Understanding Self-Determination as a Component of Suicide Resiliency from the Perspective of Young Adult College Students with Suicidal Ideations.

Accepted 6th May, 2016

ABSTRACT

Self-determination is considered as a universal psychological construct contributing to a greater sense of well-being. The current study sought to explore the psychological factor that contributes to the suicidal ideation of the college students in Kerala, which is known as the suicide capital of India (Chua, 2009). The participants were of the age group 19 to 22, selected after being screened for suicidal ideation using Scale of Suicide Ideation (SSI) and Suicide Behavior Questionnaire-Revised (SBQ-R) and further assessed on suicide resiliency and self-determination using standard psychological tests namely; Suicide Resiliency Inventory (SRI-25) and Basic Psychological Needs Scale (BPNS). The study employed focus group methodology and twenty students participated in the focus group discussion to identify the themes related to the lack of self-determination resulting in suicidal ideation. The results supported the significance of the emerged themes on how the individuals become vulnerable to suicidal ideation in the absence of the said psychological factor and the implications of the need to enhance the self-determination qualities of students for a positive adaptation.

Key words: Suicidal ideation, young adults, self-determination, resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Suicide is the third leading cause of death in youth, accounting for 12% of all deaths of youth aged 15 to 24 (AAS, 2009; Xu et al. 2010). Likewise, it is the 14th leading cause of death worldwide, accountable for 1.5% of all mortality (O’Connor and Nock, 2014). Recent research according to Mahmoud et al. (2012) indicates that young adult college students experience increased levels of depression, anxiety and stress that eventually lead them to suicide.

In India, there is a growing public health concern over suicide due to its radical rise in number. The National Crime Records bureau (2014) reported that from the year 2003 to 2013, there is 21.6% rise in the suicide rate, which is very distressing. Statistics further testified that the total number of female suicides increased by 11.4% from 42,192 in 2001 to 46,992 in 2012 (NCRB, 2012). In addition, the recent surveys recognized that females between the age group 18 to 29 are more engaged in suicidal thoughts than the males in India (Sathian et al., 2015, CDC, 2012). According to Radhakrishnan (2012), Sreedhar and Upadhayay (2010), decreased freedom of expression which results in low self-esteem, family pressure and practice of dowry system are some of the socio-cultural factors documented for the increased risk of suicide among women in India. As these facts raise enough concern about future suicide behavior and personal difficulties among young women, efforts aimed at addressing this issue are warranted.

Furthermore, research specifies that there is a complex interplay existing between ecological, biological, cognitive, affective and behavioral factors that predispose youth to suicidal behavior (Wagner, 2009). From a developmental
The present study purported to describe the college students' perceptions and beliefs associated with the lack of self-determination contributing to poor adaptation leading to suicidal ideations.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

To have a greater understanding of the perceptions, opinions and attitudes of the selected group of young adult college students regarding the factors contributing to their positive adaptation (Hennink, 2007), a focus group qualitative design was employed in this study. These findings have a vital role to play in updating the mental health professionals concerning what factors are perceived important by the risk suicidal students in the existing cultural context of India. The purpose behind using this type of methodology is that group discussions can help to explore and clarify the views of people in their own vocabulary what they know and experience and reveals dimensions of understanding that often go untapped by other conventional techniques of data collection (Kitzinger, 1995).

It has been observed that focus groups are often criticized on the ground for offering a narrower understanding of an issue than those attained from individual interviews (Krueger and Casey, 2009) especially when the information are too personal. However, in the current study, no such reluctance was really observed from the part of the participants in expressing their opinions or to share their experiences in front of the other members.

**Participants**

The locus of this study was a reputed college located in the city of Kochi, Kerala state, India. Twenty college students were chosen having the following inclusion criteria: (a) females within the age group of 19 to 22; (b) with suicidal ideation indicated by the suicide screening tests namely; Scale of Suicidal Ideation (SSI) (Beck, 1979) and Suicide Behavior Questionnaire-Revised (SBQ-R) (Osman et al., 2001); (c) low scores in standard Psychological tests such as Suicide Resiliency Inventory (SRI-25) (Osman et al., 2004), Basic Psychological Needs Scale (BPNS) (Deci and Ryan, 2001); (d) without diagnosed mental dysfunctions and (e) fit to participate in a regular pattern of sessions. The homogenous nature of the group such as sociocultural background, gender, educational background and...
area of concern was an added advantage in terms of having a safe environment (Hennink, 2007) and uninhibited discussions (Morgan, 2002) that elicited more understanding on aspects that often remain hidden.

**Procedures**

There were two moderators to conduct the focus group aside from the first author who was the principal facilitator: one to observe and manage the technical aspects and the other to take note of the emerging points. The first author was the one that directed the discussions and clarified the information.

A total of three groups and each group consisted of 6 to 7 participants. Three focus group discussions were conducted with each group lasting for two hours. A series of semi-structured questions were formulated to gather information on the predetermined psychological factor to elicit dialogue related to the factor contributing to the positive adaptation. The participants were encouraged to voice their own opinions and beliefs. The following questions were dealt with in the process: (1) What are the stressors that you experience that lead you to have thoughts of ending your life? (2) What are some of your reactions in terms of ‘immediate thoughts’ and ‘behaviors’ in facing the difficulties/stressors that you encounter in your life? At the end of each focus group the facilitator summarized the key opinions transpired and verified them with the participants.

The participants were verbally briefed about the objectives, aims and time frame. It was emphasized by the facilitator that the partaking in the discussion was purely voluntary and the participants could terminate at any time their participation. A written consent was also obtained with regard to the administration of tests and giving permission to audio record the discussions. It was clearly explained to the participants that the discussions were anonymous and confidential and encouraged the group to engage in the free and open sharing. The contact number of the principal facilitator was provided to the participants in case they had any queries regarding the sessions. The services of a Clinical Psychologist and the Counseling Psychologist were assured and made available to handle emergencies in case it occurred.

**Mode of analysis**

The researcher and the moderators transcribed the audio recorded discussion and interviews and read it several times to discern and give an overall meaning to the sessions (Van Manen, 1990). This was done as a process to search for apt meaning in the text and to extract the important themes. This was the method proposed by Van Manen (1990) for thematic content analyses where he defined thematic analyses as the process of recovering theme or themes that are embodied in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work. The present study utilized the selective or highlighted approach to uncover the thematic phenomenon.

Each discussion of the focus groups was read several times to find the statements or phrases that were particularly revealing about the studied psychological factors. The list of the preliminary themes was organized using the rubrics that incorporated the themes for the psychological factor namely self-determination. Phrases that appeared to be thematically linked to the protective factor of ‘self-determination’ that impacted resiliency were highlighted.

In order to enrich the reliability of the information and to guard the same from against the possible bias (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), the researcher presented the emerged themes and the quotations to the colleagues who are practicing professional psychologists. The themes were thus discussed and perceived as specifically revealing the factor being studied.

**RESULTS**

The stressors that triggered suicidal thoughts among the participants of the focus group included tension and discord in the family due to financial problems, parents’ objection toward choosing a course of interest, unwillingness to spend on professional courses, strained connections with parents, poor self-image, a sense of not belonging and break up in relationships. Each participant articulated her current stressful experience and how these evoked thoughts of ending one’s life.

Many of the participants anticipated the difficult situation unmanageable and uncontrollable and with this realization they became more vulnerable to suicidal thoughts. The following statements were voiced by the participants: “Most of the time I feel I can never get out of my problems”, “Everything makes me go mad”, “Nothing comes to my mind as to what next?”, “I do not think I can do anything about it”, “It will be useless if I get involved”, “I would rather not look into it”, “I feel like giving up of myself once and for all”, “It is like nothing works”, “I have no idea what would help”, “I like to think I do not exist”. These experiences of frustrations indicated the participants’ inability to decide and function and exercise the responsibilities in a more autonomous or self-directed manner in the face of stressors.

Similarly, experiences associated with competence were identified unsatisfying among the participants. Some expressed the feeling of competence as an aspect associated with the freedom to decide and act independently on their choices: “I do not think this course would get me anywhere – that is not my interest”, “I am always told what to do and not what I want” while for others, it was related to having a more control and capacity to manage the crisis. The following verbalizations
highlighted these concerns: “I am anxious every time I think I am helpless to do anything about it”, “It is all beyond what I can… I am not positive about it”, “I get angry with myself with all these stuffs getting out of control”. Feelings of fear and worries about a prospective career, disappointments due to the parents’ hesitance to spend on career oriented courses were also mentioned by a few of them. These thwarting experiences of inadequacies in the personal competency are seen to be making the participants more sensitive to stressful environments and causing greater distress to conclude that suicide is the only solution to the problem. Thus, from the voiced articulations of the participants, two themes emerged as aspects related to the lack of self-determination namely: ‘poor sense of self-directedness (Autonomy)’ and ‘poor sense of competence’. From the self-determination point of view, ‘sense of self-directedness refers to wilfully acting with a sense of choice and ‘sense of competence’ that denotes feeling a sense of confidence in doing an action (Stone and Ryan, 2009).

DISCUSSIONS

Results of the study revealed that the participants suffer a loss of inner resources leading to the experiences of suicidal thoughts. Consequently, the findings support the concept of resilience which posits that the lack of psychological resources elevates the risk of suicidal ideation (Truffino, 2010). Likewise, the concept of self-determination also finds congruous with the data that the inability to recognize being resourceful would appraise the stressor as a threat. In other words, a resilient individual will retain the characteristics of self-determination when he/she anticipates the difficult situation manageable and controllable (García-Díaz, 2013).

Furthermore, the subjects of the focus groups experienced the frustration of self-determination needs such as competence and self-directedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000) as cited by Nie and Lau, (2009) in their respective stressful situations. This ensued in them not only a reduced life satisfaction but also deprived them of the self-knowledge in the resolutions of decision during conflicting situations (Di et al., 2012). The fact that the person is having a reduced life satisfaction produce in her feelings gloom and desolation which may have accounted for their perception that suicide is the only solution to the combat stressor (Vansteenkiste and Ryan, 2013). On the other hand, a self-determined individual at the face of a stressor will be able to appraise the stressor as a challenge, recognize his/her resourcefulness and competence and wilfully direct his/her actions to meet its demands (Bandura, 1997) as cited by Chen (2015). It is therefore worthwhile to note that at the face of adverse contexts, an increased autonomous functioning resulted from the mindfulness of the inner resources can stimulate the resiliency of the individuals (Bonanno, 2004) as cited by Vansteenkiste and Ryan (2013).

CONCLUSION

Findings from the study fastidiously highlight the significance of developing the self-determination qualities to minimize the harmful consequences of stressors. The recognition and exploration of the protective power of the psychological factor thus contributes to a holistic understanding of its influence on the individuals’ successful adaptation to stressful environment and psychological well-being.

By and large, the aspects of self-determination as a psychological factor provides a healthy adaptation in terms of the appraisal of one’s strengths, taking initiative for actions, thriving in the face of adversity and learning from failures. Thus, this study was able to bring out the buffering aspect of self-determination as a component in helping the individuals to develop a proactive way of life by minimizing the delirious effect of the stressors thus making suicidal ideation a less systematic outcome (Deci and Ryan, 2012).

Implications of the study

Focusing on stimulating the resiliency of the vulnerable students is a more practical way of enhancing their mental health. Therefore, centring on the information gathered from the perspective of the students there is a need for clinicians and college counselors to engage in designing and implementing strength-based programs incorporating the protective aspects of self-determination that would uniquely attend the needs of the suicidal students. This would facilitate and enhance the resiliency of the students resulting in identifying the inner capabilities and responding positively at the face of conflicting situations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study was conducted in India as a partial requirement of the doctoral degree in the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines. The author wishes to thank the administrative board of the college for granting the permission to conduct the study.

REFERENCES


Cite this article as:

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