



EXPLORING THE PSYCHOSOCIAL CAUSES OF SUICIDE IN SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

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Abstract

The global rate of suicide is alarming, and the prevalence in Africa, especially Nigeria, is more worrisome. The causes of suicide have been evaluated from a different perspective; however, studies on the psychosocial dimension in Africa are limited. With the increasing rate of Suicide in Nigeria and the literature gap in the psychosocial dimensions, this study explored the psychosocial causes of Suicide in Nigeria through a qualitative approach. The southwestern states in Nigeria were considered in this study because of the accounted high rate of suicide. States such as Ogun, Ondo and Ekiti were considered in this study. A purposive sampling technique was used to select

key informants consisting of police officials, and religious and opinion leaders. Four themes emanate from the thematic analysis – economic challenges, frustration, mental issues and family issues were found to be psychosocial antecedents of suicide in Nigeria. Promotion of psychic support and social cohesion has been suggested to reduce suicide.

Keywords: Suicide, economic challenges, strain theory, mental issues, family issues

Introduction

Globally, about 800,000 people reportedly die from suicide, which is double the number of deaths from homicide (Ritchie, Roser, and Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). It is worrying that suicide is predominant among young people (Ritchie, et al., 2019). In 2017, about 1.4% of the death rate globally came from suicide, while the rate has increased to 5% in some countries of the world (Ritchie, et al., 2019; WHO, 2021). Among young people between the age of 15-19yrs, suicide is identified as the 4th cause of death, and 77% of suicide occurrence globally is from low- and middle-income countries (WHO, 2021). The most common source of suicide is firearms, ingestion of pesticide and hanging (WHO, 2021)

In Africa, there is an estimated 34,000 suicide rate annually and an occurrence rate of 3.25 in every 100,000 population (Mars, Burrows, Hjelmeland, & Gunnell, 2014). Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa, with more than 206,139,589 citizens, estimated at 2.58% of the total world's population (Worldometer, 2022) and it's unfortunate that the country is also ranked high among nations with increased rates of Suicide (Oyetunji, Arafat, Famori, Akinboyewa, Afolami, Ajayi, and Kar, (2021). Yet, there is a paucity of research on the psychosocial antecedents of Suicide in Nigeria. Alluding to the fact that suicide has increased in Nigeria (see, Onyemelukwe, 2020), and the negligence of literature and practice on the psychosocial dimensions, it is important to explore the psychosocial dimensions of suicide and provide feasible suggestions for the amelioration of Suicide in Nigeria.

Psychosocial orientation describes the influence of social factors on the individuals mental health and behaviour (Vizzotto, de Oliveira, Elkis, Cordeiro, & Buchain 2013), it covers physical, mental and social health dimensions of life and how social events creates or influence these dimensions. Furthermore, psychosocial dimensions of human behaviour are dependent on intrapersonal and environmental factors in our surroundings, and that is why it is usually regarded as the individual's psychological development in association with their social and cultural environment.

Vizzoto et al. (2013) defines psychosocial as that which pertains to the influence of social factors on an individual's mind or behavior, and to the interrelation of behavioral and social factors. Martikainen, Bartley and Lahelma, (2002) introduced a health and structural dimension to understand psychosocial factors of and suggested that psychosocial factors should be analysed as a mediation of the effects of social structural factors on individual health, conditioned and modified by the social structures contexts in which they exist . These explanation(s) raise more questions on the structure, social health, and environmental antecedents of Suicide in Nigeria. Are there social factors that informs the choice of suicide? what psychological state leads to suicide and how can these be managed? The rest of the article provides discussions on the dimensions of psychosocial factors considered in this article: health, mental and social state of actors before contemplating suicide. The strain theory is used as theoretical anchor. Findings and discussed are also presented at the end of the article. .

2. Literature Review

Suicide and Global trends

Suicide is the intentional act of ending one's own life (Batty, et al., 2018), the cause of this action is varied likewise the means and demographics of perpetrators (Batty, et al., 2018). However, documentation on its socio-psychological context is informative to abating the occurrence of suicide – especially in low-income countries where its manifestation is on the increase (WHO, 2021). Similarly, 30-40 suicide attempts have been made for every successful suicide outcome in developed countries (Batty et al., 2018). Suicide is identified as the second commonest form of death among individuals between the age of 15-29yrs, the fifth among those within the ages of 30-49yrs (Batty, et al., 2018), and fourth among those within the ages of 15-19yrs (WHO, 2021). This demographic trend of suicide provides sufficient data to the necessity to why a global urgent action is required on the occurrence of suicide.

Suicide is a tragedy that has thrown communities and families into despair and causing friends and relatives untold hardships with long lasting social and psychological effects (WHO, 2021). Suicide permeates both low-, middle- and high-income countries (WHO, 2021). There is a strong link between the occurrence of suicide and a poor mental and psychological state of mind – depression, personality disorders (Gregory, 2018; Barzilay, & Apter, 2014). Many occurrences of suicide has been reported to be impulsive and spontaneous but mostly in challenging times when

the culprit (the person who committed the suicide) is in their most vulnerable state (Bryan et al., 2019; Courtet, Olié, Debien, & Vaiva, 2020). Issues of financial problems, inability to manage life challenges, illness and diseases, and chronic pains (Bhatia, Verma, & Murty, 2006).). Additionally, social issues such as natural disaster, drug abuse, a sense of isolation, internal conflicts, withdrawals and loss of loved ones are associated with suicide behaviour (Carballo, et al., 2020; Shi, Ren, Li, and Dai, 2018).

Suicide is also high among the vulnerable such as refugees, those experiencing discrimination, prisoners, transgenders, gay, and lesbians (WHO, 2021). Some of these variables has been categorised as risk factors in the literature (see, Lee, & Jung, 2006; Batty, et al., 2018; Carballo et al., 2020; Shi, Ren, Li, & Dai, 2018; Hecht, et al., 2019; Terzi-Unsal, & Kapci, 2005). Recent trends in suicide have shown that the causes of suicide cannot entirely be delinked from psychosocial factors. Subsequently, recent studies on psychosocial risk studies are evaluated.

Psychosocial evaluation of suicide

Recently, there has been an increase in suicide ideation, attempt and self-harm among children and young people (Cox, & Hetrick, 2017). It is worrying that even children under the age of 12 could contemplate suicide (suicide ideation) by causing harm to themselves and making suicide attempts. Though psychosocial interventions have been recognised as ways of rehabilitating some of the children, there are tendencies that the causes of their actions have psychosocial underpinnings. Milner et al., (2018) through an intense literature search found that job stressors are associated with high rate of suicide ideation. This implies that individuals who are faced with high level of stress on their job have a high tendency of contemplating suicide, especially when there is little or no organisational support (Milner et al., 2018).

Carballo, et al., (2020) investigated psychosocial risk factors among children and adolescents and found three categories of risk factors towards suicidality: psychological, stress life events and personality trait. Psychological factors that lead to suicide are depression, drug or alcohol abuse, anxiety, and previous attempts of Suicide (Carballo, et al., 2020). The second psychosocial factor identified: stressful life events are peer conflicts and family problems. And lastly, personality traits factors such as impulsivity and neuroticism (Carballo, et al., 2020). Shi, Ren, Li, and Dai (2018) examined psychosocial risk factors associated with prenatal and post-natal periods of married women and found that women experience lower depression and higher ideation

of suicide after childbirth. Dissatisfaction in marriage and miscarriage experience lead to depression while emotional and social support through harmony built with mother in-law and husband protects first time mothers from suicide ideation or depression (Shi, Ren, Li, & Dai, 2018).

The findings from the study of Shi et al (2018) corroborates the assumptions of Caballo et al (2020) that suicide risk factors have three psychosocial classifications: psychological factor stressful life events and personality traits. The stress of childbirth can make women contemplate suicide the social context of family can be of great support to curbing suicide ideation. The family through loss of members, abuse and discord current could also lead to the thought of Suicide (Lee and Jung, 2006). In this context, Lee and Jung (2006) categorise the risk factors associated with suicide as: (a) risk occurring from interaction with individual and family and risk occurring from interaction of the individual and the larger environment

From the literature, suicide has antecedents which can be psychological (depression, emotional trauma e.t.c) and social (family, social interaction, and environmental factors).

Suicide in Nigeria and the strain theory

There is high rate of Suicide in Nigeria (Oyetunji, et al 2021), yet there are limited studies on Suicide in Nigeria. Suicide, the attempt to take one's own life intentionally is a criminal offence in Nigeria under the section 327 of nations criminal code which is applied in the Southern states of Nigeria and the law provides that:

Any person who attempts to kill himself is guilty of a misdemeanour and is liable to imprisonment for one year.” (Onyemelukwe, 2020, pg232)

In the Northern part of Nigeria where the penal code of conduct is applied, provides that

“Whoever attempts to commit suicide and does an act towards the commission of that offence, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year or with fine or with both.” (Onyemelukwe, 2020, pg232)

Despite the provisions of the law, the suicide rate is still on the increase. Most of the suicide cases reported in Nigeria between 2020-2021 where related to social and mental pressures. Akor,

et al., (2021) in their report observed an increasingly alarming trend of Suicide in Nigeria in 2021 with pathetic occurrences of suicide caused majorly by financial strain, economic and emotional strains. Most of the report of suicide from the authors were associated with a lack of resources, debt and emotional rejection: while some were unspecified (Akor, et al., 2021). The trends of Suicide in Nigeria supports the argument of the strain theory which explains individuals act and react to their frustration and sees their action as a form of remedy to whatever their current challenges might be.

Agnew (2015) stated that strains increase the likelihood of criminal act such as armed robbery and suicide. Therefore, strains can be described as factors that mount pressures on individuals to either provide a resource, meet a need, or achieve a goal which they at the point in time are unable to meet or achieve. These frustration and anger, thus leads individuals to take actions such as ending their life. Thus, suicide is seen as a way of escape from life strains - challenges, troubles, and frustrations. The strain theory has previously been used in the context of crime (see Agnew, 2020; Barbieri, et al., 2019; Jang, & Rhodes, 2012). However, the domain of analysis of the theory covers the context of suicide. Also, suicide is categorised as a crime in Nigeria. This study therefore argues that strain (social and psychological pressures) leads to Suicide in Nigeria

The interpretivist research philosophy was adopted for this study. Among the research philosophies, interpretivism promotes the exploration of the phenomenon with the use of qualitative approaches (SaundersLewis, & Thornhill, 2003). Though argued by researchers to be subjective, it seeks to unpack hitherto hidden or unclear phenomena (SaundersLewis, & Thornhill, 2003). The interpretive philosophy considers the adoption of qualitative instruments such as in-depth interview guide, focus group discussions, key informants, and thematic analytic techniques. Therefore, data was collected for this study through the use of key informant interview in purposively selected 30 communities in Southwest Nigeria states (Ekiti, Ogun, Lagos, Oyo, Osun and Ondo). Data considered for this study were specifically from Ogun, Ekiti and Ondo states. The Yoruba tribe majorly dominates these states and the Southwestern region was considered due to its high record of suicide (SaundersLewis, & Thornhill, 2003). In the three-state considered for this study, five towns/cities were selected using simple random techniques and the suicide rates in these communities was part of inclusion criteria.

The peculiarity of the study required that individuals with primary knowledge of why persons might decide to take their own life were considered for the study. Key informants such as police officers, religious heads, community leaders were purposively selected in the five communities considered in the state

4. Findings

Understanding the psychosocial dimension of Suicide in Nigeria is a core objective of this study and after the collection of qualitative data, themes generated shows that some of the psychosocial factors can be categorised under four major themes.

Economic Challenges

The first from the trajectory of responses received from the respondents showed that economic challenge faced by both youth and the elderly is a major cause of suicide. When individuals are unable to take care of their basic economic need due to national economic setbacks such as the events of the recent Covid-19 pandemic that crippled economic activities in several nations of the world and fuel the rate of suicide (see, Acharya, et al., 2022). One of the respondents, a religious leader 2 (venerable) had this to say:

The rate of suicide is rampant because of
the economy of the country- **Religious
leader 2 /Venerable /Ekiti**

This response is evidence that the increase in economic challenges in a nation with increased sufferings has the tendency of leading people to commit suicide. Economic challenges can also emanate from social outcomes from interactions among individuals. Social outcomes of unwanted pregnancy coupled with economic challenges within a nation and influence people to commit suicide. One of the respondents had this to say from his experience of a pregnant women and a man in debt who took their lives:

I have experienced the case of a pregnant lady who killed herself and economic breakdown is a major cause. I feel she couldn't face the shame of being pregnant, but I don't

think she wanted to kill herself, she just wanted to remove the shame, the man who hung himself was in huge debts and his salaries were not coming forth so he decided to kill himself – **Religious leader 1 /Venerable /Ekiti**

Crime also increases when there is economic hardship has suggested by the strain theory. In other to have a means of survival, individuals engage in different forms of crime such as fraud which can lead their victims to commit suicide. One of the respondents had this to say:

Suicide can be caused when one is defrauded by scammer, poor economy of the country, jilting, working and there's nothing to show for it, lackadaisical attitude of the leaders to the led, spiritual attack; curses- **Religious leader 2 /Cathedral /Ekiti**

Financial inability epitomizes a period of economic challenge when an individual is unable to afford for his basic social needs. Financial incapacity can be frustrating and lead both young and hold to take their lives. One of the interviewees had this to say:

Many things cause it, one is financial inability, and in Nigeria presently economic factor has led many to early grave. Two, unsolved family issues and family secrets, secrets between the spouses that will eventually leaked, which has lead t many deaths or suicide. – **Religious leader 3/pastor. Ogun state**

Life frustration

A major concept in the proposition of the strain theory is that frustration from life challenges influences people's decision to take their own life. Frustration is influenced by various factors which ranges from unmet expectations, disappointments, and the feeling that life is not worth living anymore. Frustration has both social and psychological antecedents, and this is evidence from the interview responses. Police officer 1 in Ekiti had this to say:

There was a guy who stays alone in Abeokuta who do come around to check on his girlfriend here, he committed suicide. He got tired of life because he didn't have a job and didn't have money, he decided to drink sniper and he ended his life - **Police officer1/ Ekiti state command**

Frustration has the tendency of leading to depression and the ultimate outcome of suicide. Due to difficulties experienced in different aspect of life. When individuals experience poor living standard. Frustration because of unmet expectations/needs in a low-income country like Nigeria influences the decision of people to take their own lives. One of the respondents had this to say:

Frustration, depression, very poor standard of living and the Economic factor covers everything. The salary those who are employed are getting is not enough for them not to talk of those who are not employed at all - **Police officer1/ Ekiti state command**

This submission was also supported by another respondent:

One thing I have concluded in my mind is that everyone in Nigeria has one other issue because of the frustration in the country and the way the day-to-day activities is being run. That's my own belief but depression is a mental issue -**Police officer1/ Ekiti state command**

Frustration from life experience can be challenging and without appropriate emotional support, it could trigger the intention to commit suicide as observed from the responses.

Mental issues

Psychological matters are issues affecting the mind, and it is related to the mental and emotional state of an individual. Both social and individual problems could have psychological impacts if not well managed. Unfortunately, psychological strain has been rampant in Nigeria due to social and economic challenges. These issues affect the minds and lead to mental and emotional

inappropriate conditions. One of the respondents commented on mental issues as an antecedent of suicide.

Psychologically, before someone will decide to commit suicide he or she would be suffering psychologically, it is only psychologists that can detect one's mind and attitude through behavioural pattern of the person. Mental illness doesn't just come in a day, so suicide casualties are more likely to be suffering psychologically - **Ekiti/Police Admin/**

Mental issues that can trigger suicide are not limited to those who are confined to mental health homes and psychiatric hospitals. People with good jobs, families and friends who engage in daily activities. A divisional police officer in Ondo state provided this insight:

Yes, in most of the cases they suffered mental problem. It is not only those that are on the street walking naked that are mad some living at home are mentally imbalanced and they do normal things we do but are emotionally imbalanced. Sometimes anything can just happen to them somehow and they may not know what happened to them. – **Ondo/Divisional police head**

Social and psychological issues can be intertwined and could both combine to influence the decision for individuals to take their life. Issues such as joblessness, depression, poverty, and inability to take care of personal needs. One of the police officers in Ekiti had this to say:

Not that it is not increasing but it is not common. Joblessness, depression, Poverty; when someone can't feed his month talk less of feeding someone else, No means of livelihood, Jilting, Actions of parents; maltreatment, and neglect, terminal illness, mental illness; unsound mind. – **Police officer 3/ Ekiti state**

Family issues

Challenges within families of orientation and procreation are also identified as a factor that can influence the decision of suicide. When there are internal issues within family that results into isolation, it is found here that this can also lead to suicide. One of the opinion leaders provided more insight on this:

Family members are not always happy when a member commits suicide because of stigmatisation. Also, family and friends' abandonment. He made mention of his former driver who committed suicide, family members, especially his children and wife left him, and he became so lonely. He stressed further that the day the man committed suicide, he called a small boy in the neighbourhood to help him get something and the boy refused to answer him, the man just went inside and hanged himself –

Opinion leader/Ogun state/Oluwo

The family has a role to play in ensuring that their family members are in the right state of the mind. Family members can also create psychic support for one another when there is mutual love and commitment without any form of tension. Where there is so much tension and unhappiness, the social outcomes can be devastating among family members. One of the religious leaders/Oluwo, commented on this:

The family has a role to play, in fact a major role and some of them have also contributed to the trend suicide that has been occurring within the southwestern state. Some are insensitive to the behaviours of their members, even use of foul languages that also dampens the spirit of their family members which makes them feel unwanted and they end up committing suicide. –

Religious leader/ Oluwo/Ogun state

There is also the dynamics of parent's limiting what their children have access to, especially children of parents who belong to the upper-class status in the society. Limitation to them, is seen as a sign of rejection, an abuse of their rights which could

lead to the decision to take their life. A religious leader: Cathedral in Ekiti had this to say:

In the case of Rich people with spoilt children who is denied some access to some things, they can decide to cause their family sorrow by taking their life's -
Religious leader 2 /Cathedral /Ekiti

5. Discussion of Findings

The global rate of suicide is alarming, and the prevalence in Africa, especially Nigeria, is more worrisome. The causes of suicide have been evaluated from a different perspective; however, studies on the psychosocial dimension in Africa are limited. With the increasing rate of Suicide in Nigeria and the literature gap in the psychosocial dimensions, this study explored the psychosocial causes of Suicide in Nigeria through a qualitative approach.

The exploratory examination of interview data revealed that the psychosocial antecedent of suicide is economic challenges, life frustration, mental issues, and family issues. Economic challenges have been identified as social cause of suicide. Economic challenges such as difficulty in getting means of survival and livelihood which ultimately results in a strain (Agnew, 2015). *Has observed from the strain theory, these difficulty in getting a source of living, and inability to have needed economic resources influences people's decision to take their lives. One of the risk factors that lead to suicide identified by Lee and Jung (2006) is risks amounting from individuals' interaction with their external environment. Economic crisis and unemployment are factors in the larger environment which people relate with daily, and their unavailability could lead to suicide.*

The second observed theme is life frustration. Frustrations because of the individuals' inability to meet up with his/her needs, unmet expectation, failure and disappoints when many efforts have been invested without the expected outcome. Carballo, et al., (2020) in their study identified life frustration issues as "stressed life events" to be an antecedent of suicide. Thus, when individuals get frustrated because of unmet expectations and goals, the thought of suicide is sometimes conceived and taken.

On the psychological aspect, mental issues are also found to influence decisions to take one own life in Nigeria. Has identified by Carballo, et al., (2020), psychological factors that lead to suicide are depression, drug or alcohol abuse, and anxiety - all these factors were found among individuals who are psychologically affected by life issues, they get into a stage of depression and subsequently end their life.

The last theme is family issues. The family is expected to be a place of abode and psychic support for its members; however, issues also emanate from the family that influence people's decision to take their life. Issues such a feeling of rejection by loved ones, divorce, marital abuse amongst others. The submission of Lee and Jung (2006) corroborates the findings from this study as the authors observed that through the loss of members, abuse and discord current could lead to the thought of Suicide (Lee and Jung, 2006). Challenges in the family can lead to emotional trauma, depression, and the decision to take one 's own life.

The social issues identified are economical, life frustration and family issues, while the psychological issues are related to mental health. However, both social and psychological issues are interwoven and lead to one another; social challenges could lead to psychological issues and vice versa and could trigger the intention to commit suicide.

6. Implication and Conclusion

Themes such as economic challenges, life frustration, and mental and family issues represent the dimensions of psychosocial causes of Suicide in Nigeria. These issues are interwoven, and a one-fit-size-all approach can be considered. Psychic support from friends and families and increased social bonds can reduce the outcome of suicide. There will always be issues of economic challenges, frustration because not all goals will be met and family challenges that cannot be overruled. However, where there is psychic support and social cohesion, the outcome of suicide can be reduced.

Informal relationships should be encouraged in organisations, among colleagues and friends. This will help individuals going through any form of social or psychological strain to get relieved before making decisions such as suicide. Increasing social bonds among family members is crucial, and families must put in place practices that will encourage social cohesion among members.

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