life choices.

Families and peer support will boister self efficacy in overcoming vulnerabilities to suicidal ideation and eventual suicide during emerging adulthood.

It is also of importance for the assessment of factors leading to depression and suicide thinking/ideation to be carried out from secondary level of education to higher institution from time to time so as to educate them on the need to understand their personality traits and how it can be predisposed from these suicide risks leading factors.

Researchers in suicide and the related should not fail to make their findings open to the public through media or journals, as this will help to educate the public more on suicide and the related.

Conclusion

This study investigated social relationship and personality traits as a correlates to suicide risk in young adults at Federal Neuro-psychiatric Hospital in Enugu State. The participants for the study were (50) fifty young adults diagnosed of depression. The instruments were used, which are suicide risk questionnaire, Big Five Inventory (BFI) personality traits and social connectedness questionnaires. All the hypotheses were rejected. These hypotheses were analyzed using Pearson's product moment correlation statistics.

In view of the outcome of this research which shows that social relationship and personality traits such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience did not predict suicide risk in young adults except neuroticism which has a positive relationship with suicide risk. The researcher is of the view that clinicians before time identify factors that lead to suicide risk and utilize appropriate psychotherapy modalities to help depressive patients on the need for treatment compliance in other to motivate them and acquire adequate knowledge to manage their personalities.

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