“Remember, we are not White”: Community calls for an integrated approach in the treatment of substance use disorders

Prudence Mafa (a)* Jabulani Makhubele (b) Enoch Rabotata (c)

(a,b,c) Lecturer, Department of Social Work, University of Limpopo, South Africa

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 13 October 2022
Received in rev. form 25 Nov. 2022
Accepted 12 December 2022

Keywords:
Substance Abuse; Integrated Treatment Approach; Black Community; Beliefs

JEL Classification:
H12, I31

ABSTRACT

Substance abuse and its associated disorders affect a whole spectrum of people. Substance users and individuals affected by substance abuse come from diverse backgrounds with varying beliefs and subscribe to various doctrines. This body of work explores the perspectives of a certain Black rural community in Limpopo Province, South Africa, about substance abuse and its treatment in their neighbourhood. Data was collected from purposively sampled community members aged between 18 and 35 years through a focus group discussion. The participation of the focus group members in the study was voluntary and consented to. The collected data was coded and thematically analysed. Community members ascribe the abuse of substances to different factors such as peer pressure, poverty, and idleness—the most prominent factor, as cited by participants, is witchcraft fueled by jealousy. The youth in the community feel like a failure to maintain sobriety by those admitted to treatment centers is not only due to structural challenges but can also be attributed to the spiritual realm. There is a need to consider service users’ backgrounds and beliefs in substance abuse treatment. The social work value of individualization should be duly applied when working with people who have substance abuse problems. There is also a need to obtain treatment workers’ perspectives about the integrated approach in treating substance use disorders.

Introduction

Substance abuse problems are widespread and affect people from different walks of life. Substance users and those affected alike attempt to the best of their abilities to treat substance use disorders associated with the abuse of substances. These affected individuals represent various spiritual beliefs, perspectives, worldviews, and doctrines. Cultural and spiritual influences are not easily altered (Moore, 2001) and therefore influence how people lead their lives, including how they respond to the substance abuse problems. Black people are known to follow and respect their cultural teachings. Audet, Ngobeni, Graves and Wagner (2017) have noted that South Africans prefer to use medical pluralism, which is seeking concurrent traditional and allopathic treatment of illnesses because traditional healers are highly accessible health practitioners throughout the Sub-Saharan region.

A review of literature about similar studies which covered the topic on African traditional practices treatment of various ailments and social problems was conducted. The process of reviewing literature was followed to identify gaps in the treatment of substance use disorders amongst Black people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). When conducting an empirical study, a researcher may, based on the type of study, be inclined to use inductive or deductive reasoning.

The current study was therefore based on inductive reasoning which also incorporates a phenomenological approach (O’Leary, 2017). This approach allowed the researchers to gather data from individuals who have knowledge about the topic under investigation. The data collected was therefore qualitative in nature as participants were knowledgeable about the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The study was qualitative in approach and followed an exploratory descriptive design. Data gathered during the focus group
discussion was thematically analysed using the Anova technique. The data generated two main themes which are: determinants of substance abuse in black communities; ways of responding to the prevalence of substance abuse and its associated disorders.

Literature Review

African communities have always had specific ways of addressing issues that they encounter. The indigenous way of attempting to understand challenges and finding their solutions involved consulting traditional healers or sangomas. Menze et al. (2018) have realised that a considerable number of people still prefer to consult traditional healers for a variety of problems ranging from interpersonal issues, infertility, work-related problems, mental health issues, and physical ailments. Substance abuse is not an emerging problem that Black people find themselves having to grapple with. It is an existing phenomenon which has been a part of their lives for generations and prior to the introduction of westernized clinical services, this group of people were able to address problems they experienced in their own way (Mthembu, 2021). There is a call by some African researchers (Sorsdahl, Flisher, Wilson, & Stein 2010; Kpobi & Swartz, 2018; Mthembu, 2021; Shange & Ross, 2022) to coordinate efforts of treatment between clinicians and traditional healers to fully benefit the Black community. Seeing that the work of traditional healers covers a broad range of problems, substance abuse is said to be one of the problems in their scope of practice (Audet et al, 2017). Contemporary approaches to substance abuse treatment have a lot of focus on it being a problem resulting from a person’s thoughts which influence their behaviour (Adedoyin, Burns, Jackson, and Franklin, 2014). Such an intervention ultimately involves altering the substance user’s thoughts, an exercise which takes little to no consideration of the person’s spiritual schema.

The current study sought to determine Black rural youth’s perceptions about substance abuse and its treatment in their community.

Theoretical Framework

The Ecosystem Theory

The study was anchored on the Ecosystem Theory which was pioneered by Urie Bronfenbrenner. The theory helped the authors to understand and describe the behaviour of the study participants as it occurs in their own environment. When using this theory, there are four systems to be considered which are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and the macrosystem (Green, 2017). These systems affect how individuals interact with their environment.

Microsystem

Parrish (2010) explains the microsystem as the relationship between an individual and the immediate environment. This could be the interaction between individuals and their immediate family members. The family plays a crucial role in the socialization of children. As such, people who are raised in families which follow traditional practices are likely to follow the same practices as they grow older.

Mesosystem

Mesosystem refers to the relationship between an individual and the settings in which he or she encounters on a regular basis (Green, 2017). Customary beliefs are deeply rooted in such a way that people consider anything outside their culture as inferior or less important. To most of them, westernized treatment should supplement their own tried and tested ways of living and dealing with health-related problems.

Exosystem

The exosystem refers to social settings such as government institutions that deliver services to residents. Although people are not direct active participants, they are affected by what happens in these social settings (Parrish, 2010). In the context of this study, the government has initiated substance abuse treatment programs which are offered without charge. The barrier of access to treatment institutions, may arise from the fact that these programs are designed following the prescripts of westernized healthcare practices.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem includes the economic, educational, political, legal, and social systems that bring about the overall culture of society (Green, 2017). It focuses on the societal factors such as cultural norms and expectations that may influence how people seek treatment for substance abuse disorders. Cultural practices may play a major role on whether a person decides to seek clinical treatment of substance use disorders. Indigenous groups of people may decide to prioritize their traditional practices over western healthcare practices. In essence, when applied in this study, this theory helped describe the perceptions of Black community members about the treatment of substance use disorders in their neighbourhood as examined through the interaction of people and their immediate environment.

Findings

The findings from the focus group discussion are reported according to the two main themes that emerged from the analysis of the data. The themes are namely: determinants of substance abuse in black communities; ways of responding to the prevalence of substance abuse and its associated disorders.
Determinants of substance abuse in the community

Peer pressure

In this study, just like in similar ones which have a focus on the causes of substance abuse, peer pressure was one of the factors identified by the participants as leading to the use and abuse of substances. This is how such information was relied by a study participant:

Participant 2: “Okay, most of us are involved in substance abuse because of the friends we interact with. You find that you have friends who drink alcohol and you do not drink but you love them. However, those friends you love in the end will put pressure on you until you get involved in the mess because most of the time, they will tell you that they do not associate themselves with someone who does not drink alcohol. You will end up drinking with them in the end because you want to be part of them.”

This attribute was found to be one of the subthemes in many a study on this topic. Relevant research includes Ananias et al. (2019); Matlakala, Makhubele and Mafa (2019); Mafa (2020); Chilwalo et al (2021); who have pointed to friends or peers as having a great influence on the onset and maintenance of one’s use of substances.

Jealousy

With this variable, it was unanimously agreed upon by the participants that Black people at times do not wish to see their fellow people succeed. Therefore, because they can foretell those people’s futures, they are able to block their luck and/or cast bouts of bad luck on them. Substance abuse is one of those spells that can be cast upon someone whose future is deemed a threat by ill-wishers.

Participant 4: “The reason youths keep on going back to rehabilitation centres for treatment is that most of these people are bewitched. Evil people don’t want to see other people prosper so they will try by all means to bewitch you and make you not achieve your dreams.”

These assertions resonate with the findings of earlier studies (Masumbuka, 2013, Mafa & Makhubele, 2020) that Black people do attribute substance abuse to supernatural causes.

Lack of income

Black people in South Africa account for more than half of the citizens who are unemployed (Statistics South Africa, 2021). This therefore means the unemployed are poor and find it difficult to meet their basic needs. Failure to meet needs as is an attribute of substance abuse (Mohasoa & Mokoena, 2019). This is how participants demonstrated this fact:

Participant 6: “As we all know, as Back people, we are poor compared to Whites. We struggle to find jobs and we end up staying at home with nothing to do. We end up using drugs as a coping mechanism to deal with our problems.”

Ways of responding to the prevalence of substance abuse and its associated disorders.

Clinical intervention

Study participants acknowledge and realise that there is a need for substance use disorders to be treated with the help of trained professionals.

Participant 11: “We have social workers and psychologists who offer to counsel those who have problems related to substance abuse and other personal problems. So, our people must seek help from them.”

The treatment of substance abuse is a complex issue, and no single approach is guaranteed to maintain long term sobriety. Kasiram and Jeewa (2008) also recognize this difficulty and suggest that substance users should not be blamed for their circumstances and need practitioners to help them become empowered and free from dependence.

Divinity

Community members would like helping professionals to consider their worldviews and incorporate them in the treatment of substance use disorders. This is how someone expressed this need:

Participant 8: “Remember, we are Black, and we should not live our lives like White people. I think it is important that after rehabilitation, traditional doctors and social workers continue to treat the people until they fully recover and break the curse that was cast upon them.”


Discussion

It is evident that young people are concerned with the prevalence of substance abuse in their community. The increasing number of people getting involved in drug use is correlated with structural problems such as lack of or insufficient treatment centers and the
notion that substance abuse goes beyond the person’s choice to use drugs (Adedoyin et al., 2014). The majority of the participants believe the substance abuse is rather fueled by external forces in the environment such as witchcraft and jealousy.

The young people in this community do acknowledge that there is a need to establish treatment centers in their communities. However, they reiterated that the clinical services should be supplemented by spiritual intervention. That is taking into account that the service users are Black people who do not solely rely on Western forms of intervention when they have problems. People will be more motivated to seek help if they know that therapists will start where they are, which includes acknowledgement of service users’ beliefs about their problems.

The proposed dualism or integrated approach to the treatment of substance abuse should be used with caution to avoid service users excluding themselves from the responsibility they have towards treatment. The approach should be not to exonerate service users from taking responsibility for their own lives (Audet et al., 2017). This means that this approach will need to be utilized by experienced practitioners who understand the extent to which service users and their family members attribute their adversities to supernatural forces. This is because these attributions have a strong influence on how service users respond to treatment.

From the writings of various researchers who conducted similar studies, it is evident that that there is no unanimous agreement that the treatment of substance abuse should take an integrated approach. This could be based on findings that some of the treatment method used by traditional healers include the use of potentially toxic substances or the methods themselves have not been scientifically proven to treat substance abuse. The latter assertion could possibly stem from the fact that traditional healing is frowned and looked down upon (Mthembu, 2021).

Some authors recommend the use of the multisystemic perspectives in the treatment of substance abuse, with the notion that substance abuse is influenced and determined by contexts and various systems (Smock, Froerer, & Blakeslee, 2011) and therefore cannot be addressed using a single approach. While that may be factual, some authors contend that traditional healers are not well equipped to deal with substance abuse. This is despite the fact that Black people have been dealing with various health-related problems themselves before colonization (Mthembu, 2021) and indeed as found earlier by Audet et al. (2017) some traditional healers have stated that they are able to treat substance abuse.

**Conclusion**

It is crucial that helping professionals who render services to Black communities be aware of their own values. They must have a high degree of self-awareness about their own personal value systems and be aware of how these can influence their professional work. The concept of multiculturalism has been emphasized in social work curricula, as such substance abuse therapists should not frown upon their client system’s belief systems. There also needs to be coordination of services between the clinical services received at treatment centers and traditional healers.

This will however pose challenges when the impact of the clinical services has to be evaluated. The evaluation should also be coordinated and involve the opinions of all stakeholders involved, as is done in multi-disciplinary treatment teams. The collaboration needs to be between recognized and registered traditional healers and treatment providers. Clinicians and traditional healers alike have to be trained on collaborative treatment or case management intricacies.

(i) Future research should solicit the views of service users who have undergone concurrent traditional and allopathic substance abuse treatment must be elicited to determine how that worked for them. The issue of payment for the integrated approach to substance abuse must be debated. While allopathic treatment is generally obtained freely from government institutions, traditional healers charge for their services. Will government be prepared to subsidize service users who opt for this integrated approach?

(ii) This paper articulates the need to practice culturally relevant approaches to treatment which complement traditional strategies aligned with the multisystem approaches. This will help deal more effectively with individuals’ etiological, biological, psychological, social, spiritual, and cultural considerations and put emphasis on holism which encourages therapists to focus on all aspects of the person, including emotional, physical, and social well-being, by encouraging growth through self-exploration and expression.

(iii) Just like with any other treatment approach, the integrated method will not be suitable for everyone, as such the approach must be used in accordance with what the client needs.

**Acknowledgement**

All authors have read and accepted published version of the manuscript.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualisation, P, J.C, and N.E; methodology, J.C; validation, P, J.C, and N.E; formal analysis, P, J.C, and N.E; investigation, P, J.C, and N.E; writing original draft preparation, P, J.C, and N.E; writing review and editing, J.C.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Prior to undertaking this study, the researchers sought ethical clearance from the University of Limpopo’s Turfloop Research Ethics Committee to ensure that the study adhered to ethical compliances.
Data Availability Statement: The corresponding author will provide the data presented herein upon request.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest in terms of this study

References


304


**Publisher’s Note:** SSBFNET stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

© 2022 by the authors. Licensee SSBFNET, Istanbul, Turkey. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science (2147-4478) by SSBFNET is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.