AN EXPLORATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONALITY TRAITS ON SUICIDE IDEATION AND ATTEMPTS IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT: The present study was prompted by the observation that there was very high prevalence of suicide ideation and attempts among students in secondary schools in Kenya. The objective of the study was to explore the influence of personality traits on suicide ideation and attempts among learners in public secondary school students in Kenya. The target population comprised of the students population (5940), Guidance and Counseling teachers (29), teachers (289) and the sub county educational officers (8). Overall, the sampled respondents were 300 covering all the categories of the study comprising 260 students, 8 sub county educational officers and 28 class teachers and 4 heads of Guidance and Counseling. The data collection instruments comprised of questionnaires and interviews schedules. The instruments were piloted and tested for reliability at 0.7 reliability coefficients while validity was established by seeking assistance of supervisors and other experts. The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis for qualitative data while quantitative data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics like frequency tables and the regression model. The findings established that the study components comprising personality. The findings from the regression analysis yielded the value of R=0.848 which means the variation in the number of suicide ideations and attempts are explained by the study components. Further, the computed value of R^2=0.72 demonstrates a strong positive relationship of the study variables and the incidences of suicide ideation and attempts in Kenya.
The study recommends the establishment and strengthening of Guidance and Counseling programmes, training guidance and counseling teachers to reach out to the students, fostering life skills among the students to cope with the day to day challenges, enhancing the co-curricular activities to keep the students busy and change of behavior attitudes among the students.

KEYWORDS: Personality Traits**,** Suicide, suicide ideation, suicide attempts, pervasiveness, Guidance and Counselling (G&C).

1 INTRODUCTION

The incidence of suicide is attributable to many causes. In recent times, the relationship between HIV/AIDS and Suicide has become an area of concern and has been noted in several epidemiologic studies. Numerous case reports support the trend of increased suicide risk in persons infected with HIV/AIDS and are attributable to a variety of medical, neurotic, psychiatric factors which contribute to the death of a HIV/AIDS patient. For instance, a 27 year-old man committed suicide two years after he received a diagnosis of AIDS. On 24th August 2010, another student of a university in Kenya attempted to commit suicide after she found out she was living with HIV (New Vision 2011). Ma-zok (1988) observed that the association between HIV/AIDS and the risk of suicide was found to be increased thirty-six fold. Further, a study by Cote & colleagues (2005) noted that there is a 7.4 fold higher risk for suicide among men with AIDS compared to that of the general population.

The causes of suicide ideations and attempts are also attributable to psychosocial causes among the students which inter alia include personality circumstances, family settings, schools setting and societal environment all which bring stress. In regard to stress, it is instructive to note that the borderline between stress and depression is fairly thin with some literature using the terms interchangeably. The apparent link points to the direction that stress degenerates into depression. Stress is

mainly a psychological manifestation of some discontent and denial tendencies. Stress related suicidal attempts could be attributed to a prospective escape from situations that seemed impossible to deal with or to get relief from bad thoughts or feelings .Some feelings of being unwanted, unloved, victimized or being a burden to others can contribute to the increase of suicidal thoughts. Suicide could be interpreted as a "cry for help" and attention or an expression of despair and wish to escape rather than a genuine reason to die (Kandels, 1991).

Closely related to stress is depression, which refers to a state of low mood and aversion to activity, it is also an extreme case of stress. It is externally epitomized by sadness, helplessness and hopelessness among students. Feelings of hopeless and/or helplessness are shared among those who are clinically depressed. They are also some of the most frustrating feelings that depressed individuals' experience. Research on the cognitive theory of depression has shown that people who are depressed struggle with feelings of hopelessness and helplessness more so than people who are not depressed (Sacco & Beck, 1995). A sense of hopelessness reflects a negative view of the *future*. This includes expectations of personal dissatisfaction, failure, and a continuation of pain and difficulty-- a belief that nothing will get better. Emotional state of helplessness reflects a negative view of the *self*. Depressed individuals view themselves more negatively, their egoism suffers, and they have little or no self-confidence. They do not believe they have any control or that they can help themselves to feel better. They may have an urge to give up and think, "What's the use?"

2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

At least 100,000 adolescents die by suicide every year and among youngsters aged 15 to 24 years, suicide is the third cause of death. Moreover, the real number of suicides is higher than the statistics show and suicide in adolescence is often underestimated (Newsbulletin, 2012). According to UNICEF (2011), depression is the single largest contributor to the global burden of disease for people aged 15–19 and suicide is one of the three leading causes of mortality among people aged 15–35 years. Globally, an estimated 71,000 adolescents commit suicide annually, while up to 40 times as many make suicide attempts (UNICEF, 2011).

In a study on Prevalence and Correlates of Suicidal Ideation Among Students in sub-Saharan Africa, which included Kenya, Palmier (2011) found that with a large percentage of the population in many sub-Saharan countries being under the age of 18, the prevalence of suicidal ideation and the rate of deaths attributed to suicide will continue to be a serious public health concern unless contributing factors are established and proper programs aimed at suicide prevention are implemented. To further underscore the importance of the study area, Staff (2008) observed that each suicide leaves an average of 6 intimately affected by the death either as a spouse, parent, significant other or sibling.

3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of personality traits on suicide ideation and attempts in public secondary school students in Kenya

4 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study sought to accomplish the following objective:

To explore the influence of personality traits on suicide ideation and attempts in public secondary school students in Kenya.

5 LITERATURE REVIEW

It is important to ground on the risk factors associated to the personality characteristics of an individual. McLean, Maxwell, Platt, Harris, & Jepson (2008) in a study to describe and assess current knowledge regarding the societal and cultural factors associated with increased incidence of suicide found out that a wide range of personality traits is implicated in higher risk of suicide, including hopelessness, neuroticism, extroversion, impulsivity, aggression, anger, irritability, hostility, and anxiety. In addition, they assert that there may be increased suicide risk associated with particular individual/personality factors including hopelessness, neuroticism, extroversion, impulsivity, aggression, anger, irritability, hostility, and anxiety; attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and low problem-solving skills (McLean *et al*. 2008).

Adolescence is a critical phase in life and has its influence on suicide ideation and attempts. Davidson & Linnoila (1991) observe that it is a phase is characterized by emotional, physical, psychological and social dynamics that seemingly defy

natural law. It is a phase marooned in erratic up and downs in both biological and social setting of a teenage (Davidson & Linnoila, 1991). Scientifically, it is attributable to the gradual release of chemicals in the brain called neurotransmitters that triggers systemic imbalance in the lifestyle of teenagers. The resultant view of life that emanates from this state may and regrettably so, lead to suicide ideation (Davidson & Linnoila, 1991).

A survey by the biennial Youth Risk Behavior Survey(YRBS) data for adolescents found out that during the preceding 12 months, 28.6% of high school students had felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for the last two weeks in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities, 16.9% of students had seriously considered attempting suicide, 8.5% of students had already attempted suicide on or more times and 2.9% of students nationwide had made a suicide attempt that had to be treated by a doctor or nurse (Grunbaum *et al.* 2004). According to Grunbaum *et al* (2004), adolescents suffer from a feeling of loss for the childhood they must leave behind and undergo an arduous period of adjustment to their new adult identity and yet the society alienates them by denying them their rights, responsibilities and privileges of adulthood. They are no longer children yet they are not accorded adult privileges to express their sexuality and hold a place in the work force (Davidson & Linnoila, 1991). One cognitive explanation for suicide suggest that when adolescence lack adequate problem-solving skills and face stress provoking problems, they develop an attitude of hopelessness and attempt suicide as they see no other alternative. Holmes (1991) describes these cognitive processes as rigid where adolescents decide on suicide as a solution to their problems and they will not consider other solutions. Adolescents are faced with many challenges that can culminate into suicide.

6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In achieving the objective of the study, the researchers used the mixed research method which is an approach of inquiry that combines both qualitative and quantitative forms. The two approaches are used so that the overall strength of the study is greater than either qualitative or quantitative research as stated by Creswell & Clark (2007). Qualitative design employed in this study was phenomenology. The objective of qualitative phenomenological research is to describe a "lived experience" of a phenomenon. "Investigators search for essentials, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image and meaning"(Creswell, 1998). The design allowed the researchers to carry out an in-depth focus on the meaning of suicidal ideation and attempts in area of study. It was also used to explore the phenomena of suicide and to capture individual thoughts, feelings experiences or interpretation of meaning and process.

Previous research has shown that hopelessness was related to adolescent suicidal ideation. Several studies found that there was a significant relationship between hopelessness and suicidality, Cukrowicz , Rutter and Warman (2004). Hopelessness was found to be the strongest of cognitive variables in concurrent association with suicidal ideation (Stewart, 2005). Researchers also reported that hopelessness was the best predictor of suicidal ideation in students and adolescents experiencing bipolar disorder Hallfors (2006), Hallfors (2006), and Smith (2006).

7 RESEARCH FINDINGS

7.1 PERSONALITY TRAITS ON SUICIDE IDEATION AND ATTEMPTS

Under this variable, the study sought to establish the influence of personality characteristics on suicide ideation and attempts in public secondary schools. The variable was operationalized into hopelessness, resentment, withdrawal, low esteem, adolescence crisis and loneliness which were measured using the likert scale.

7.2 RATINGS OF HOPELESSNESS ON SUICIDE IDEATION AND ATTEMPT

On the objective of personality trait on suicide ideation and attempt hopelessness was a variable of interest to the researchers. The study showed that the major cause of suicide ideation and attempts was hopelessness. The findings established that 52% strongly agreed that they experienced hopelessness in their lives while 20% moderately agreed. A cumulative rating of 72% implies that this was a general phenomenon in the lives of the respondents. In relation to gender the ratings were 54.4% among the boys and 45.6% among girls. This idea was confirmed by the teachers in the focused group discussions and interview guide for the G&C teachers who observed that students experience periods of hopelessness in their lives.

In this study the indicators of hopelessness as a personality trait were worry, fearfulness, headaches, disturbed sleeping patterns and thoughts of suicide. Suicidal ideation symptoms may include unintentional weight loss, feeling helpless, feeling alone, excessive fatigue, low self-esteem, presence of consistent excessively talkative, intent on previously dormant goals, feel like one's mind is racing. The onset of symptoms like these with an inability to get rid of or cope with their effects, a possible form of psychological inflexibility, is one possible trait associated with suicidal ideation. They may also cause psychological distress, which is another symptom associated with suicidal ideation. Symptoms like these related with psychological inflexibility, recurring patterns, or psychological distress may in some cases lead to the onset of suicidal ideation. Other possible symptoms and warning signs include hopelessness, insomnia, depression, severe anxiety impaired , concentration, psychomotor agitation and panic attack, (Valensein et al 2012).

This concurs with Shneidman (1996) that the common emotion in suicide is hopelessness and helplessness where a pervasive sense of hopelessness defined in terms of pessimistic expectations about the future is even more important than other forms of negative emotion such as depression in predicting suicidal behavior. The suicidal student is convinced that absolutely nothing can be done to improve his or her situation, no one can help.

Table 1: Rating of hopelessness among boys and girls in percentage

Indicators	Boys	Girls
Worry	65	35
Fearfulness	45	55
Disturbed sleep patterns	59	41
Headaches	51	49
Thoughts of suicide	52	48
Mean	54.4	45.6

7.3   RATINGS OF RESENTMENT ON SUICIDE IDEATION AND ATTEMPTS

Based on the relationship of personality trait and suicide ideation and attempts, resentment was rated second. According to the researcher, the indicators for resentment were rejection, depression, being confused and angry. Unrealistic academic, social, or family expectations can create a strong sense of rejection and can lead to deep disappointment. The findings were that of 52.8% of boys and 47.2% of the girls experienced resentment. Results from the focused group discussions and the interview schedule gave emphasizes of the same. They were anonymous on the students' feelings of rejection, depression, being confused and angry when things went wrong at school or at home. This is also confirmed by http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net./conditions/depression-teens that many young people feel that life is not fair or that things "never go their way." They feel "stressed out" and confused. To make matters worse, teens are bombarded by conflicting messages from parents, friends and society.

Today's teens see more of what life has to offer both good and bad on television, at school, in magazines and on the internet. The argument is that sometimes teens feel so depressed that they consider ending their lives. The study shows that suicide attempts among young people may be based on long-standing problems triggered by a specific event. Suicidal adolescents may view a temporary situation as a permanent condition. Feelings of anger and resentment combined with exaggerated guilt can lead to impulsive, self-destructive acts.

Table 2: Indicators of resentment in percentages

Indicators	Gender		Total
	Boys	Girls	
Rejection	44	56	100
Anger	58	42	100
Confusion	48	52	100
Disappointment	54	46	100
Sadness	60	40	100
Mean	52.8	47.2	

7.4   RATINGS OF DEPRESSION ON SUICIDE IDEATION AND ATTEMPTS

On the personality trait of depression the researchers were mainly concerned with feelings of sadness, insomnia, self-injury, frequent tearfulness and disinterest in class work as indicators of the trait. Findings indicate that 45% boys and 55% girls experience depression. The interview schedule from the sub county educational officers confirmed that the issue of depression has become common in the district. The heads of G&C commented that a number of students are depressed due to situations that they are unable to cope with from home and school. Research indicates that teens with depression may socialize less because prolonged feeling of sadness is accompanied by loss of concentration and isolation. Depression will lead to loneliness because a depressed person loves isolation (which of course breeds lonesome feelings). In a similar vein, loneliness also leads to depression because one may feel sad and depressed when lonesome feelings persist, Joiner (2010).

Table 2: Indicators of depression in percentage

Indicators	Gender		Total
	Boys	Girls	
Sadness	41	59	100
Insomnia	46	54	100
Self-injury	48	52	100
Frequent tearfulness	47	53	100
Disinterest in classwork	43	57	100
Mean	45	55	

7.5   RATINGS OF SELF-ESTEEM ON SUICIDE IDEATION AND ATTEMPTS

Self-esteem reflects the evaluative component of self-concept. Indicators of self-esteem were feelings of self-worth, self-acceptance, self-respect, worthwhileness and competence. Ratings on self-esteem accounted for 57.6% for boys and 42.4% for girls. The study shows that girls suffer from low self-esteem therefore being more vulnerable to suicidal ideation and attempts. The focus group discussion from the teachers lamented that many students suffer from low self-esteem especially girls and it affects their level of concentration and participation in class and even co-curricular activities. Many girls are overwhelmed by the issue of imaginary audience. People with high self-esteem tend to be satisfied with their lives and hold a positive attitude toward themselves. They display a genuine sense of self-acceptance, self-worth, and self-respect (Rosenberg, 1985).

In contrast, people with low self-esteem evaluate the self as unworthy and incompetent. Thus, self-esteem can have a profound influence on a person's cognitions, emotions, and responses to stressful life events. 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).

Table 3: Indicators of self-esteem in Percentage

Indicators	Gender		Total
	Boys	Girls	
Self- Worth	58	42	100
Self-acceptance	56	44	100
Self – respect	52	48	100
Worthiness	60	40	100
Competence	62	38	100
Mean	57.6	42.4	100

Self-esteem reflects the evaluative component of self-concept. Self-esteem refers to the global appraisal a person makes of his or her own value as a competent and worthwhile person. People with high self-esteem tend to be satisfied with their lives and hold a positive attitude toward themselves. They display a genuine sense of self-acceptance, self-worth, and self-respect (Rosenberg, 1985). In contrast, people with low self-esteem evaluate the self as unworthy and incompetent. Thus, self-esteem can have a profound influence on a person's cognitions, emotions, and responses to stressful life events. 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 (Brent et al., 1986). Low self-esteem is also implicated in suicide attempts made by adolescents (Kienhorst et al., 1990).

8 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results that were obtained the findings of the study unearthed the impact of psychosocial factors that perpetuate suicide ideation and attempts in public secondary schools in Kenya. The current trend requires intervention and the study recommends the following:-

Capacity building for the guidance and counseling departments; this should be geared to provision of the requisite support resources for the departments. An important input is their administrative empowerment to ensure the development of proactive programs and delivery systems which are not only deterrent but also have the capacity to drive the process to the root causes. The G&C staff should perhaps be granted reasonable discretion to explore the causes beyond the school environment.

Mainstream G&C into the school curriculum; this complements the capacity building of G&C. The importance of guidance and counseling studies in the normal school curriculum would potentially inculcate at an early age a positive behavioural culture and coping mechanisms in students through the delivery and imparting of quality knowledge and information on the pertinent causes of suicide and other negative behavioral tendencies. The importance of this approach is to bake ready-made adolescents who are well equipped with causes and remedies for any eventual symptoms, tendencies and occurrences. This correlates to White (2013) that school based screening is a strategy that is designed to increase detection and promote help seeking among potentially suicidal youth and given that the majority of young people spend a great deal of time at school, classroom or school wide approaches for identifying potentially suicidal adolescents have been increasingly recommended as important youth suicide prevention strategies

Enhance emphasis on co-curricular activities in school programs and the positive linkage to talent development. In the current school curriculum, most non-academic activities are considered peripheral and therefore attract little premium as they are labeled as non-core activities. Sports and other co-curricular activities are both recreational and potential career fronts. When well nurtured, sporting activities are deterrents to emotional imbalances that escalate to stress and the resultant social maladies. It is incumbent on the policy maker in the education system to recognition that career development can also be achieved through enhancement of the inherent talents in adolescents and can therefore be harnessed with the normal school curriculum. Indeed sports and art are currently very lucrative ventures world-wide.

Develop policy guidelines to address the social needs of the students; the devolved system of governance in the country provides the opportunity to formulate policies that address the unique socio-cultural environments of the schools within the counties without compromising the national identity. The success of such policies should involve wide consultations with the county stakeholders to ensure pooling together, broad coverage and accessibility. The roles of the communities, religious and corporate entities would provide the required synergy.

Management of identified cases; how well attempters are nurtured and mainstreamed back to their peers would doubtlessly have positive ramification on the control mechanisms and approaches fronted to address the menace. Most communities treat suicide attempters or families with suicide history as social outcasts without any meritorious analysis of the underlying causes. This calls for a mind shift and deliberate effort to demystify suicide and accord commensurate attention as given to other social vices bedeviling societies. This is in line with the observation by White (2013) that it is important to develop a locally coordinated, systematic service delivery response network that will ensure that youth at risk for suicide receive timely assessments, effective care, efficient follow up and careful monitoring.

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