ISSN 115 - 960X



Ilorin Journal of Business and Social Sciences

Volume 23, No 2 October, 2021

Published by the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ilorin, P.M.B. 1515, Ilorin, Nigeria

ISSN 1115 – 960X

Ilorin Journal of Business and Social Sciences (IJBSS)

Volume 23, Number 2, October, 2021

PUBLISHED BY

THE FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES,
UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN,
P.M.B. 1515, ILORIN, NIGERIA.
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ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES AND PERSONALITY TRAITS AS PREDICTORS OF SUICIDE IDEATION AMONG UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract

There is overwhelming evidence on the increase of suicide, especially among students and it recently remains one of the reported issues in the nation. There is a gap in the literature regarding how childhood adversity and personality traits affect undergraduate suicide ideation. This study, therefore, examines childhood adversity and personality traits as predictors of suicide ideation among undergraduates. Using a non-experimental survey design, 335 undergraduates (Male=131, female=204) were sampled using a convenience sampling technique, the respondents age categories ranged from 17-30years (M=20.36, SD=01.83). Instruments used were 26 items adverse childhood experience international questionnaire (ACE-IQ) developed by World Health Organization (2018), 10-item big five personality inventory developed by John (2007), and 18 item suicide ideation scale developed by Ivan Miller (1991). Three hypotheses were formulated and tested. The result of the hierarchical regression analysis shows that childhood adversity (β=.57; $p<0.01$), personality dispositions (extraversion personality traits (β= -22; $p<0.01$), conscientiousness personality traits (β=.47; $p<0.01$), neuroticism personality traits (β=-.96; $p<0.01$), agreeableness personality traits (β=-.04; $p>.05$), and openness to experience (β=.09,$P>.05$) jointly predicted suicide ideation among university undergraduates in Ondo State [$F(7,327)=577.0$; $p<.001$]. It was therefore concluded that childhood adversities and personality dispositions play a very significant role in suicidal behaviour observed among students. Based on the results of the study, it is recommended that the authorities saddled with the responsibility of suicidal prevention and campaign should integrate childhood adversity and personality into modules to further assist and expose students to suicidal behaviour.

Keywords: Childhood adversity, personality dispositions, suicide ideation, undergraduates.

Introduction

The prevalence of suicide death among youths, especially undergraduates, is alarming in recent times, particularly during and post covid-19 lockdown (Manzar, Albougami, Usman, &Mamun, 2021). Though suicide may arguably be described as a problem steadily becoming global. It is associated with different age categories of humans; however, the increase among the youth has outnumbered other age categories. Before now, suicide among young individuals was considered strange and uncommon. In the space of 10 years (2007 to 2017), the reported incidents of suicide among young individuals between the ages of 10 and 27 increased from 6.8% to 10.6% death rate globally. The obvious increase in teen suicide has especially motivated numerous contemporary scholars to attempt and inquire into establishing the predictive factors to suicidal ideation among the youths (Adewuya, Ola, Olurotimi, Olayinka, Mathew, Olufemi, Adedolapo, & Olajide, 2020; Buhari, Ogunmodede, Bolarinwa, Adegunloye, Adegoke, & Oguntayo, 2021; Ursula, 2010).

Suicide has been identified as one of the leading causes of death among Nigerians. Its triggers may not be far-fetched from the ongoing economic hardship which has culminated in a high poverty rate among Nigerians (Luke, 2018). Suicidal ideation according to the American Psychiatry Association, is a common medical term that refers to the thoughts about taking one's own life, with some degree of intent (America Psychiatry Association, 2013). It is however important to note that the experience of suicidal thoughts may or may not necessarily mean the imminent danger of committing suicide (Smart, 2007). However, suicide ideation is a serious issue that needs to be addressed.

The menace of suicide badly affect the youth mostly and has been declared a serious public health problem such that the World Health Organization (WHO) identifies it as the second leading cause of death for youths between the ages of 15 and 29 years (WHO. 2012). It was further reported that an estimation of 100 to 200 adolescents attempted suicide, for each recorded complete suicide (WHO, 2014). Suspected individuals with a history of previously attempted suicide may be at a much higher risk of dying by suicide compared with those who have never attempted suicide considering these findings of WHO. Meanwhile a recent research has put it that individuals with a history of childhood adversity may be at risk of psychological disorders such as personality disorders, depression, and suicide (Oguntayo, Faworaja, Akintunde, & Anochirim, 2020).

Childhood adversities are the unpleasant experience one undergoes while growing and could be caused by the combination or any of the following subjects; guidance, parents, caregivers, relatives, neighbours, or others. Adverse childhood experiences are commonly experienced in the form of sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect, witnessing of violence. Childhood experience is considered a common occurrence among today's youth (Oguntayo et al., 2020). In the study of Hughes (2017), fifty-seven percent (57%) of the participants reported the experience of adverse childhood experiences.

Perceptibly, there could be a link or relationship between childhood adversity and suicidal behaviour (Blosnich, Garfin, Maguen, Vogt, Dichter, Hoffmire, & Schneiderman, 2021). Some studies have shown an increased risk of suicidal behaviour (both ideation and attempts) that was due to adverse and traumatic life events during childhood (e.g. Blosnich, et al., 2021; Stansfield, 2017; Afifi, 2016; Bruffaerts, 2010).

The study of Yoo (2018) revealed that the knowledge on the direction of a relationship between traumatic experiences and suicidality remained unknown and scarce in related pools of literature. However, a study found a strong link between intrapersonal experiences or events (such as the loss of a loved one, homelessness, feeling of rejection) and suicide attempts (Christiansen, 2011).

Childhood adversity has been implicated in common co-occurrence of suicide attempt with the tendency of developing later psychopathology (Oguntayo et al., 2020; Williams, 2003). Numbers of studies have identified a relationship between specified childhood adversity and suicidal behaviour, for example, suicide behaviour and childhood sexual abuse (Fergusson, 2001), suicidal behaviour and physical abuse (Brodskyet, 2001), dysfunctional parental relationships (Yamaguchi, 2000), and parental mental illness (Dube, 2002) and occurrence of several adversities has been reported (Dube, 2001). However, while studies conducted among juveniles and patients in correctional service and hospital settings have identified an interplay not only between childhood adversity experiences personality traits, and suicidality (Adewuya et al., 2020; Oguntayo et al., 2020), study focusing on similar phenomenon among undergraduate students is scarce.

A personality trait is the specific personality that is most by expressive and relatively enduring about the participants (Bee & John, 2007). In the study, personality characteristics are categorized into five main personalities; ranging from openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, to neuroticism. There are ambivalent empirical conclusions on the relationship between personality attributes and suicidal ideation. For instance, some western-based studies have found that a spike in the neuroticism dimension of personality traits has the tendency of displaying depressive symptoms, anger, vulnerability, hostility, and impulsivity. Studies have shown that neurotic traits may predispose individuals to psychiatric disorders such as mood disorder, depression and the way individuals react to life events (Andrea, 2003; Rohtash, 2015).

The study of Jessor (2013) reported a negative correlation between extraversion and suicidal behavior. He further explained that participants with a high spike in extraversion personality type are more vital, joyful, and sociable, while individuals with a low spike in extraversion (high introversion) are linked with despair and depression. Furthermore, certain studies have pointed out that lower extraversion scores have a strong influence on suicidal behaviour (e.g. Krimson, 2009; Jesson, 2013).

According to Walker (2002),the conscientious dimension of personality factors may also have a strong link with suicidal ideation. According to this author, individuals with a high spike of conscientiousness as a personality trait exhibit the following behaviours; cautiousness in decision making, competence, self-discipline, self-control among others, while individuals with low spike of consciousness are likely to show symptoms or feelings of despair, depression, loneliness, and on suicidal behavior.

Despite commendable researches on suicide, there has been paucity of literature on independent or combined link between childhood adversity, personality traits, and suicide ideation, specifically among youth or university students. Recently in the western world, there seems to be a growing evidence-based research to support the role of childhood adversity and personality traits on suicide ideation. In a study by Horwitz (2017), exploring the influence of childhood trauma on suicide behavior, the findings indicate that negative experiences from childhood play an important role in suicide behaviour, such that these experiences find expression at a later life which an individual may find stressful to cope with. In addition to these strong ties, demographic variables such as gender, have also been identified as a risk factor (Dube, 2001; Buhari et al., 2021).

Again, inadequate and inconsistent funding has been one of the problems affecting the research on suicide and its predictors. The position of correlation between adverse childhood experience and suicidal ideation, as well as between personality traits and suicidal ideation remains unclear. In that way, the study is essential to address the ambiguous conclusions and make a meaningful contribution to knowledge. Also, the lack of an adequate database of the Nigerian population (Adepetun, 2019), has been worrisome and made it difficult to assess the personality traits of individuals who have completed suicide due to the nature of the subject of interest. Thus, in this study, childhood adversity and personality traits were examined as a predictor of suicide ideation among undergraduates. In posing a way out to the above problems, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is the prevalence of suicidal ideation among university undergraduates?
- To what extent does childhood adversity predict suicide ideation among university undergraduates, holding constant socio-demographic factors?
- To what extent do personality traits predict suicide ideation among university undergraduates, holding constant socio-demographic factors?

Methods and Materials

This phase focuses on the main issues addressing the research method of the study. The research methods entail research design, study population, sampling techniques and sample size, research instrument, and data analyses.

Research Design

The research design adopted in this study was a non-experimental correlational design, as it attempts to analyze data collected from a representative subset (university undergraduates) by establishing the existing relationship between the independent variables (i.e. childhood adversity and personality traits) and the dependent variable (i.e. suicide ideation).

Setting

For the sake of convenience and proximity three universities were purposively selected for this study thus; Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-akoko, Ondo state (AAUA), Federal University of Technology Akure (FUTA), and University of Ilorin (Unilorin). FUTA is located in Akure, the capital city of Ondo State in southwestern Nigeria; it is a federal government institution founded in 1981 with focus on engineering and technological disciplines alone.The federal government also established Unilorinin 1975 and located it in Ilorin, the capital city of Kwara State (northcentral zone). This university offers almost all the conventional courses in Nigeria while AAUA is owned by the Ondo state government, it is situated at Akungba-akoko with focus on science, art, humanity, management, and educational courses (Premium Newspaper, 2021).

Participants/Sampling

A convenience sampling technique was used in the study to save time, finance, and rigours of other types of sampling techniques as this is a self-sponsored study that involved a wide range of settings. Three hundred and thirty-five (335) undergraduates were sampled across departments and faculties in three public universities. One hundred and three (113; 33.73%) were sampled from Adekunle Ajasin University Akungba, 114 (34.03%) were drawn from Federal University of Technology Akure, while 108(32.23%) of the respondents were drawn from the University of Ilorin. They comprised 131(30%) males and 204(60%) females. The study involved all undergraduates conveniently sampled irrespective of their history of suicidality.

Instruments

In this study, a self-reported questionnaire was designed to collect data from participants. The questionnaire is made up of four sections (Section A-D), which includes the measurement for the demographic information, Childhood adversity, personality traits, and suicide ideation.

Section A: Demographic information of the participants: Consist of the demographic variables of the participants such as age, gender, religion, and marital status.

Section B: Suicide Ideation Scale (SIS): Suicide Ideation was measured using an 18-item suicide ideation scale developed by Ivan Miller (1991). The scale was designed to measure global feelings of self-harm. It was rated on a 4-point scale (0= none, 1=weak,

2=moderate, 3=strong). The items' samples are: “wish to die”, “wish to live”, “Desire to make an active suicide attempt” “Passive suicide attempt”, frequency of suicidal thought” etc. All items were directly scored. Interpretatively, the higher the score, the higher the severity of suicide ideation. The scale has an internal consistency of 0.85 Cronbach alpha.

Section C: Big five Inventory (BFI): Personality trait was assessed with a 10-item personality inventory designed by Bee and John (2007). It contains items such asI see myself as someone who;“is reserved”, “who is generally trusting”, “tend to be lazy”, “sociable and outgoing” etc. it is scored on a 5-point response scale of 1= Disagree strongly, 2=Disagree a little, 3=Neither agree or disagree, 4=Agree a little, 5=Agree strongly. The overall Cronbach alpha of 0.79 was reported.

Section D: Adverse Childhood Experiences International Questionnaire (ACE-IQ): Adverse Childhood Experiences International Questionnaire (ACE-IQ) was developed by the World Health Organization (2018) with a Cronbach alpha of 0.89 when the scale was developed. Core areas of childhood adversity were measured using a 26-item scale. Some samples of those items are; “Did you see or hear a parent or household member in your home being yelled at, screamed at, sworn at, insulted or humiliated?”, “Were you beaten up by soldiers, police, militia, or gangs?”, “Did a parent, guardian, or other household member threaten to, or actually, abandon you or throw you out of the house?”, “How were you bullied most often?”, etc. The scale is predicated on a 2-point scale (0=No,1=yes). For the scoring format, items are added together to get a total number, and the higher the score, the higher rate of childhood adversity. Scores above the mean imply a high rate of childhood adversity.

Procedures

The researchers sought permission from the appropriate authority of the university, participants were briefed about the purpose of the study. A research assistant was identified in each institution, and they were brief and trained to grasp the purpose and objectives of the study. A detailed informed consent form was attached at the beginning of the online questionnaire and consent was a prerequisite to continue in the survey. Three hundred and fifty participants correctly filled the questionnaires and responses were recovered, and processed for statistical analysis. The data were analyzed using the SPSS package (version 25).

They were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that there was no physical and psychological harm attached to the study. They were assured that they are free to discontinue the study if they felt highly uncomfortable at any point in the course of participating in the study. The questionnaires were administered through the help of trained research assistants, it involved only those who were willing to participate in the study. The researchers assured them of confidentiality for the information they would provide.

For the easier accessibility of the researchers (incase respondent needs clarifications), the names of the researchers were included in the forms with contact and addresses for the participants to use if they have any questions. The participants were assured of the principle of confidentiality, in which all research data obtained from participants were computer coded with a number. Only the code numbers appeared on the data records.

Data Analyses

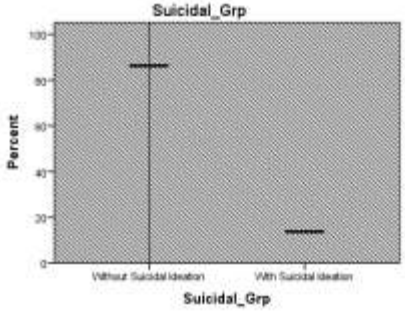
In the course of this study, the descriptive (prevalence estimates) method was used to explore objective 1, t-test of independent was used to analyze objective 2, hierarchical Linear Regression analysis was used to examine objectives 3 and 4 because the variables were categorically measured. All analysis was conducted using the 22.0 SPSS version.

Results

This is the result and interpretation of data collected on personality traits and childhood adversity as predictors of suicidal ideation among university undergraduates. The analyzed data was reported in two phases; the first phase revealed the prevalence estimates of suicidal intents among undergraduates, the second phase revealed the results of inferential statistics

Objective 1: Analysis of Prevalence Estimates

The study objective one that was set to establish the prevalence estimates of suicidal ideation among university undergraduates was established in graphical presentations.



Interpretatively, the outcomes of the prevalence estimates analysis revealed that 11.70% of the university undergraduates met the criteria of suicidal ideation, while 88.3% of the counterparts have no suicidal ideation. The prevalence rate called for the attention of the stakeholders to halt further surges.

Inferential Analyses: Test of Hypotheses

Three research hypotheses were formulated based on the study objectives, to guild the direction of the study. The stated hypotheses were formulated to ascertain the predictive influence of the independent variables (childhood adversity and personality attributes) on the dependent variable (suicidal ideation), controlling the influence of socio-demographic factors using Hierarchical Logistic Regression. This is presented in Table 1

Table 1: Hierarchical Linear Regression showing the predicting influence of Childhood Adversities and Personality Predispositions on Suicidal Ideation among UniversityUndergraduates

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Variable	***B***	***SE B***	***B***	***B***	***SE B***	***β***	***B***	***SE B***	***β***
Age	-02.95	0.15	-.74**	-03.03	0.15	-0.75**	4.04	0.09	1.07**
Sex[a]	13.96	0.53	0.93**	13.94	0.53	0.93**	-11.31	0.51	-0.75***
Religion[a]	09.54	0.40	0.58***	-0.04	0.02	-0.04	20.31	0.63	1.23**
Childhood Adversity				09.35	0.42	0.57***	-0.08	0.01	-0.10***
Extraversion							-4.38	0.20	-0.22**
Agreeableness							-0.03	0.02	-0.04
Conscientiousness							1.96	0.01	0.47**
Emotional stability							-9.45	0.01	-0.96**
Openness to Experience							0.10	0.11	0.09
R²	**.821**			**.823**			**.846**		
F* for change in *R²	**507.09****			**383.58**			**527.00****		

Note: a – identified variables were dummy coded with 0 divorces serving as the reference group
**p < 0.001

Objective 2

It was hypothesized that childhood adversity will significantly predict suicidal ideation among undergraduates, holding constant, the influence of socio-demographic factors as presented.

Table 1 above reveals that adverse childhood experience significantly predicts suicidal ideation, holding constant the socio-demographic factors among undergraduate students in Ondo State ($\beta = .57$; $t = 22.44$; $p < 0.01$) such that, the higher the scores of respondents on adverse childhood experience, the higher the score on the suicidal ideation scale vis-a-vice. In other words, 57% ($\beta = .57 \times 100$) of the variance observed in suicidal ideation among university undergraduates was independently accounted for by adverse childhood experiences. It could be inferred that the higher the adverse childhood experience, the higher the tendency for suicidal ideation among students. This study's outcome was in line with the stated objective two, therefore, informed the acceptance of hypothesis two.

Objective Three

Study objective three similarly hypothesized that personality dispositions will significantly predict suicidal ideation independently among university undergraduates, holding constant, the influence of socio-demographic factors.

The results in table 1 reveals that extraversion personality disposition (β = -.22; t = 753.51; p < 0.01), conscientiousness personality disposition (β = .47; t = 411.70; p < 0.01), and neuroticism personality disposition (β = -.96; t = 787.50; p < 0.01) independently predict suicidal ideation significantly, holding constant the socio-demographic factors. The outcome further revealed that agreeableness (β = -.04; t = -1.70; p > .05) and openness to experience (β = .09; t = 1.98; p >.05) do not significantly predict suicidal ideation. In other words, 20%, 47%, and 96% of the variance observed in suicidal ideation among university undergraduates was independently accounted for by extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism respectively. The inference made from this result is that, dimension of extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism have tendency to determine suicidal ideation among students. This study objective outcome was not totally in line with the stated hypothesis, and therefore was partially accepted.

Childhood adversity and personality dispositions were found to jointly predict suicidal ideation significantly, holding constant, the influence of socio-demographic factors (F (7, 327) = 527.0, p < .001, R2 = .846). This outcome signified that 84.6% (R2 = .846 x 100) of the variance observed in suicidal ideation tendency among university undergraduates was jointly accounted for by childhood adversity and personality dispositions. This result is an indication that the joint effects of childhood adversity and dimension of personality dispositions are capable of predicting suicidal ideation among undergraduate students.

Discussion

The discussions of the study outcomes, conclusion, recommendations, and limitation of the study are presented thus:the study revealed a disturbing prevalence of suicidal ideation among university undergraduates. It was shown that about one-tenth of the students have suicidal intentions. Again, childhood adversity was reported to havea strong link with suicide ideation. This result was affirmed by similar studies (Blosnich, et al., 2021; Murray, 2006) who reported that childhood adversity, especially childhood abuse strongly influences suicidal ideation. Murray (2006) further explained that several di? erent forms of childhood abuse, including physical abuse psychological maltreatment, and neglect, were signi? cantly associated with new-onset suicidal ideation. This result need urgent attention. And the need for campus-based interventions is necessary to halt the surge of this menace among students.

The study also concluded that personality traits partially influence suicide ideation among university undergraduates. This implies that certain personality traits (extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism) influence suicidal ideation, while other personality traits (agreeableness and openness to experience) have nothing much to do with suicide ideation. This result is in tandem with Nabi (2016) findings which stated that Personality traits are frequently one of the risk factors in patients presenting with suicide risk suggesting that personality dispositions may reflect important individual differences in predicting suicide attempts. This implicated that students are

at increased risk of experiencing mental health problems, especially suicidality. However, certain personality traits (extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism)should be considered when assessing the vulnerability of students to suicidality. Also, history of adverse childhood experiences and types of personality traits should be accounted for when considering ways of managing poor mental health especially suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in the university.

Conclusion

We conclude that childhood adversity is one of the major reasons for suicide ideation among youths who are predominantly undergraduates. Also, individuals with lots of childhood traumatic experiences have a tendency to attempt suicide .More so, it was concluded that personality dispositions play a major role in suicide ideation among university undergraduates. The only personality traits which were recorded to have been a risk factor according to this study are: extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism. It is important to note that only individuals who scored high on these traits were the ones reported with suicide ideation.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the researcher recommends the following:

It is recommended that policymakers in tertiary institutions should integrate the knowledge and literacy of mental health into school general studies curriculum bringing into book the psychoeducation of suicide ideation/mental health generally and its preventions.

Stakeholders should incorporate mental health awareness into the school orientation programmes when matriculating freshers (newly admitted) into the university system. This is necessary because many young people seeking admission are naïve about the variety of mental health issues. Therefore, it would be helpful if the university authorities in Nigeria kickstart enlightenment campaigns immediately freshmen are admitted into the university, to build an insightful skill in them. The stress associated with typical schooling in Nigeria could serve as a trigger to the innate built up in the students, such as the experience of adversities and personality predisposition. Therefore institution counselors should be well informed about this. Moreover,palliative measures to help victims or survivors of adversity should also be encouraged in government schools.

Parents are to note that childhood adversity has significant implications on the mental health status of the children later in life. Proper care should be taken when children are growing. Occurrences such as child abuse, sexual assault, child neglect, violence during childhood, and single parenting are adversities that predispose an individual to suicidal acts.

Limitation of the Study

Despite the contribution of this literature, it is not without some limitations. The result should be generalized with caution because the study was a survey, conducted only in

three Nigerian universities. The method used for sample selection and the sample size may, therefore, not necessarily typify the overall students in the Nigerian Universities.

It is also important to note that cultural diversities were not controlled. So, the result may or may not be generalized to all cultures, as there may be cultural differences in the response rate. Future studies should, therefore, include more sample sizes, across different universities and explore other explanations for suicide ideation among undergraduates.

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