

PSYCHOSOCIAL STRESSORS AND DEPRESSION AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN OBIO/AKPOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA.

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Abstract

The relationship between psychosocial stressors and depression among students in secondary schools within the Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State was studied. The study was guided by a descriptive correlational design with two research questions and two hypotheses. 3215 senior secondary school students from 25 public schools were in the population, and a sample of 320 students was proportionately and randomly drawn, and the data was collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire involving psychosocial stressors and depression, which were both standardized. The measures were subjected to reliability analysis, and the results provided support for the use of the measures in terms of internal consistency, as the instruments yielded Cronbach's Alpha reliabilities of 0.82 and 0.85 for psychosocial stressors and depression, respectively. The analysis involved introductory descriptive statistics, mean, and standard deviation for the research questions, and Pearson's Product Moment for the hypotheses testing. The results mainly indicated that the students experienced the most stressors, which were psychosocial and academic-related. Stressors that are family-related and peer-related, on the other hand, were also experienced stressors in moderate ranges. The depression that the students experienced was moderate, with the occurrence of symptoms that were more emotional. The analysis of the data supported the idea that there is a major link between educational stressors ($r = 0.562, p < 0.05$) and depression, ($r = 0.431, p < 0.05$) and depression considering family stressors. The analysis concluded that there is a noteworthy link between psychosocial stressors and depression for secondary school students. Recommendations focused on reducing the level of depression for students to include: stress management instruction to the school curriculum and or encourage the students to participate in socially supportive/adaptive family settings.

Keywords: psychosocial stressors, depression, adolescents, academic pressure, family related stress, secondary school students

Introduction

During this stage in life, people go through a series of changes on a biological, psychological, and social level, where they develop skills and coping mechanisms that will prepare them for functioning as an adult (WHO, 2025). Unfortunately, this is also the stage in life where one can develop mental disorders such as depression that can potentially affect one's academic, social and health well-being for the rest of their life.

Depression among people at this age is one of the most prevalent mental disorders, and this condition leads to disability and other forms of morbidity such as dropping out, performing poorly in class, substance abuse, and self-harming including suicidal attempts. Even though there are variations in the estimated prevalence of depressive symptoms in this age group, it is evident from the presentations that there is a significant portion of adolescents that display depressive symptoms of clinical significance, with the older adolescents and females having a notable occurrence of such symptoms.

In Nigeria and other lower- and middle-income countries, there is a growing body of literature that highlights the significant occurrence of depressive symptoms among adolescents of secondary school age. Reports from different settings in Nigeria concerning school-based surveys have found prevalence estimates from low teens to over a quarter of adolescents sampled, depending on the sample and the screening cutoffs. Another analysis conducted in Nigeria also reported higher

prevalence among girls and younger adolescents. This justifies further detailed local studies due to the substantial levels of depressive symptoms in Nigerian adolescents.

Numerous psychosocial stressors involving depression in adolescents span multiple ecological levels. As part of the school population, depressive symptoms are consistently associated with academic pressure, anxiety, and perceptions of failure and underachievement. Such stressors as interpersonal clashes, family discord, divorce, maltreatment, and neglect, economic strain, and exposure to/oversight of violence and bullying are also of heightened risk. Psychosocial load is compounded by issues with peers and romantic relationships, while symptom severity is aggravated by substance use, poor sleep, and maladaptive coping. These domains of risk are also intersecting, and the more stressors adolescents face, the more likely they will suffer from depression. (Tang et al., 2020; Mofatteh, 2020).

In Nigeria, contextual and cultural elements influence the manifestations of depression and the behaviors associated with it. The early detection and treatment of the disease is hindered by mental illness stigma, a lack of mental health literacy, and the absence of accessible mental health services geared to adolescents. Research in the mental health services gap and the demand for community mental health services in Rivers State and Obio/Akpor is well documented. Primary mental health services and specialty services; the gap between community needs services and a lack of serviced mental health is documented in community surveys and local facility data. These factors underscore the importance of school settings for detecting at-risk students and implementing preventive and early intervention strategies. Increased scrutiny is also needed to address the school-related factors. Psychosocial stressors within a school environment include: high stakes exams, conflicts with teachers, poor corporal emotional discipline, victimization from peers, and achievement competition that can worsen depression and exacerbate symptoms. On the contrary, positive school factors such as supportive teachers, structured routines, counselling and guidance services, and positive peer relations decrease the risk. Empirical studies focusing on depression in adolescents highlight the importance of individual differences such as temperament and history of mental illness, as well as school and family stressors, in determining the presence and trajectory of depression.

Although some research on adolescent depression in Nigeria has been done, important local evidence still remains unavailable. Obio/Akpor LGA, a highly populated urbanized area in Rivers State, has shown facility and community mental health demands, but there have been few systematized psychosocial stressors studies and their impact on depression symptoms of secondary school students. To determine the prevalence and most pressing stressors within Obio/Akpor schools and design appropriate and culturally acceptable school-based strategies and referral systems, relevant local data are essential.

Moreover, untreated depression in adolescents has adverse effects that go beyond the symptoms. For instance, chronic illnesses, impaired mental health, and depression can end in lower achievement, reduced economic productivity, and poor occupational health in the future.

Considering the potential harm, it is incumbent upon Obio/Akpor and similar Nigerian areas to tackle preventative and early response psychosocial stressors at the school level. Public health efforts are focused on this objective. This study seeks to identify, categorize, and assess the psychosocial stressors secondary school students face within the Obio/Akpor LGA and the degree to which they are related to the constitution of depressive symptoms, in order to tailor more precise actions and guiding policies.

Statement of the Problem

Depression is a global issue being faced by many adolescents in the world, and within the context of Nigeria, there are many reports and studies that explain depression and depressive symptoms of adolescents, and talking about Rivers State, adolescents of Obio/Akpor LGA are also being affected by the issue. Reports of studies in Nigeria indicate and explain that depression and depressive symptoms begin and stem from the education system and the school environment and are caused by a range of factors, such as, academic pressure, unstable family system, family economic hardship,

civil violence, peer bullying, etc. These psychosocial factors are present in urban school settings. The school settings in Obio/Akpor are urban schools as well, even with the prevalence of these psychosocial factors, there is little research that explains the impact the combination of these psychosocial factors are having on the students. There is a growing trend in the health sector regarding adolescents and depression and schools in Obio/Akpor are operating without mental health inventories, mental health counseling services, mental health training, and detection of mental disorders during health assessments. This means that there is a high possibility that students are facing depression, and little to no support being offered by the education system, these students are at high risk of suffering from many issues such as school dropout, addiction, isolation, and unattended emotional issues. The absence of studies related to the psychosocial stressors that are causing depression in Obio/Akpor secondary school students is impacting the creation of much needed strategies and support from the schools.

Policymakers, educational administrators, and mental health professionals have no way of addressing the issues pertaining to the increasing mental health needs of the adolescents in the region. This study seeks to understand the challenges of having no systematic and empirical grasp of the psychosocial stressors that are constitutive of the depression of the secondary school students in Obio/Akpor LGA, as challenges of this underappreciated and poorly addressed issue continue to grow and remain unmet.

Aim and Objectives of the Study:

The study concerns the psychosocial stressors and depression of the secondary school students in the Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State.

The specific objectives were to:

1. assess the psychosocial stressors that secondary school students in the Obio/Akpor LGA encounter.
2. investigate the depression that is present among secondary school students in the Obio/Akpor LGA.
3. explore the relationship between psychosocial stressors and depression of secondary school students in the Obio/Akpor LGA.

Research Questions

1. What psychosocial stressors do secondary school students in the Obio/Akpor LGA face?
2. What is the depression level of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area secondary school students?
3. What is the correlation between psychosocial stressors and depression of secondary school students in the Obio/Akpor LGA?

Hypotheses

H0₁: There is no relationship between students' depression and the academic-related stressors in Obio/Akpor LGA.

H0₂: There is no relationship between students' depression and the family-related stressors in Obio/Akpor LGA.

Methodology

To determine the correlation between psychosocial stressors and depression within the population of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, this research used a descriptive correlational approach. Correlational design, according to Creswell (2014), makes it possible to explore the degree of association and the character of the association between one variable (psychosocial stressors) and depression (the other variable), and also to define the relationships without controlling the variables. The data collection comprised all public Secondary Schools in Obio/Akpor LGA, Rivers State. A total of 3,215 students from 25 public senior secondary schools formed the study population. Using a

proportionate stratified random sampling technique, students were selected to form a sample of 320 participants. This exercise in stratification took into account schools, class levels, and gender, ensuring that the sample retained the diversity of the total population.

The research instrument that was used to collect data constituted a questionnaire which was in two parts. Section A: demographic data. Section B were standard instruments that measure psychosocial stressors and depression. Applying the Adolescent Psychosocial Stress Scale (APSS), which was a modified version from instruments used in other studies (Smith & Brown, 2018), psychosocial stressors were measured. The Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II), which was also a validated instrument to measure depression in adolescents (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996), was used.

Reliability was determined by conducting a pilot test involving 30 students from a neighboring LGA. For the psychosocial stressor scale, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.82 and for the depression scale, it was 0.85, thus indicating a very good level of internal consistency among the items.

Data collection processes required the acquisition of permits from the Rivers State Ministry of Education and from the school principals of the selected institutions. Students, their parents, or guardians were provided with information for informed consent. Questionnaires were administered in educational settings and participants were told their responses would be kept private. Out of the 320 questionnaires distributed, 307 were duly completed and returned, representing a return rate of 96 percent.

The 25th version of the software SPSS was used for the analysis of the information. Mean and standard deviation and frequency count were among the descriptive statistics used to summarise the demographic data. The hypotheses were tested and the relationships' strengths and directions between psychosocial stressors and depression were established using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient. The 0.05 limits were used to determine significance.

RESULT

Research Question 1: What psychosocial stressors do secondary school students in the Obio/Akpor LGA face?

Table 1: Psychosocial Stressors among Secondary School Students in Obio/Akpor LGA

| Psychosocial Stressor | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always | Mean | SD |
|-----------------------|-------|--------|-----------|-------|--------|------|------|
| Academic Pressure | 12 | 25 | 102 | 110 | 58 | 3.62 | 1.05 |
| Peer Conflict | 35 | 78 | 95 | 60 | 39 | 2.88 | 1.12 |
| Family Issues | 40 | 65 | 90 | 70 | 42 | 2.94 | 1.18 |
| Financial Concerns | 50 | 70 | 85 | 55 | 47 | 2.78 | 1.25 |

Academic pressure is frequently reported psychosocial stressor across the secondary students in Obio/Akpor LGA as demonstrated in Table 1. 307 respondents revealed that 110 students reported having academic pressure "often", 58 students reported "always" and were above the midpoint of the scale 3.62. Peer conflict and family issues were reported even less frequently as 2.88 and 2.94 respectively suggesting that even these were moderate. Financial issues 2.78 were also a cause of lesser mean indicating that a significant number of students having less financial issues but also having significant academic pressure. All in all, secondary students continue to have various psychosocial pressure but the most dominate being their academics.

Research Question 2: What is the depression level of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area secondary school students?

Table 2: Level of Depression Among Students Obio/Akpor Local Government Area

| Depression Indicator | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always | Mean | SD |
|--------------------------------|-------|--------|-----------|-------|--------|------|------|
| Feelings of sadness | 20 | 45 | 110 | 85 | 47 | 3.45 | 1.10 |
| Loss of interest in activities | 35 | 60 | 95 | 70 | 47 | 3.02 | 1.15 |

| Depression Indicator | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always | Mean | SD |
|--------------------------|-------|--------|-----------|-------|--------|------|------|
| Feelings of hopelessness | 40 | 70 | 85 | 65 | 47 | 2.95 | 1.12 |
| Trouble concentrating | 30 | 55 | 100 | 80 | 42 | 3.20 | 1.08 |
| Fatigue or low energy | 25 | 50 | 105 | 85 | 42 | 3.28 | 1.09 |

Depressive symptoms exhibited by students showed that participants experienced feelings of sadness the most at a mean score of 3.45 (SD = 1.10). This can be observed in Table 2. Median scores of 3.28 and 3.20 from participants also indicated most of them experienced symptoms of fatigue/low energy and trouble concentrating. Students also reported a loss of interest in activities and feelings of helplessness symptoms at mean scores of 3.02 and 2.95 which were less frequently experienced, however, were still a non-negligible presence across many students. Overall, the findings point to a conclusion that Obio/Akpor LGA secondary school Students are experiencing symptoms of depression at a moderate level with most experiencing emotional symptoms in the form of sadness

Test of Hypotheses

Table 3: Correlation Between Academic-Related Stressors and Depression

| | | Academic-related stressor | Depression |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|------------|
| Academic-related stressor | Pearson Correlation | 1 | 0.562 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | 0.000 |
| | N | 307 | 307 |
| Depression | Pearson Correlation | 0.562 | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 | |
| | N | 307 | 307 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Among secondary school students in Obio/Akpor LGA, academic stressors and depression are positively correlated, as shown in Table 3 ($r = 0.562$, $p < 0.05$). Such values indicate that as students are exposed to increased academic stress, they demonstrate an increased incidence of depressive symptoms. The null hypothesis (H01) must therefore be rejected as academic stressors are shown to significantly affect depression in students in the research sample.

Table 4: Correlation Between Family-Related Stressors and Depression

| | | Family-related stressor | Depression |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|------------|
| Family-related stressor | Pearson Correlation | 1 | 0.431 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | 0.000 |
| | N | 307 | 307 |
| Depression | Pearson Correlation | 0.431 | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 | |
| | N | 307 | 307 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

According to Table 4, an increase family-related stressors among students is positively correlated with an increase in symptoms of depression ($r = 0.431$, $p < 0.05$). Hence, increase family-related stress is associated with an increase in symptoms of depression among students. Hence, it can be concluded that the null hypothesis (H02) can be rejected, with the implication that family-related stressors are associated with depression among students in secondary school.

Discussion of Findings

The study which investigated the psychosocial stressors of secondary students in Obio/Akpor LGA, the results showed that the most common stressor was the pressure to perform academically. Many students responded that they experienced academic stress "often" or "always," ($M = 3.62$). Other issues reported, but to a lesser extent were peer conflict, family issues, and finances. This is consistent with prior studies that showed the large majority of youths suffer from stress issues when they are faced with academic demands and pressure, such as, exam, assignment and performance expectations, that influence their emotional and psychological wellbeing (Adeyemo, 2018; Smith & Brown, 2018). The results showed that although secondary school students have to deal with a range of psychosocial problems, in the Obio/Akpor situation academic related stressors are of greater concern due to the high educational demands and pressure to perform in a competitive schooling system.

Going forward, the study assessed the incidence of depression symptoms among students, which yielded the results indicating students had moderate depression symptoms. Students overall had the feelings of sadness symptom highest on the mean score at 3.45, with the symptoms of fatigue at 3.28 and concentration difficulty at 3.20. The other symptoms of interest and hopeless feelings were also in the moderate range of reports. Such results support the previous works indicating the psychosocial stressors, particularly related to academics and family, in adolescents increase the prevalence of depressive symptoms (World Health Organization, 2021; Beck et al., 1996). The students' mental health signals psychosocial stressors are impactful, indicating the mental health of students worsening the magnitude of psychosocial stressors. The findings of the study also underscore the necessity of depression symptom severity with school counseling, stress relief, and parental involvement.

The study examined the relationship between depression and academical-related stressors was investigated and a positive significant association was found ($r = 0.562$, $p < 0.05$). This means that the more students had academic stressors in their lives, the more depressive symptoms they reported. These findings, along with other studies, show that academic distress such as heavy workloads, examinations, and pressure to perform at a high level lead to emotional distress and depression in youth (Adeyemo, 2018; Smith & Brown, 2018). The null hypothesis was rejected showing that academic related stress is one of the primary causes of depression among secondary school students in Obio/Akpor LGA. This makes it imperative that academic assistance, stress relief programs, and counseling services be available in secondary schools.

The study also probed the relationship between family-related stressors and depression, the results also revealed a positive, significant relationship ($r = 0.431$, $p < 0.05$). This shows that students who deal with higher levels of family-related stress—such as conflict, parental neglect, and household discord—were even more likely to have symptoms of depression. This finding is consistent with studies that show family dysfunction and negative home surroundings play a big role in depression in adolescents (WHO, 2021; Beck et al., 1996). The null hypothesis was thus, and that distance was collapsed within the family has also a significant effect on the mental health of a secondary school student. The results emphasize the need to include parents and guardians in mental health initiatives and foster family-assigned depression-positive environments.

Conclusion

The research found that high school pupils in Obio/Akpor LGA suffer from various psychosocial stressors and that relatively worse stressors pertain to academics. Such stressors were correlated to depression as students who had stressors as concerning academics and/or family were more likely to show depressive symptoms. The results point to the effects of school and family surroundings on the mental health of teens. This suggests the need for the implementation of measures aimed to reduce these stressors in order to enhance students' mental health and school performance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion, it was recommended that:

1. Schools introduce and adopt structural stress management systems that include time management and stress coping workshops, academic counseling and peer support systems.
2. Parents and guardians be enlightened on the need to develop positive and sustaining family atmospheres.

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