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THE NEXUS BETWEEN BEREAVEMENT AND EXAM ANXIETY IN SUICIDAL IDEATION AMONG UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract

Undergraduate period is associated with numerous stressors that when complicated, could stimulate suicidal ideation. Hence, the need to investigate bereavement and exam anxiety in association with suicidal ideation among undergraduates. Two hundred and sixty (260) undergraduates participated in this study; consisting of 177 males and 83 females, selected using convenience sampling method. Their ages ranged from 16 to 30 years; with a mean age of 23.68, and standard deviation of 3.22. Three sets of instruments were used for data collection, they include: The Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire, Bereavement Challenges Scale, and West Side Text Anxiety Scale. A correlational research design was adopted for this study and Pearson product moment was the statistics use for analyses. The result showed that the first hypothesis which stated that there would be a significant relationship between bereavement and suicidal ideation among undergraduates was accepted at $r = .47$, $p < .01$. The second hypothesis which stated that there would be a significant relationship between exam anxiety and suicidal ideation among undergraduates was also accepted at $r = .56$, $p < .01$. Based on the findings, the researchers recommended among others, need for a functional and accessible counselling unit in all Nigerian universities in order to be able to assess and proffer appropriate psychological intervention for undergraduates at risk of suicidal ideation.

Keywords: Bereavement, Exam anxiety, Anxiety, Suicidal Ideation, Undergraduates

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1. Introduction

Undergraduate period is associated with numerous stressors that when overwhelming, can result to maladaptive behaviours (Onuoha et al., 2024). Such stressors include: academic tasks, social expectations, family crisis which they cannot help but bring to the university community and financial shortcoming; that sometimes hamper their full participation in academic exercise (Obi-Nwosu et al., 2024). To some, this stressors complicate their emotional state, leading to the development of sense of worthlessness, and or hopelessness (Onuoha et al., 2024; Onuoha, 2021); factors associated with depression, and sense of loss. Inferring from the assertion of Onuoha et al. (2021), sense of worthlessness and hopelessness emanates from an undergraduates negative mental schema that hold negative view of self, the future and the world. Thus, being engulfed by these negative emotions usually impacts the activation of illogical thoughts and cognitive bias; and such illogical thought can be suicidal ideation.

Among undergraduates, suicidal ideation, attempts, and actual suicide have been on the increase; making it timely, to examine factors that stimulates suicidal ideation; aimed at proactive actions to curtail the issue of suicidal ideation, and actual suicide among undergraduates. Since Obi-Nwosu et al. (2024) asserted that academic expectations are among the undergraduates' stressors, which when complicated, can have detrimental implications; which includes anxiety. According to Tran et al. (2018), anxiety is mostly stimulated by specific life event, such as bereavement. Thus, unresolved anxiety that is stimulated by exam tension (exam anxiety), and those triggered by the loss of loved one (bereavement) could be among the striking factors that complicates undergraduates' stress. Hence, the need for this study that examined the relationship between bereavement and exam anxiety on suicidal ideation among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Suicide is a major public health problem, and is common among adolescents (Woldeyhannes, 2018). According to Ajibola et al. (2022), suicide is the leading cause of death among young people within the age of 15 to 29 years. More so, adolescents in low, and middle-income countries like Nigeria account for higher proportion of global cases of suicidal ideation, and suicide. Ajibola et al. (2022) further asserted that data from 32 low, and middle-income countries indicated that most sub-Sahara African countries records high rate of suicide among adolescents and young adults. In Nigeria, there are several cases of suicide among undergraduates. For instance, Vanguard (2023)

reported a case of a hundred level student of Obafemi Awolowo University that was found dead in an uncompleted building, suspected to have committed suicide; and many other suicidal cases, among undergraduates (Onuoha et al., 2024).

Despite the efforts of the Nigerian government in reducing suicide rate as well as the stigma associated with taking one's own life, there have been incidents of resent cases of suicide every year; especially, among undergraduates. This could be the resultant of their rapid physical and hormonal changes along with a desire for self-discovery and independence; which when unchecked, can lead to risky behaviors. Hence, making them vulnerable to mental health problems (Garlow et al., 2008). Furthermore, loss of loved one can further complicate the emotional state of undergraduates; while such complicated emotional pain can result to the feeling of sadness, loneliness, and a sense of hopelessness. If these negative emotions stimulated by bereavement are not adequately addressed, they can become overwhelming, and can contribute to the development of suicidal ideation.

Bereavement is the negative emotional state associated with losing a loved one. It is most often referred to as the time after a loss; when emotions are at their most profound state; and is typically associated with intense grief and tremendous sorrow. According to Stroebe et al. (2007), losing a loved one is the most stressful life events a person can experience. Such stressful experience can stimulate high level of dysphoria, anxiety and anger that is mostly accompanied by thoughts, and images of the deceased person. To some, it makes them disengage from their usual daily activities (Shear 2015). However, it is important to note that everybody grieves differently. For some people, it may be hardly noticeable; while for others, they may exhibit very strong negative emotions. Inasmuch as, some noticeable manifestations of grief seems to be common across different cultures, there are other differences observed among different ethnic groups and religions (Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2005)

According to Bonanno et al. (2004), grief is a normal mourning process that accompanies loss, and not a psychological disorder. More so, most people adjust to the new reality of life without requiring professional help. Some scholars argued that grief may be a universal adaptive response that leads to a cascade of homeostatic mechanisms, helping the bereaved to recoup with the life event and adapt to it. Nonetheless, losing a loved one is an adverse life event that can lead to intense suffering, and the development of maladaptation; that requires intensive care for adequate adjustment. Hence, grief can increase the risk for the development of mental, and physical health problems. Bereaved individuals are more likely to fall sick to the extent of experiencing high level of physical pain (Shear, 2015). While there is no medication for bereavement, most people are able to move on with their lives at some point. However, when grief last longer than normal, or to the point that the person finds it had to function effectively in their day to day activities, it becomes pathological, and may require psychological support. Notably, among undergraduates, failure in an important examination can stimulate grief which can trigger the same negative emotions as losing a loved one. Thus, making fear of failing an examination a factor capable of triggering exam anxiety.

According to Kendra (2022), Exam anxiety is a psychological condition in which sufferer experience extreme distress and anxiety in exam situations. It is a combination of physiological over-arousal of tension and somatic symptoms; along with intense fear of failure and catastrophizing that occurs before, or during exam situations. Exam anxiety is a physiological

condition where people experience extreme stress, anxiety, and discomfort during and or before examination. Thus, exam anxiety can create significant barriers to learning and performance. According to Isiaku (2021), intense level of emotional distress is directly correlated to reduced academic performance and higher overall student drop-out. Thus implied that exam anxiety can actually impair learning; thereby hampering exam performance; and can further complicate the emotional state of an undergraduate by stimulating sense of worthlessness and hopelessness; which could lead to suicidal ideation.

Statement of the problem

Period of undergraduate is associated with so many stressors that can result to maladaptive behaviour in search for ways to cope and adjust. These stressors can impact maladjustment such as: gambling behaviour, cybercrime, and risky sexual behaviour that could further complicates undergraduates stress situations (Onuoha et al., 2024; Okafor et al., 2024; Okeke et al. 2024; Onuoha et al., 2025). Thus, hampering the goal of student-hood; with concomitant maladjustment like truancy, leading to poor academic grades and high dropout rate. In more complicated stress situation, it can result to suicidal ideation, attempt, or actual suicide (Onuoha et al., 2024; Tobih et al. 2024).

Although several studies have examined psychological factors associated with suicidal ideation (Okechukwu et al., 2022; Seon et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023). However, none to the best of the researchers' knowledge examined the role of bereavement and exam anxiety on suicidal ideation among undergraduates in south eastern Nigeria. Thus, the need for this study that examined bereavement and exam anxiety as risk factors in suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria; aimed at filling the observed gap in knowledge, as well as adding novel empirical and theoretical evidence to the body of knowledge in the area of the study variables.

Theoretical Framework/Empirical Review

Theoretically, this study is grounded in the Stress and Coping Theory developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which posits that individuals employ coping mechanisms to manage stress and adversity. However, when these coping mechanisms are insufficient or ineffective in addressing specific stressors, maladaptive outcomes may arise. Drawing on this framework, it can be inferred that overwhelming stressors such as examination anxiety or bereavement may exceed an undergraduate's coping capacity. When existing coping strategies are exhausted without adequate adjustment or resolution, individuals may resort to maladaptive responses, one of which could manifest as suicidality.

Empirically, several scholars have explored the relationship between psychological stressors and suicidal ideation. For instance, Okechukwu et al. (2022) examined the link between academic stress and suicidal ideation, reporting a significant association between the two variables. Similarly, Seon et al. (2023) investigated the impact of suicide bereavement on suicidal ideation and found a notable connection between bereavement experiences and suicidal thoughts. In the same vein, Ahn et al. (2023) also examined the relationship between suicide bereavement and

suicidal ideation, further confirming that bereavement is significantly associated with increased risk of suicidal ideation.

Research Hypotheses

1. There will be a positive and significant relationship between Bereavement and suicidal ideation among undergraduates.
2. There will be a positive and significant relationship between exam anxiety and suicidal ideation among undergraduates.

This study examined the role of exam anxiety, and bereavement on suicidal ideation among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. The rationale for selecting bereavement and exam anxiety as independent variables with propensity of stimulated suicidal ideation among undergraduates is because, both variables are associated with negative emotions that when overwhelming, could stimulate maladaptive behaviours. Hence, the empirical findings in this study will show if there is an association between these factors (exam anxiety, bereavement, and suicidal ideation) among undergraduates.

2. Method

Study Design

This study was a survey research that adopted a correlational approach in investigating the relationship between bereavement, exam anxiety, and suicidal ideation among undergraduates. In order to test the postulated hypotheses, Pearson product moment was adopted as the statistical tool for data analyses.

Participants

In this study, a total of 260 undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka served as participants. They were selected using convenience sampling method; and consisted of 177 males, and 83 females. Their ages ranged from 18 to 30 years, with a mean age of 23.68, and standard deviation of 3.22.

Instruments

Three instruments were used in this study for data collection; they include: Suicide Ideation Questionnaire, Bereavement Challenges Scale, and West Side Text Anxiety Scale. Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (SIQ) was developed by Reynolds (1987). It is a questionnaire designed to measure the degree or how many times people thought about ending their lives. It is a 15- item questionnaire that is rated on a 7-point likert scale format; ranging from 1= Almost every day, to 7= I never had this thought. Sample items of this scale include "I thought about death", "I thought about people dying", I thought about writing a will.

Reliability and Validity of the scale

The authors reported a cronbach's alpha coefficient for SIQ as 0.95. Furthermore, Ogunwale and Abayomi (2017) conducted a pilot study involving 400 undergraduates of Ogun state University, and obtained a cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .86; indicating a high level of internal consistency.

In a pilot study conducted in this present study involving 50 undergraduates from Sociology Department of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, a cronbach's alpha coefficient of .81 was reported

Bereavement Challenges Scale

Bereavement Challenges Scale (BCS) was developed by Trevino et al. (2017). It is a 35-items that measures challenges confronting bereaved individuals. BCS is rated on a 5-point likert scale; ranging from 1= "not at all" to 5= "a great deal". Some sample items of the scale include: "I believe my life will never be meaningful again", "I am afraid of the unknown", "I believe that it's too late for me to try new things or develop new relationships".

Reliability and Validity of the scale

The developers found that BCS is highly correlated with Symptoms of prolong grief. Furthermore, they correlated BCS with Quality of Life and Psychiatric Diagnoses; and reported (OR,12.539[95% CI, 4.03-38.96], p,0.001); indicating that a high score in BCS increases the likelihood of meeting criteria for mental disorder. Prior to this study, the researchers conducted a pilot study among undergraduates involving 50 undergraduates in Sociology Department of Nnamdi Azikiwe University; aimed at examining the reliability of BCS. From their analyses, a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.83 was reported; indicating that the scale is reliable.

Westside Text Anxiety Scale

The West side text anxiety scale is a 10 items scale that was developed by Driscoll (2007). It was design to assess students with anxiety, and cognition impairment that can hamper performance. Items on WTAS are rated on a 5-point likert scale format; ranging from 1=Not at all; never true to 5=extremely always true. Some sample items of the scale include: "The closer I am to a major exam, the harder it is for me to concentrate on the materials, "During important exams I feel I am doing awful or that I may fail", "After an exam, I worry about whether I do well or not.

Validity and Reliability of the Scale

For the validity, the author reported a validity coefficient of .44. More so the researchers conducted a pilot test involving 50 undergraduates from Sociology Department of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, and reported a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .91; indicating that the scale is reliable and can be used for data collection.

Procedure

Following ethical approval from the Head of the Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria, the researchers employed a convenience sampling method to recruit 267 undergraduate students from the same institution for participation in the study. Prior to the administration of the research instruments, all participants were fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained from each participant. Out of the 267 students who consented and completed the questionnaires, 260 properly filled questionnaires were deemed valid and subsequently coded using SPSS for data analysis

Statistics

This study was a survey research that utilized a correlational research design; while Pearson product moment correlation was adopted for data analyses. The data in this study were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.

3. Results

Table 1: ***Summary table of Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients for Study Variables***

Variables	M	SD	1	2
1. Suicide ideation	91.63	14.47	-	
2. Bereavement	61.56	22.45	.47**	-
3. Exam anxiety	21.12	9.25	.56**	.52**

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).*

Table 1 above showed that a statistically significant relationship existed between bereavement and suicidal ideation at $r = .47$, $p < .01$. Hence, the first hypothesis that stated that there would be a positive and significant relationship between bereavement and suicidal ideation among undergraduates was accepted. Furthermore, the table also revealed that a statistically significant relationship existed between exam anxiety and suicidal ideation at $r = .56$, $p < .01$. Thus, the second hypothesis of the study which stated that there would be a statistically significant relationship between exam anxiety and suicidal ideation among undergraduates was as well accepted.

4. Discussion

This study examined bereavement and exam anxiety as risk factors of suicidal ideation among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Two hundred sixty participants were selected for this study, using convenient sampling method. In line with the objectives of this study, two hypotheses were postulated, and tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The analysis reveal that a positive relationship existed between bereavement and suicidal ideation among undergraduates; indicating that bereavement impacts undergraduates' suicidal ideation. This finding is in tandem with that of Stroebe et al. (2005) that conducted a study titled the broken heart: Suicidal ideation in bereavement. In their study, they found an association between bereavement and suicidal ideation. The outcome of the first hypothesis of this study is also in line with that of Molina et al. (2019) that examined suicidal ideation in bereavement and also found an association between bereavement and suicidal ideation. Similarly, Seon et al. (2023) investigated the pathway of suicide bereavement on suicidal ideation by analyzing the mediating effect of complicated grief. Their results showed that suicide bereavement was found to have a significant effect on suicide ideation; and that complicated grief plays a mediating role in the path of suicide bereavement to suicide ideation. Furthermore, this finding is related to that of Ahn et al. (2023) that investigated the relationship between suicide bereavement and suicide ideation and found that a relationship existed between bereavement and suicidal ideation

The second hypothesis of the study was also accepted; indicating that a positive relationship existed between exam anxiety and suicidal ideation among undergraduates. This means that an association existed between exam anxiety and suicidal ideation. This finding is in line with the finding of Okechukwu et al. (2022) that examined academic stress and suicidal ideation: the moderating roles of coping style and resilience. In their study, they found an association between academic stress and suicidal ideation. The outcome of the present study is also in agreement with that of Yang et al. (2023) that examined the relationships between anxiety and suicidal ideation and, between depression and suicidal ideation among Chinese college students; and found that a relationship existed between anxiety and suicidal ideation. More so, Erturul et al. (2024) investigated the relationship between exam anxiety and risky behaviors in late adolescents. Their finding indicated that an association existed between exam anxiety and risky behaviour. Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2025) examined the role of perfectionism and psychological capital in the relationship between academic procrastination, test anxiety and suicidal ideation among pre-medical students; and found and association between test anxiety and suicidal ideation.

Implication of the study

This study examined bereavement and exam anxiety as risk factors to suicidal ideation among undergraduates. The findings of this study lead to the outlined implications

1. Theoretically, the findings validated the theoretical framework of the study that stated that people develop their coping mechanisms so as to help them cope with stress and adversity but when the stress and adversities become overwhelmed that their coping becomes ineffective, they manifest maladaptive behaviours. Since the finding confirmed that bereavement and exam anxiety are risk factors that can stimulate suicidal ideation, which is a form of maladaptation, the findings can be used to further elaborated stress and coping theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984).
2. Practically, since exam anxiety and bereavement are among the factors associated with suicidal ideation, clinical psychologist and school psychologist should always probe for bereavement or situations of overwhelming exam anxiety when handling cases of suicidal ideation among undergraduates.
3. There is need to setup a functional Centre for Counselling and career development in all universities in Nigeria so as to be proactive in the identification and management of undergraduates' stress situation, in order avoid it getting to an overwhelming state that can stimulate suicidal ideation.

Limitations of the study

This study is a survey study that relied on self-reportage (questionnaire) as a means of data collection. Thus, participants might have responded to the questionnaires in a way that will make them look socially acceptable. Thus, negatively impacting the outcome of the result of this study. However, since they were assured of the confidentiality of their personal information, such assurance, is expected to enhance their transparency while responding to the research questionnaires. Furthermore, the study participants in this study were selected using convenient sampling method which might have missed the true representation of the study population.

5. Conclusion

This study examined bereavement and examination anxiety as risk factors for suicidal ideation among undergraduate students at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. In line with the study objectives, two hypotheses were formulated and tested using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation. The results indicated that both bereavement and exam anxiety significantly contributed to the risk of suicidal ideation among the participants. Based on these findings, relevant recommendations were proposed to provide functional strategies aimed at preventing the onset of suicidality among undergraduates, particularly those experiencing complicated grief or overwhelming academic stress.

6. Recommendations

In line with the research findings, the researchers recommended that;

1. There is need for a functional and accessible counselling unit in Nigerian universities in order to be able to assess, and proffer appropriate psychological intervention for undergraduates at risk of suicidal ideation.
2. Lecturers should not only teach, but also serve as mentors to undergraduates; so as to be able identify those that are at risk of suicidal ideation; for timely intervention.
3. There is need for the implementation of extracurricular activities in schools which can effectively reduce student stress levels as well as negative emotions associated with bereavement through play, and social interaction that foster a well-rounded development.

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