



Self-esteem and stress as correlates of Suicide thought among Undergraduates of Benue State University, Makurdi.

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Abstract

This study investigated self-esteem and stress as correlates of suicide thoughts among university students of Benue State University, Makurdi. Using a descriptive survey design; the study adopted purposive sampling technique to select 402 undergraduates (208 males and 194 females) from all the 7 faculties of Benue state University, Makurdi. Rosenberg self-esteem scale, Becks' Suicide Ideation Inventory and Life Experiences Survey (LES) were used as instruments for data collection. Analysis of data was done using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) at .05 level of significance. The study revealed significant correlation between the independent variables (self-esteem and stress) and the dependent variable (Suicide thought) on the following order, Self-esteem $R(400) = 0.216$, $p < .05$, and Stress $R(400) = 0.174$, $p < .05$). Among the recommendation is the fact that Lots of awareness and knowledge about suicidal thoughts among undergraduates should be created in order to provide a guideline for possible prevention program or treatments for those students who are experiencing the ideas of suicidal. This study came to existence as an attempt to raise the awareness about suicidal ideations' risk factors and prevention so that university students in crisis may be recognized and helped.

Keywords: Stress, Self-esteem, Suicide thoughts. Undergraduates.

Introduction

Suicidal thought or the thought of suicide could be regarded as intent, plan and imagination of an individual concerning their wish to commit suicide. When looking at suicidal ideation we do not look into suicide attempts or complete suicide but the thought of an individual concerning suicide. Suicide, world over is one of the most

prevalent psychosocial issue which cause a lot of pain to loved ones who are left behind. After the act, it may be impossible to know the internal thoughts or motives that drove any individual to commit suicide. Since suicidal ideation occur among variety of people (young and old, rich and poor, educated or less educated), it can be very difficult to pin point a typical suicidal ideation profile among college students. Such worldwide problem of suicidal thought has been considered a significant factor leading to death according to many researchers. Nock, Borges and Bromet, (2008) affirms that between 22% and 38% of young adults have suicidal thoughts at some point in their developmental life stages. According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (2010), suicidal ideation is the precedent factor of suicide which is the second leading cause of death among (25-34) year olds and the third leading cause of death among (15- to 24) year olds, and accounts for 12.2% of all deaths annually in U.S.A. and other developed countries.

It is strongly believed that suicidal behaviors appear to be problematic among university students and young adults all over the world. Suicidal thought among university students has unique circumstances due to the stress that occur in university life, including changes in family and peer relationships. Self- esteem levels can be an important issue during the first year of college students' life. People with low self- esteem develop a feeling to harm themselves because they are not living up to their expectations that may be developed internally by the students and externally by other (Kaur, & Rani, (2012). People usually preoccupied with the thoughts of



suicidal thoughts to overcome and block unbearable emotional pain, caused by a wide variety of stressful life problems (Whitlock, & Knox, 2007).

Suicidal thought is viewed as a preoccupation with intensive mindset of ending one's own life, while suicide is the completed act of taking one's life (Conner, Duberstein, Conwell, Sidik, 2008). According to Lester (2006), suicidal act viewed as unethical and immoral in all Islamic countries, and considered to be a sin committed against God's will. However in some other cultures it may not be illegal or unethical to commit suicide.

Studies have reported that self-esteem is a powerful internal protective factor against adolescent suicide behaviors (Whitlock & Knox, 2007). Researchers have argued that external resources in terms of availability of social support, especially from the family, can reduce the risk for suicidal behavior and can be invaluable during periods of increased stress (Compton, Thompson, & Kaslow, 2005). In this context, Tsang and Yip (2006) found that higher levels of family cohesion and family support were associated with lower levels of suicidal ideation among African American college students. Self-esteem is the sum of attitudes which depend on perceptions, thoughts, evaluations, feelings and behavioral tendencies aimed toward ourselves, the way we are and behave, and our body's and character's features. The biggest influence on self-esteem is parenting, acceptance, and control. In other words, it's one self's evaluative perception. Young children have relatively high self-esteem, which gradually declines over the course of childhood. As children develop

cognitively, they begin to base their self-evaluations on external feedback and social comparisons. As they grow older, they form a more balanced and accurate appraisal of their academic competence, social skills, attractiveness, and other personal characteristics. Self-esteem continues to decline during adolescence which has been attributed to the adolescent body image and other problems associated with puberty. Adolescence is the critical period for the development of self-esteem and self-identity, and low self-esteem may endanger adolescents' emotional regulation (Tsang, Yip, 2006). Adolescence could be seen as a critical stage in the lives of individuals, in which one consolidate their values and identity and they conquer autonomy, achievements that frequently lead to psychological and relational tensions and the risk of problematic or maladaptive behaviors. Young adults life is highly determined by the developmental and how effectively they maneuvered through these stages. With self esteem a majority of the youth tend to have a positive self concept if the stages of development were well addressed. A majority of individuals who suffer low self esteem can be traced back to a past relationship that may have influenced the feelings. A negative view of the self may involve seeing the self as worthless and the future as hopeless. The adolescent with low self-esteem may see life as not worth living and may perceive everyday stressors as overwhelming. Low self-esteem has been found to be important in the prediction of suicidal ideation among high school students (Dukes and Lorch, 1989). The presence and severity of suicidal ideation in adolescents with affective disorders has been



related to low self esteem (Harris & Mollock, 2006). Low self-esteem is also implicated in suicide attempts made by adolescents (Tsang & Yip, 2006). Furthermore, negative self-evaluations were associated with increased suicidal tendencies, number of suicidal gestures, seriousness of suicidal intent, and medical lethality of the attempt in a study of 64 adolescent psychiatric inpatients (Harris & Mollock, 2000). Thus, self-esteem deficits appear to be directly related to suicidal tendencies, including both suicidal ideation and suicide attempts in adolescents.

Stress is a response of the human body to any stimulus that disrupts the individual's homeostasis (Selye 1974). Because these responses are unavoidable, individuals are faced with the constant urge to maintain internal balance. Accordingly, any experience that affects one's homeostasis is considered to be stress (Rice, 1992). Social scientists have expanded Hans Selye's notion of physiological stress to include social, cognitive, and psychological or mental stress. Mullis, Youngs, MuUis, and Rathge (1993) proposed that stress is a function of an individual's appraisal of a life stressor and therefore, a cognitive process. Similarly, Lazarus (1993) contended that the extent to which individuals experience stress is determined by their subjective evaluations of their experiences. Therefore, if individuals appraise an event as traumatic, they will experience more stress from the experience than will individuals who appraise the event as nonsignificant. Researchers (e.g., Bartle-Haring, Rosen, & Stith, 2002) have noted the importance of reducing stress by helping youth develop positive perceptions of the self in order to avoid catastrophic socioemotional



outcomes such as suicidal behavior. Indeed, exposure to stress by youth has been linked to severe emotional and psychological problems (Bartle- Haring, Rosen, & Stith, 2002)

The search for identity, a naturally stressful demand on youth can be overwhelming to some adolescents and predispose them to thoughts of suicide (Lester, 2006). Hence, the high incidence of adolescent suicide is assumed to be indicative of societal stress in the lives of young people have found that suicide attempts among adolescents do tend to increase as stress levels increase. Academic pressure, work related problems, interpersonal difficulties, death of loved ones, illnesses, and loss of relationships have been found to be significant stressors on young people (Butler, Novy, Gagan, & Gates, (2009) maintained that a poor or an overachieved academic performance can serve as a precursor to stress, subsequent depression, and suicidality. They also reported that serious suicide attempts seem to be higher among students who experience considerable academic success and less serious suicide attempts more indicative of students who are failing at school. Those researchers argued that academically successful students experience greater amounts of stress than do their less successful peers because more successful students feel more pressure to maintain their level of performance. This pressure may cause them to increase the lethality of their suicidal intent. However, students who have consistently exhibited a pattern of academic failure may simply engage in risk-taking behaviors (e.g., criminal acts, risky sexual activity) that predispose them



to suicidality. On the other hand, Petzel and Riddle (1981) observed that the majority of suicidal students in both high school and college are receiving passing scores in their academic classes, an indication that academic performance is not the only significant factor that contributes to the occurrence of suicide.

Research findings have indicated an inverse correlation between life stressors and Suicide ideation (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, (2008). Specifically, too much academic stress predisposes adolescents to depression and other psychiatric difficulty (Garber, Robinson, &Valentiner, 2007; Therefore, it is conceivable that students need to enhance their ability to cope effectively with stress because individuals with poor coping mechanisms are more vulnerable to environmental stressors (Simonds, McMahon, & Armstrong, 1991). In this study, the association between adolescent stress and suicidal ideation was examined.

Statement of Problem

The thought of suicide and even the actual suicide are trends that are gradually being experienced and prevalent undergraduates in tertiary institutions in Nigeria and beyond. Suicidal thought has been considered a significant factor leading to death, particularly among youths and adolescents especially in our institutions of higher learning. It is strongly believed that a suicidal behavior affects many among university students and young adults all over the world. The thought of suicide among university youth have unique circumstances due to factors such as self-esteem and stress that occur in university life, including changes in family and peer

relationships. The current study examined the Self-esteem and stress as correlates of suicide thoughts among undergraduates. Apart from the dearth in Literature, much of the research to date has focused on the associations of either self-esteem or stress to actual suicide but not to the thought of suicide. Majority of studies have examined the relationships in clinical populations. Thus, the researcher intends to fill this gap. The present study therefore tried to see Self-esteem and stress as correlates of suicide thoughts among undergraduates of Benue state University, Makurdi.

Research Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between self-esteem and Suicide thoughts among undergraduates of Benue state University.
2. There is no significant relationship between stress and Suicide thoughts among undergraduates of Benue state University.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey design: Utilizing the purposive sampling technique to select 402 first year Undergraduates from all the faculties and departments in the university. All the students were given the choice to participate or not in the study, and they were seen in their classrooms or at the various relaxation parks. The ones that accepted to participate after telling them what was expected were given the instruments to fill and return.

Participants:



The sample was selected from students that cut across all the faculties and departments in the university. The sample consisted of 402 students. They consisted of 208 males and 194 females. They were informed about the purpose of the study as well as about their rights and expectations from participating in this study. They all gave their verbal consent to participate.

Table 1 shows the distribution of the socio-demographic variables.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of sex of students

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Males	208	51.7
Females	194	48.3
Total	402	100

Table 1 indicates that 278 (51.7%) of the students were males while 194(48.2%) of the students were females.

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Age grades of students

Age Grade	Frequency	Percent
15-17 yrs	197	49.0
18-20 yrs	205	51.0

Total	402	100
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Table 2 shows that students' between ages 15-17 years were 197 (49.0%), those between 18-20 yrs were 205(51.0%).

Table 3: Frequency and percentages for Religion

Religion	Frequency	Percent
Christianity	370	92.03
Islam	15	3.73
Traditional	17	4.2
Total	402	100.00

Table 3 shows the religious affiliations of the students, 370 (92.03%) were Christians, 15 (3.73%) were Islam while 17 (4.2%) were traditionalists.

Procedure

The researchers approached the students in their classes when they had free period, and others were approached while relaxing at the various students parks within the school environment, the researchers ensured they used only the first year students because most of them fell within the adolescent period. The participants were administered questionnaires with the other research assistants. The questionnaire took between 25 minutes to complete and was collected back the same day by the researchers for analysis.

Instrumentations:



To measure self-esteem, the **10 item Rosenberg self-esteem scale** was used. Developed by Morris Rosenberg, in 1965, it had a reliability coefficient of between 0.77 to 0.88. A Pilot study also conducted by the researcher among 50 students of University of Mkar, in Banue state and it yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.81. Items in the scale include: “on the whole, I am satisfied with myself”; “At times, I feel I am not good at all”; “I feel that I have a number of good qualities”; “I am able to do things as well as most other people do”; “I wish I could have more respect for myself” etc.

Beck’s Suicide Ideation Inventory (BSII) was used. The scale is a 19-items instrument that evaluates the presence and intensity of suicidal. Thoughts in a week before evaluation. Self-reporting edition of the scale was introduced by Beck et al., in 1988 (13). Each item is scored based on an ordinal scale from 0 to 2 and the total score is 0 to 38. Individuals answer to the first 5 items which is excerpted. If individual's answer to the fifth item is positive (scores 1 and 2), he/she answers the rest of the items and otherwise the questionnaire is completed. Some of the items include [1] “Wish to live”? with options including (a) Moderate to strong (b) Weak (c) None [2] “Wish to die”? with options including (a) None (b) Weak (c) Moderate to strong. [3] Reasons for living/dying: with options [a]. For living outweigh for dying (b) About equal (c) For dying outweigh for living. The items assess the extent of suicidal thoughts and their characteristics as well as the patient's attitude towards them; the extent of the wish to die, the desire to make an actual suicide attempt, and

details of plans, if any; internal deterrents to an active attempt; and subjective feelings of control and/or "courage" regarding a proposed attempt.

To determine the reliability of the Becks suicide Ideation inventory, a pilot study was carried out on students, the researcher administered it to 50, students outside the sample of the study. The reliability of the scale established through the overall measure of the internal consistency, which was obtained by Cronbach alpha (0.89) which is suitable for the purpose of the study.

A high score on the scale indicated a higher likelihood that students have suicidal ideation or intent. The possible responses ranged from: (0= No suicidal ideation existed), (1= Strongly Disagree), (2= Disagree), (3 = Agree), (4 =Strongly Agree). The possible scores ranged from (0 to 180). The possible score divided into three levels, low level from (0 - 1.33), moderate level from (1.34 – 2.67), and high level from (2.68-4.0).

Life Experiences Survey (LES) developed by Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, (1978) was used to determine stress. The LES is a 60-item instrument designed to measure stressful life events and the importance of life experiences across time of experience. For each event, respondents indicate whether the event occurred within the last six months (1 to six months) or within the last 6 to 12 months; the stressful outcomes are designated as acute and chronic, respectively. The LES assesses the type of appraisal of the life experiences (positive, negative, or total) and evaluates the individual's response patterns. The measure is set on a 7-point Likert-type scale



anchored by - 3 (extremely negative) and 3 (extremely positive). The rating of (0) on the scale indicates that the participant appraises the life experience as having no impact. Because positive life experiences do not cause the (3T) of stress that can potentially lead to thoughts about suicide, only negative life experiences were used in the analysis for the present study. The test-retest reliability for the negative life changes on the life experiences survey have been reported to be .56 and .88 ($p < .001$), respectively (Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978). In addition, the measure shows significant correlations with other well established psychological measures such as the Beck Depression Inventory, Internal-External Locus of control Scale, Holmes and Rahe Scale, and State-Trait Anxiety Inventory.

Data Analysis

Data collected were analyzed using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) at 0.05 level of significance.

Research Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between Self-esteem and suicide thoughts among undergraduates of Benue State University, Makurdi.

Table 4: PPMC summary table showing significant relationship between self-esteem and suicide thoughts among undergraduates in Benue State University, Makurdi.

Variables	N	Mean	SD	R	df	P
Suicide thought	402	12.13	5.34	0.216	400	Sig

Self-esteem	402	10.52	3.89			
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The result in Table 2 shows that self-esteem correlates with suicide thoughts, $r(400) = 0.216$, $p < .05$, the mean and standard deviation for teaching anxiety was 10.52 and 3.89 respectively. This result indicates that when students' level of self-esteem is high, their thought for suicide is low. However, when self-esteem is low, students' suicide thought is high.

Research Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between stress and suicide thoughts among undergraduates in Benue state University.

Table 5:PPMC summary table showing significant relationship between stress and suicide thoughts among undergraduates in Benue State University.

Variables	N	Mean	SD	R	Df	P
Suicide thought	402	12.13	5.34	.174	400	Sig
Stress	402	9.17	2.85			

Table 5: reveals that teachers' with high level of stress have high tendency of suicide thoughts, $r(400) = 0.174$, $p < .05$, the mean and standard deviation for emotional labour was 9.17 and 2.85 respectively, while those students that have low level of stress have low level of suicide thoughts.

Discussion of Results



The result of the first hypothesis shows that self-esteem correlates with suicide thoughts, $r(400) = 0.216, p < .05$, the mean and standard deviation for teaching anxiety was 10.52 and 3.89 respectively. This result indicates that when students' level of self-esteem is high, their thought for suicide is low. However, when self-esteem is low, students' suicide thought is high. Corroborating this, Harris & Mollock, (2000) stated that the presence and severity of suicidal ideation in adolescents with affective disorders has been related to low self esteem. He added that Low self-esteem is also implicated in suicide attempts made by adolescents. Tsang and Yip, (2006) also lending their voices added by saying that negative self-evaluations were associated with increased suicidal tendencies, number of suicidal gestures, seriousness of suicidal intent, and medical lethality of the attempt in a study of 64 adolescent psychiatric inpatients. Thus, self-esteem deficits appear to be directly related to suicidal tendencies, including both suicidal ideation and suicide attempts in adolescents.

The result of hypothesis two revealed that Stress significantly and positively predicted Suicide thought among Undergraduates of Benue State University, Makurdi. $r(400) = 0.174, p < .05$. This means that the higher the score on stress, the higher the score on Suicide thought among Undergraduates. This implies that undergraduate students that experienced more stress academically, physically, mentally and otherwise are more likely to have thoughts of suicide when compared to those who experience less stress, Reason could be due to the fact that tertiary

institution comes with its associated fatigue that could impair their motivation and ability to learn and with the daily learning task in the university. According to Lester (2006), the search for identity, a naturally stressful demand on youth can be overwhelming to some adolescents and students and predispose them to thoughts of suicide. Hence, the high incidence of students' suicide is assumed to be indicative of societal stress in the lives of young people have found that suicide attempts among adolescents do tend to increase as stress due to academic pressures increase. Corroborating this, (Butler, Novy, Gagan, & Gates, (2009) maintained that a poor or an overachieved academic performance can serve as a precursor to stress, subsequent depression, and suicide thoughts.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicates that both self-esteem and stress positively and significantly predicts suicide thoughts among undergraduates as a result of the emotional, psychological and physical situations they pass through in the campus, as such, parents, guardian and teachers are in the unique position of helping adolescents and students improve their self-value and self-worth, problem-solving abilities and coping skills; in turn, this can help them deal with negative life stressors and low self-esteem and reduce the occurrence of intrusive thoughts about suicide.

Recommendations



Management of Tertiary institutions across the country should ensure that courses that relate to self-esteem, such as psychology and Counselling be made as compulsory electives for all first year students coming into the institution, not minding their departments, this will go a long way to helping them develop the skills on how to improve and develop their self-esteem, and further will help to curb incidences such as suicide.

Secondly, Counselors and other caregivers should become aware of the potential factors that can predict students at risk, as such, proper counseling be given to students to help them properly manage and cope with stress while in school.

Lots of awareness and knowledge about suicidal thoughts should be created in order to provide a guideline for possible prevention program or treatments for those students who are experiencing the ideas of suicidal ideation. This study came to existence as an attempt to raise the awareness about suicidal thoughts, risk factors and prevention so that university students in crisis may be recognized and helped.

Counselling psychologists and other mental health practitioners should work towards providing more counseling services and alternative therapeutic interventions for students, especially when they detect unusual life strains—particularly in the college academic environment.

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