

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND ITS MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS AMONG THE YOUTH: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH.

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to explore the mental health effects of substance abuse among the youth and to examine services put in place in helping mentally disturbed as a result of substance abuse. The study adopted a cross-sectional qualitative research approach. The data was collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews. Participants were sampled and divided into two sections: youth abusing substances and key informants. They were drawn using purposive and snowball sampling, and data was analysed qualitatively. The findings confirm that substance abuse is high among the youth in Botswana. Moreover, the findings show that the early onset of substance abuse is often preceded by mental disorders comprising depression, suicidal tendencies and personality disorders. In conclusion, the paper unveils the significance of rehabilitation centers in Botswana. Furthermore, the paper recommends that specific prioritized interventions be identified for support, by social workers, parents, counselors and other professionals dealing with cases of substance abuse and mental health. Lastly, it outlines implications for social work research.

Keywords: substance abuse, mental health, social work.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The issue of substance abuse and mental health is not only peculiar to youth in Botswana but a worldwide phenomenon. Available studies show that mental health and substance use problems often coexist [1,2]. To illustrate the magnitude of youth substance abuse, according to a 2010 report on substance use in Canada, up to 50% of youth who sought substance abuse treatment were found to have a concurrent mental health disorder, such as depression or anxiety [3]. Comparatively, [4] also conducted a study using a larger sample of 538 adolescents at a hospital based adolescent clinic in Boston; substance abuse was reported in 63% of the 165 girls and 56% of the 79 boys with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms. Similarly, substance abuse is widely reported among African youth, constituting to serious social and public health problems [5]. A quantitative research in Ethiopia on the high prevalence of substance use and associated factors among high school adolescents in 2014 found out that the current prevalence of substance use among Woreta high school students was (47.9%) and the life-time prevalence was 65.4%. According to [6] the prevalence rate of substance abuse in Ethiopia was significantly higher than a study done among high school students in Addis Ababa which showed that the life time prevalence was (45.7%). Additionally, [6] points out that in South Africa a study done in a similar setting among adolescent students in Cape Town found

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out that the prevalence was (50.6%). Therefore, this evinces the high prevalence of substance abuse among youth in Africa. This paper contends that, despite the efforts of various stakeholders to raise awareness on substance abuse globally and in Africa, more youth continue to abuse substances. It is of utmost importance to note that the effects of substance abuse on families, communities and nations at large cannot be overemphasized. For this reason, this paper will specifically focus on the substance abuse and its mental effects. An assessment of services put in place to address this problem will also be made.

It is worth noting that in Botswana, most of the available studies in the country focus on the effects and impact of substance abuse, leaving a gap of knowledge, to explore further, on how substance abuse relates with mental health. According to [7,3,8] alcohol and marijuana are the most abused substances in Africa, and Botswana is no exception. This present study was conducted in Serowe village, Botswana, on the grounds that a lot of cases in the psychiatric ward from Sekgoma Memorial Hospital (SMH) in Serowe are a result of substance abuse. Evidence from the statistics obtained in the psychiatric ward at SMH shows that of the 457 registered patients in the year 2014, 148 were alcohol and drug abusers. In the year 2015, from July to December, 162 patients were registered; out of which 95 patients were a result of alcohol and drug abuse, aged between 18 to 35 years old, this registered aged group indicates that there is high drug and alcohol abuse rate. From 2014 to 2015 the statistics gives credence that the number of cases related to drug and alcohol abuse reported at SMH escalated among the youth.

Therefore, this paper argues that the high number of drug and alcohol abuse by the youth in Botswana is a great concern for the Ministry of Health and the community at large. All this clearly demonstrates that efforts to curb alcohol abuse has not only fallen short but has worsened the situation. It is against this background that the present study sought to propose a long lasting solution to address the plight of substance abuse among the youth in Botswana. Lastly, it outlines implications for social research.

2. THEORETICAL DISCOURSE

This section is a briefly discusses the theoretical framework that has been adopted in the present study. According to [9] social cognitive theory considers the unique way in which individuals acquire and maintain behaviour, while also considering the social environment in which individuals perform the behavior. The theory takes into account a person's past experiences, which factor into whether behavioral action will occur. These past experiences influences reinforcements, expectations, and expectancies, all of which shape whether a person will engage in a specific behaviour and the reasons as to why a person would engage in such behavior. Furthermore, the social cognitive theory stresses that evaluating behavior change depends on the following factors; the environment, people and behavior which constantly influence each other [10]. The theory is further incorporated in the next section on presentation and discussion of results

3. METHOD

3.1 Participants

The sample included 18 participants comprising 15 and 3 social workers employed in the health setting. There were more male participants represented in the study than their female counterparts. This is shown by the frequency of males, which is represented by 70% as opposed to 30% of females.

3.2 Sampling Technique

This present study adopted non-probability sampling, namely purposive and snow ball. Purposive sampling was chosen on the grounds that, the study focused on a certain group of individuals being youth aged 15-35 years with experience in substance abuse. It was also used to select the key informants knowledgeable on issues of substance abuse and mental health. In addition, the technique was used on the basis that, it is less time consuming since it allowed eliminating of participants that did not fit in the study. It was very handy in selecting the key informants knowledgeable on issues of substance abuse and mental health who receive cases on substance abuse and mental health in their line of duty on a daily basis. Snowball on the other hand was used in finding youth participants involved with substance abuse. The sampling technique was convenient owing to the fact that participants with whom contact has already been made used their social networks and referred us to other respondents who participated in the study.

3.3 Data collection

Data was collected through the use of in-depth face to face interview. The participants were assured of confidentiality and allowed to express themselves with minimal interruptions. Data from the interviews was recorded through the use of a tape recorder. The interview session took 30-40 minutes and the interview guide consisted of 12 questions which were derived from the study objectives.

3.4 Ethical consideration

Considering ethics in research is of paramount importance. Therefore, it is important that researchers are well aware of and understand the basics of ethical research and how they might affect the research project. As noted earlier on, participation by respondents was voluntary and free, they were not be coerced into providing information. Permission was sought beforehand and preceded after participants had signed the consent form. To adhere to anonymity, information from each participant was analysed in such a way that it cannot be traced to any specific individual. For instance, names of participants were not used rather they were assigned numbers.

3.5 Limitations of the study

The study findings should be cautiously interpreted due to some limitations. The findings of this study cannot be generalised to the larger population on the grounds that the sample size was small and unique to the people who participated. Furthermore, the study was cross sectional and location specific hence limiting external validity.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Substance abuse among the youth

Participants were asked to indicate how they ended up being into substances and the age they started indulging in drugs. In responding to these questions, several answers were mentioned and with respect to the introduction of drug most of the participants reported to have taught themselves while some were introduced to drugs by their friends, classmates and family members. With regard to the most abused substance, of the fifteen youth interviewed a significant majority reported marijuana to be the drug that they have ever abused the most

compared to other drugs. However, few participants reported alcohol to be the substance they abuse the most. Still on that note, very few participants reported to having used cocaine the most. One participant also stated that the most abused substances were a combination of cigarette and alcohol whilst another participant reported to have used *Madiana* the most. However, the key informants comprising social workers and a psychiatrist also found marijuana to be the most prevalent substance among the youth in SMH looking at some of the cases they receive.

In reaction to the issue of frequency, all the youth participants reported smoking daily usually three times or more in a day. In relation to alcohol the general consensus was that participants reported drinking alcohol four times in a week. To find out factors contributing to abuse of substances, participants were asked to outline reasons for using substances. During the interview, participants indicated that people abuse substances due to different reasons. Moreover, when interviewed, the significant minority of the participants pointed out using substances because of the influence from their friends. They laid a point that they usually want to fit into the crowd and to please their friends. In addition, one female participant emphasized that she was influenced by her partner and could not refuse as her partner tend to be violent when he is high. In contrast, during the interview, only a few participants reported to be using substances to reduce boredom as it always keeps them busy. When participants were asked on the signs that they experience when they do not indulge in substances; most participants indicated not being able to function normally when they have not taken substances. They indicated trembling when they do not take use substances. Nonetheless, two of the fifteen youth participants stated being depressed when they do not indulge in substances, one participant reported that she hallucinates when she does not take in substances for a long time.

4.2 Link between mental health and substance abuse

Participants were asked about the interface between substance abuse and mental illness, whether the former causes the latter. They expressed different viewpoints and the predominant answer was reported to be that substance abuse leads to mental illness. Out of the total population, most of the participants indicated that substance abuse contribute to mental health. However, though the majority of participants reported that substance abuse leads to mental illness, other participants had differing views, as they stated that mental illness causes drug abuse. One participant addressed the issue by saying:

“Well I would like to think the two are interrelated so there is no definite answer, I believe drug abuse causes mental illness and also people who have mental health problems tend to abuse drugs. This is so, because people who abuse drugs tend to become violent and they behave in a way they would not behave on a normal day. Therefore, abusing drugs has severe effects on the brain and a way a person functions and usually people who have mental illness tend to abuse drugs”.

The remaining two of the fifteen participants reported not knowing which one causes the other but they do not think abusing substance can lead to mental illness. The key informants were also asked of their opinion on the causal relationship between mental illness and substance abuse. All three key informants interviewed, reported that the two are related and cannot be separated. The key informants were also asked about the frequency of substance abuse among people with mental illness. All of the key informants reported that it is often and indicated that there are more than ninety percent drug problems among people who have a mental illness.

4.3 Mental health effects of substance abuse among the youth

One of the questions asked to participants was on whether substance abuse has some mental health effects and they were asked to elaborate such effects. They reported that likely mental health effects include depression, suicidal attempts, stress disorder, mood disorders, psychotic disorders, personality disorder. Most of the participants emphasized that substance abuse leads to depression. During the in-depth interview, the participants pointed out that due to drug addiction which comes with a variety of problems such as financial constraints can lead to depression. Additionally, three of the eighteen participants said that they were once diagnosed with depression due to the abuse of substances such as cocaine, marijuana. In addition, the in-depth interview which was done by the key informants also found depression to be one of the mental health effects that is associated with the abuse of substances. For instance the social worker stressed that the clients that she is dealing with at the psychiatric unit are mostly diagnosed with depression. With regard to suicidal tendencies, very few participants stated that usually abusing substances can lead to suicidal attempts.

From the study findings, other participants reported that mood disorders are some of the mental health effects associated with substance abuse. On the grounds that mood disorders are associated with depression and bipolar disorder, minority of the participants said substance abuse can lead to mood disorders because people indulging in drugs may feel irritable at times and feel hopeless. In reaction to this issue, the psychiatrist emphasized that the most common psychiatric co-occurring disorders are substance abuse and mood disorders. She further pinpointed that it is common for people with mood disorders to turn to substance abuse and the substance abuse, in turn, exacerbates the effects of the mood disorder. With respect to psychotic disorders, most participants reported psychotic disorders as one of the mental health effects associated with abusing substances. They reported that usually people indulging in substances especially those using more than one substance tend to lose touch of reality and get to see things that are not even there (hallucinations). Six participants reported to having been diagnosed with the disorder while using cocaine and crack. They reported to have seen things which did not even exist.

4.4 Services put in place to help people who are mentally disturbed as a result of substance abuse

In terms of services that are put in place to help people who are mentally disturbed as a result of substance abuse, participants were asked to name services which are in place, and they were also asked to indicate whether they are effective and accessible. According to the study findings, most participants stated being aware of services such as the psychiatric unit from Sekgoma Memorial Hospital as well as the support group run by medical social workers. One of the social worker summarized this by saying:

“They receive help from clinics and hospital at the psychiatric ward where they have a chance to meet with social workers who engage them with behaviour modification techniques, finding ways to deal with their addiction if they are willing to quit what they should do and how they should do it, how to overcome challenges that come with quitting, psychosocial education which involve general education on the effects of substance abuse, cognitive restructuring because they have negative perceptions and needs like they feel intelligence so they need cognitive restructuring. The other service is a support group for those still using and who have stopped, it consist of both male and females who use different substances and it is an open group basically they share experiences and explore side”.

With respect to the effectiveness and the accessibility, most participants indicated that the services are effective and accessible. However, there is still more which needs to be done. Furthermore the participants were also asked to come up with recommendation in relation to the issue of substance abuse and mental health effects among youth. Most of them reported that it is high time the government initiates rehabilitation centres and that programme should be initiated at primary school level to sensitize children on the impacts of substance abuse.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Prevalence of substance abuse among the youth

It is evident from the results that there is a high substance use among the youth in Botswana. All the key informants indicated that there is a high prevalence of substance abuse among the youth by reporting that they receive cases daily, which are associated with substance abuse, and this makes substance abuse one of the very important problems among the youth in the contemporary days. The results concur with [10] that the use of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis and other psychoactive substances constitutes one of most important public health problems among the youth worldwide. Still in relation to the prevalence of substance abuse, the findings revealed that the majority of the participants have taught themselves while some were introduced to drugs by their friends, classmates, family members. Therefore, these findings are consistent with social cognitive theory which explains how people acquire and maintain certain behaviour, in that, it stresses that the individual learned experiences and the social environment including societal pressures and role models provide a framework for understanding behaviour. The findings of the study revealed that the youth have learned the behaviour of using illicit drugs and alcohol from their social environment such as classmates and friends. This high prevalence rate of substance will continue increasing because of the societal pressures that the environment instills on the youth.

Another observation made in the research finding with regard to the most abused substance; of the fifteen youth participants, most of them reported marijuana to be the drug that they have ever abused the most compared to other drugs. In contrast, some participants reported alcohol to be the most drug they abuse the most. Along the same line, few participants reported to having used both alcohol and marijuana the most at the same time. Furthermore, a few participants argue that the most abused substances were a combination of cigarette and alcohol whilst only one participant reported to have used *Madiana* more often. From the results it is evident that marijuana is the most abused drug followed by alcohol respectively. It is worth noting that the results are supported by a survey in the United States of America, which concluded that marijuana was the most common illicit drug chosen by teenagers, and more than 50% of high school seniors had used it [3]. Additionally, the findings are also supported by a study conducted among high school students in Botswana, which also reported Marijuana to be the most commonly used substance among secondary school students [11].

In sharp contrast to the above results, a study done in Limpopo, South Africa reveals that the most commonly used substances are Cannabis (49%), Inhalants (39%), bottled wine (32%), home-brewed beer (30%), and commercially brewed beer used by (54.8%) of the youth [12]. However, comparatively, another study by Texas Department of Health Services (2008) in conjunction with the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas University (2008) found out that alcohol continued to be the most abused substance by secondary school students (63%), followed by tobacco (30%), marijuana (25%), inhalants (9.3%), and cocaine (6.8%). These findings hold different results in relation to the most abused drug. One of the more significant findings to

emerge from this present study is that there are more males abusing substances than females. This observation is also evinced by the previous studies which were conducted in this area. To substantiate this, [1] conducted a study on prevalence of substance use among college students in Eldoret, western Kenya and results indicated that lifetime prevalence rate of any substance use was (69.8%), with males having statistically significantly higher rates than females. On yet another study done by [12] results has also shown that males had higher prevalence (13.4%) than females (4.9%).

Moreover, the above results are supported by social cognitive theory, which posits that the prevalence rate of substance abuse could be lower in females compared to males which might be caused by the lower female rate on responding to stimuli on achieving societal goals. Through the selective interactions with their environment, adolescents might reciprocally interact with drug dealers, available alcohol and behaviors associated with drug consumption which generates a high prevalence rate in the findings of this study. Participants expressed different viewpoints on the question of the reasons for abusing drugs. The results reveal that most of the participants pointed out that they use substances because of the influence from their friends. Whereas few participants reported to be using substances to reduce boredom as it always keeps them busy, and to boost their confidence as they indicated that it makes them feel alive and helps them to be able to concentrate. The different opinions that exist on the reasons for the abuse of substances are also reflected in the divergent views in the literature review regarding the matter. For instance, according to [5] international studies have shown that nearly 92% of the youth experiment with both licit and illicit alcohol, tobacco, bhang, inhalants (glue, petrol) and heroin, among others, during the growing up process, for different purposes such as influence from friends and some believing that it will increase their level of thinking hence making them confident.

Furthermore, when asked on the signs they experience if they do not use substances, participants revealed quite different experiences. Most of the participants reported not being able to function when they do not use the drugs as they indicated that substances kept them going. The research results correlates with all literature reviewed on the subject of the prevalence of substance abuse among the youth and it shows that the rates of abuse are high among different substances and causes significant physical and psychosocial problems in this population.

5.2 Link between mental health and substance abuse

From the findings of the study, it is clear that there is a strong relationship between mental health and substance abuse. This is validated [13] who indicate that young adults with mental health conditions have higher rates of substance-related disorders. From the present study findings, most of the participants indicated that substance abuse leads to mental health. The majority of the participants attributed this link to dependence to drugs. These findings concur with the findings of [14] that many people who regularly abuse drugs are also diagnosed with mental disorders and vice versa. Similarly, according to the social cognitive theory, through the concept of behavioral capability which states that continuous learning, adaptation and successfully abusing substances such as marijuana and alcohol; youth are more prone to developing mental illness. The findings of the study show the link between mental health and substance abuse.

Furthermore, all key informants stipulated that mental health and substance abuse are related and cannot be separated taking into consideration that most of the substance abusers frequent have more than one mental illness such as depression, bipolar, epilepsy and depression. These present study findings are consistent with the [15] which show that drug abuse and other mental illnesses are often comorbid. However, the results of the study show that few of the participants do not

recognize a link between substance abuse and mental health. This confirms [16] discovery that substance abuse does not always lead to mental health or that there is always a correlation between the two. This concurs with the social cognitive theory component of expectations which states that people anticipate the consequences of their actions before engaging in the behaviour, and these anticipated consequences can influence successful completion of the behaviour. Expectations derive largely from previous experience. The results show that the participants that abuse substance but not having mental illness anticipated the consequences of their substance intake and managed their substance intake hence; they never developed mental illness as a result of substance abuse.

5.3 Mental health effects of substance abuse among the youth

The results of the present study show that substance abuse has negative effects on mental health. Thus, substance abuse leads to mental health disorders comprising depression, suicidal tendencies, mood disorders, psychotic disorders and personality disorders which are explained below. Most of the study participants stated that drug addiction leads to financial constraints which facilitate depression. The literature shows that substance use increases with the severity of depressive symptoms [2]. According to social cognitive theory on observational learning; people can witness and observe behaviour conducted by others, and then reproduce those actions. Therefore, it became apparent that participants in the study observed and learned abusing substance and alcohol, from the people in their environment and modeled the behaviour until they developed mental health illness such as depression.

In addition females interviewed in the study revealed that they had depression. The findings replicate the results of earlier research [17] who pointed out that 16 to 19 year old females were more than six times more likely to experience depression if they were alcohol abusers than if they were not, and that drug abuse was strongly associated with a lifetime prevalence of depression. However, the findings of the study reveal that depression is the most common mental health illness among the participants as validated by the key informants; however it is hard to determine whether depression is directly caused by substance abuse. From the findings a few participants reported that substance abuse lead to mood disorders. One of the key informants stated that people with mood disorders turn to substance abuse because of the social problems that they encounter in their lives.

According to [18] mood disorders is associated with several psychosocial problems, including employment problems, criminal behavior, and lower academic achievement. Similarly, a research that was done among college students suggests that students with greater symptoms of mood disorders are at risk of many problems, including academic failure, dropping out of school, interpersonal problems, and risky behaviors such as drug use or risky sexual activities [19,20]. In addition the findings of the study revealed that half of the participants reported psychotic disorders. Comparatively studies of adults have found that psychotic disorders in general tend to be positively related to abuse of, and dependence on, both alcohol and illicit drug [21,22]

5.4 Services put in place to help people who are mentally disturbed as a result of substance abuse

According to the study findings, most of the participants reported awareness of services such as the psychiatric unit from Sekgoma Memorial Hospital as well as the support group run by medical social workers. The results reveals that patients who are admitted at SMH in the

psychiatric ward are provided with a chance to meet the social worker who engage them with behaviour modification techniques to find ways to deal with their addiction if they are willing to quit and how they should do it, how to overcome challenges that come with quitting. There is also psychosocial education which involves general education on the effects of substance abuse and cognitive restructuring. The results concur with [23,24] that motivational interviewing can also be used to help people engage in treatment, key elements of this technique include expressing empathy, providing feedback, avoiding argumentation, refraining from directly confronting resistance, and encouraging an individuals' belief that he or she has the ability to change.

[25] adds that the technique has been used with individuals with co-occurring disorders to enhance intrinsic motivation, explore and resolve ambivalence, and develop strategies for change which is mostly done at the psychiatric ward as they emphasize on personal choice, responsibility, and awareness of the risks and benefits of continued substance use. The findings of the present study also resonate with available literature which also emphasizes that groups are very helpful, not only in maintaining sobriety, but also as a safe place to get support and discuss challenges. It is therefore the contention of this paper that the findings of this present study can be used to inform policy and practice intervention in Botswana and elsewhere in Africa and around the world.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

This section suggests some strategies in the form of recommendations to mitigate substance abuse and its mental effects among the youth in Botswana and elsewhere in the globe. It is reasonable to expect that social workers advocate for policies and programs that address over incarceration by diverting low level drug offenders to treatment orientated alternatives. Since its inception as a profession, social work has been dedicated to social justice [26]. More importantly, the profession has contributed knowledge of evidence informed practice and policies to national discussions that seek to address needs of vulnerable populations. Therefore, this paper suggest recommendations that should be designed for future researchers, the government and other relevant ministries as well as social workers and other professionals dealing with issues of substance abuse and mental health.

Further research needs to be conducted on this study but on a wider scope covering larger geographical areas in Botswana in order to explore, on a wider scope, the prevalence of substance abuse and its mental health effects among the youth. Social workers and psychiatrists need to conduct various form of epidemiological research to provide scientific baseline data on the problem facing youth in Africa and elsewhere in the world. This will significantly inform the formulation and implementation of appropriate policies in order to influence political decisions with regards substance abuse and mental health issues. In the same way, social workers, parents, counselors and other professionals dealing with cases of substance abuse and mental health should become knowledgeable about the link of substance abuse and mental health. Future research should consider using both qualitative and quantitative method to complement one another. With quantitative method, more participants will be reached given the nature of analysis it uses. This is not the case with qualitative method which was adopted in the study as it analyses participant's words hence uses a smaller sample.

The government should initiate rehabilitation centers to avoid a situation where the patients feel uncomfortable at the psychiatric ward and for better interventions. Furthermore, useful preventative strategies such as enforcing legal action against perpetrators smuggling illegal drugs

into the country, should be put into place. In addition, information dissemination and enhanced sensitization of the on the mental health effects of substance abuse are also a potentially fruitful approach. Lastly, Social workers as a means of providing direct practice, administrative, and program evaluation services to programs treating the mentally ill client, should be hired in these settings.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper reiterates that the problem of substance abuse constitutes one of most important public health problems among the youth worldwide. Based on the study results, the paper has demonstrated that there is a high prevalence of substance abuse among the youth and the findings concluded that more males are affected by the problem as compared to female counterparts. This paper has explicitly and implicitly shown that mental health and substance abuse are related and cannot be separated because most of the substance abusers frequent have more than one mental illness and it is not clear which one causes the other. However, it is evident from this study that substance abuse leads to mental health disorders such as depression, suicidal tendencies, mood disorders, psychotic disorders and personality disorder. The findings suggest that most of the participants stated that drug addiction leads to financial constraints which facilitate depression. Furthermore, the theory of social cognitive was used to explain the prevalence of substance abuse and its mental health effects among the youth. Lastly, based on the findings, the study concludes that there is need for establishment of programs which can help people who are mentally disturbed as a result of substance abuse such as rehabilitation centres and support groups so that they share and learn from their experiences.

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Conflict of interest

As authors of this article we have no competing interests

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