SUBSTANCE ABUSE AMONG ADOLESCENT MALES: SOCIAL WORK AND ABUSERS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This study reports on the perspectives of social workers and abusers regarding adolescent males who use illicit drugs in South Africa. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which guides this study, emphasizes that a holistic approach including the professionals, community and governmental structures could be vital in curbing drug dependence among adolescent males. The study employed the qualitative research methodology to enable fifteen isiXhosa speaking adolescent males (aged 15-20 years) and five registered social workers to express the factors and effects of substance abuse among male youth. Two phases of focus group interviews took place at one high school and Department of Social Development offices in Alice, Eastern Cape, South Africa. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the researchers suggested pseudonyms for the participants. Tesch's method of data analysis was used to identify the themes while Lincoln and Guba's principles ensured the trustworthiness of the study. Poverty, inconsistent parenting and peer pressure emerged as precursors for abusers to access substances, which, in turn, resulted in risk sexual behaviour and poor academic performance among abusers. Social workers also reported lack of training, thus, the substance abusers, relapse. There is a need for an integrated approach among the educators, social workers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and South African Police to ensure schools become a drug-free zone.

KEYWORDS: academic performance, adolescent males, crime, drugs, peer-pressure.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cannabis is the most common among adolescent males in countries such as England, United States and Uruguay (Wadsworth & Hammond, 2019). Approximately 80% of male youth using substances in California, ended up in prisons (Denney & Connor, 2016). Jackson's (2016) study confirms that multidimensional precursors such as dysfunctional families (i.e. divorce, single parenthood, unemployed caregivers) and disorganized environment, have the propensity to influence adolescent males to engage in substance abuse. In Chicago, adolescent males who demonstrated strong affinity to low quality peers reported substance abuse and sexual aggression since *loco-parentis* monitoring was inconsistent (Hughes & Short, 2014). Thus, Matlakele and Erasmas (2018) found that in Botswana, adolescent males using substances were more likely to be antisocial and bully others. At school, their academic performance is relatively poor and majority of them lacks concentration, do not complete assignments and reports high rate of absenteeism (Kavutha & Karuiki, 2015).

Even in South Africa, adolescent males continue to use substances (Masilo & Makhubele, 2017), and Masilo and Dintwe (2019) are concerned about the lack of social workers at South African schools given the high rate of criminal behaviour especially in communities mired in poverty. There is a need for the Department of Education to collaborate with the Department of Social Welfare and Development to appoint school-based social workers to provide emotional support and offer rehabilitation programmes especially to substance abusers (Department of Social Development, 2016). Why? About three years ago, a large number of youth from the Eastern Cape Province, aged 13 to 20, attended rehabilitation programmes for substance abuse (Manu, Maluluke & Douglas, 2017). It is astonishing because the International Federation of Workers and Social Workers (FITS) assumes that school going- children should not be exposed to environments that compromise their well-being (Svatonova & Hoskova- Mayerova, 2017).

From ecological perspective, social workers should ensure that in every community adolescent are protected from risk-taking behaviour and get support from their educators, families and other health care workers (Garray, del Toro & Relinque, 2020). Contrary to the belief that learners benefit from the rights to health and safety as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 (South Africa Constitution, 1996) in South Africa there is insufficiency of school based social workers, thus, an overwhelming numbers of adolescent males engage in substance abuse (Madisha, 2019). Although previously the factors and effects of substance abuse on adolescent males have been documented extensively

(Fisher & Harris, 2013; Jacobs & Slabbert, 2019; Madisha, 2019), there is dearth of research, which concentrates on the perspectives of both the social workers and substance abusers. This study offers a unique opportunity for adolescent males using substance to express their voices, at a time when South African young people use different illicit drugs such as nyaope (Mahlangu & Geyer, 2018). Also, this study enables the social workers to highlight the ramifications of being understaffed. Thus, this study attempts to answer the following questions: (i) What are the factors and effects of substance abuse on adolescent males? (ii) How do the social workers deal substance abuse among adolescent males attending schools?

2. RESEARCH OJECTIVES

The research objectives of this study are:

(i) To determine the factors and effects of substance abuse among adolescent males attending schools.

(ii) To investigate how the social workers deal with substance abuse among adolescent males attending schools.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, the researchers identify and discuss the factors and effects of substance abuse, but first, the different substances, namely; *alcohol and drugs*, are defined. *Alcohol* is a legal substance permissible for people 18 years of ages and above, and it acts as a stimulant or depressant when consumed in large quantities. Its side effects include blurred vision, incoherent speech, agitation, personal injuries, low regard for others, insomnia (lack of sleep) or hypersomnia (too much sleep) and high or low sexual libido (Obi, Adayonfo, Iwueze, & Ekwe, 2017). *Substance abuse* refers to the dependence of illicit drugs such as cocaine, heroin, cannabis, ecstasy, methamphetamine and Mandrax (Mazonde, 2017) and the negative consequences of use include behavioural, cognitive and physiological disorders (World Health Organisation, 2018).

3.1 Factors leading to substance abuse among adolescent males

3.1.1 Parenting styles

According to Diana Baumrind's (1971) parenting styles, namely; *authoritative, authoritarian and permissive parenting style,* adolescent males reared in authoritative family households tend to show assertiveness and resist peer influence unlike their counterparts whose parents are permissive. In South Africa, Kheswa and Van Eeden (2018) found adolescent males from authoritative parent households

tend to display leadership qualities and have aspirations for their future, which account for responsible sexual behaviour unlike their counterparts from households, characterized by authoritarian parenting style. Authoritarian parents are harsh, controlling and deprive their children of communication around sexuality and substance abuse, thus, they experiment with drugs and engage in criminal acts (Biglan, & Van Ryzin, 2019). Permissive parents often lack communication skills to prepare their adolescent males regarding sexual risk behaviour, which results in ill-informed decision- making, thus, easily swayed to alcohol abuse by peers (Brewer, 2017).

3.1.2 Dysfunctional families

In the South African context, it is common that in grandparents' households, the grandchildren's parents have died or remarried after divorce (Schultz & Shirindi, 2019). Therefore, most grandparents survive on social grants and are unable to meet all their grandsons' educational needs. On the other hand, adolescent males who grow up in family settings characterized by conflicts and domestic violence owing to fathers who abuse alcohol (Van Breda, 2017), Bandura's (2018) social learning theory confirms that such youth may deem intimate partner violence as acceptable and see nothing wrong in drug dependence.

3.1.3 School environment

According to Van Breda (2017), there is correlation between quality schools and socio- economic status. Schools that are located in affluent areas tend to yield responsible future adults as opposed to schools from poor communities. Kheswa, Mahola and Dayi (2020) in a study conducted at one college campus in the Eastern Cape Province, found that crowded environment was a breeding ground for adolescent males to enter school premises with alcohol and drugs. It becomes worse when there is no system in place to check learners in possession of weapons and drugs (Chetani, Mah & Yohane, 2018).

3.1.4 Service rendering

When the social services are available at the schools, it becomes easier to render counselling to learners who abuse alcohol and drugs (Jacobs & Slabbert, 2019). Thompson, Frey and Kelly (2018) assert that schools with social workers encounter fewer suspensions, incidents of aggressive behaviour and class attendance. However, Beddoe (2019) pointed out that the social workers experience challenges in communities where parents and the schools do not actively communicate the progress of adolescent males receiving treatment or attending rehabilitation.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory guides this study (Golden & Earp, 2012). According to Bronfenbrenner (1986), the ecological perspective sees a human being as a subsystem within a hierarchy of larger systems such as the family and the community. On macro and meso levels, Bronfenbrenner's theory is concerned about the socio-economic status of adolescent males considering that in South Africa, majority of caregivers are unemployed and due to lack of good role models, a disproportionate number of male youth model the behaviour of adults using drugs (Mosavel, Ahmed, Ports & Simon, 2015). On micro level, the substance abusers are likely to be hospitalised in psychiatric wards for drug-addiction, owing to impairment in their mental health and emotional well-being (Fisher & Harris, 2013). The relevance of Bronfenbrenner's theory in South Africa also manifested in determining the family members, educators, and School Based Support Team (SBST) support adolescent males exhibiting poor academic performance due to substance abuse (Makhalemele & Nel, 2016).

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Pandey and Pandey (2015) define qualitative research approach as an in-depth research method that is exploratory in nature , and it is used to gain an understanding of the social issues. Because of its inductive approach, the qualitative research generates new theory through observations, focus groups and face-to face interviews (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, & Delport (2011). Furthermore, focus groups enable the participants engage in discussion and provide solutions to their own challenges (Rubin & Babbie, 2013). Fifteen substance abusers from one school in one village in Alice, Eastern Cape, South Africa, and five qualified social workers from the Department of Social Development and Welfare, voluntarily gave their consent to participate in the focus-group interviews. The purposively selected participants were knowledgeable about the substance as suggested by Rubin and Babbie (2013). As Creswell (2014) suggests that a population should be a group comprising of similar characteristics, the researchers guaranteed that the participants shared the same culture (i.e. IsiXhosa-speaking, same geographical area). The participants remained anonymous during data collection and used the pseudonyms. Five social workers were given PA, PB, PC, PD and PE for identification while the fifteen adolescent males used P1, P2 until P15. The researchers employed Tesch's method for thematic analysis. Although transcriptions of the collected data took time, identification of theme and categories, was thorough. The researchers translated and transcribed the responses, which were tape-recorded. The researchers had to read and re-read each of the responses and

group them together that which forms the sub-themes (De Vos et al. 2011). After data collection, one of the researchers debriefed the participants owing to the sensitivity of the topic. Debriefing is important in focus groups to assist the participants to deal with suppressed emotions (Creswell, 2014).

5.1 Trustworthiness

The researchers applied the four Lincoln and Guba's principles of trustworthiness to ensure rigor of the study, namely; *credibility, dependability, neutrality and transferability* (Gunawan, 2015). Provision of a thick description of the method and setting of the study by researchers to obtain accurate information about it, contributed towards dependability as suggested by Moretti, van Vliet, Bensing, Deledda, Mazzi, Rimondini and Fletcher (2011). For neutrality or objectivity and data authenticity, the researchers asked the participants the same questions and recorded all the responses in an audio-recorder.To ensure credibility, the researcher, through probing enabled the participants to share their perceptions, experiences and feelings during the focus groups. To guarantee ttransferability, the researchers extensively and thoroughly described the process that was used so that other researchers can follow it for replication.

6. RESULTS

6.1 Biographical Information of the participants.

Of the fifteen adolescent males who purposively participated in the study, six of them were in Grade 10 while nine were in Grade 11. By age, four indicated to be 15 years old, six indicated to be 16 years old and only three were 17 years old. There was only one 19 year-old and one 20 year-old. The best description of the caregivers pointed that five of the participants lived with their grandmothers only and two lived with both grandparents. Furthermore, two participants indicated to their legal guardians were uncles and aunts in the same house while other two raised by grandmothers and uncles. Only one participant indicated to be living with both parents. The remaining three indicated to be living with mother and aunt, mother and his grandmother, and his uncle, respectively.

6.2 Themes and categories

Prior identification of the themes and categories, respectively, the researchers followed Tesch's method, which entailed coding of similarities from the responses quoted in verbatim. The themes with categories identified following Tesch's method of data analysis as conducive to alcohol and drug abuse by adolescent males

are; Types of drugs, factors influencing adolescent males to use drugs, effects of alcohol and drug abuse and challenges faced by social workers.

Four themes and categories with eleven sub-themes, were identified.

Factors influencing adolescent males to use substances.

Peer Pressure

Both social workers and substance abusers mentioned peer pressure as one of the factors influencing their use of drugs. The extracts below serve as an evidence:

"I used drugs because my friends introduced me to them. They asked me to contribute money so that we can buy two Amstel Lagers" [P10].*"My friends told me to smoke. At first I refused but later on I joined them"* [P5]. *"My friend's father used to send his son to buy dagga for him. We stole part of it. We saw his father laughing after smoking dagga, so we wanted to feel that way. We felt happy after* smoking *it"* [P15].

Social workers also agreed that peer pressure misleads adolescent males.

"I believe that adolescents are more attached to their friends than to their family that's why I say peer pressure". [Participant A], "*It is quite difficult to attend to this, because the children influence each other"*. [PE].

Lack of parental control

There has a strong affirmation that lack of monitoring from parents or guidance can lead adolescents to drugs and alcohol.

"I am staying with my grandparents, my mother is in Cape Town and she is not staying with us" [P15]. "*I spend most of my time with my friends; my mother and father come late form work*" [P3] *"I do drugs during absence of my parents at home"* [P6]. *"I come back drunk, my grandmother does not see me because I sleep in an outside room"* [P9].

Parenting styles

Participants reported permissive and authoritarian styles in their families as contributing towards their substance use. The participants expressed the following;

"My grandparents do allow me to go to tavern and advise me not to come back late" [P15]." *I go out and my uncle ill-treated and beat me every time I come back"* [P9].

Accessibility of drugs

Majority of the participants mentioned that they were able to buy substances in their local shops, tavern and ordinary homes. *"I bought alcohol and cigarette at the shop"* [P13]. *"I buy drugs from someone in the village and once I am on high, I want sex "* [P15]. *"I bought alcohol at the tavern"* [P6]. When asked if they do smoke at school, one of the responses was *"I smoke (intsango) "cannibas" and meet with my friends in a building that is far away from the classes or school toilets"* [P7,].

Types of drugs

Three social workers reported that adolescent males use substances both illicit and permissible ones. The nature of substances abused includes legal substances such as beer, ciders, cannabis and tobacco. Social workers responded as follows: *"The drug choice that I have dealt with is cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana, cannabis"* [PA]. *"Almost every child on my caseload smoke tobacco, I think it is because the parents also smoke tobacco"* [PE]. *"My clients are using tobacco, cannabis, alcohol, I really think that more structure should put in place where it comes to alcohol abuse, because the children have been exposed to alcohol abuse at home and in the community"* [PC]

Some of the male adolescents' interviewed, corroborated by saying they use alcohol as their drug of choice: *"I used alcohol to ease stress"* [P3]. *"I use alcohol and marijuana"* [P6]

Poverty

The majority of participants in this study are from lower socio-economic status. Participants indicated to have either one parent employed or no parents employed. *"I depend on my grandmother, but also rely on my friends for help and support* [P11]. *"My uncle is unemployed; we only depend on my grandmother"* [P10]. *"The person who provide at home is my grandmother, mother is not working"* [P5].

Effects of alcohol and drug abuse

Academic performance

Majority of the participants indicated that substance affect their academic performance. Furthermore the participants mentioned that substance affect their studies, as participants explained. *"I repeat the grade this year"* [P1]. *"Drugs affected me at school, I am not able to do homework"* [P6]. *"The substance make me not to concentration in class and I do not attend school every day"* [P4].

Crime

The responses given confirm that there is a link between substance abuse and crime. *"I fight with other people after using alcohol"* [P15]. *"Drugs make me think of stealing"* [P13]. *"I will steal money from my grandmother so that I can smoke"* [P11].

Sexually transmitted infections

Two of the adolescent males indicated to have contracted sexually transmitted infections due to practising unsafe sex with their sexual partners because of alcohol and drug abuse. *"I woke up one day feeling pains when I should urinate and I recalled that I practiced unsafe sex"* [P13]. *"I never used condoms when I am drunk. After three days I went to the hospital to ask for help because a yellowish smelly discharge was silently coming out of my penis and I was told that I had gonorrhoea ''* [P11].

Challenges facing social workers

Lack of training

The social workers highlighted that they do not receive intensive training to be fully equipped to render an effective service to the adolescent males. The following narratives indicate how participants viewed training in the substance abuse field. *"Social workers need more training about substance abuse, specifically for after care, early intervention and relapse prevention."* [PA]. *"All social workers are not trained to rendered services to these clients. I think it is important that social workers must be trained, because drug addiction is involved in all aspects of our work"* [PE].

Lack of cooperation from adolescent males

Most social worker who participated in the study stated that adolescents who use drugs lack cooperation. Some of the social worker interviewed said: *"the challenges with working with adolescence it is that they do not cooperate, they do not come for sessions as we agreed and they live in environment with drugs"* [PA]. *"The challenge is that parents do not work hand in hand with us, as it will be easy if parents were involved in the lives of the adolescents who abuse substance"* [PB].

7. DISCUSSION

Reflecting on the social workers' perspective on why adolescent males abuse substances, it was evident that the social workers often deal with school learners

who come from dysfunctional families. For instance, either grandparents, unemployed aunts, uncles or single parents reared fourteen of the adolescent males. It is not surprising that peer pressure influenced most of them to engage in smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol. These findings resonate with Tshitangano and Tosin's (2016) study, which was carried in Vhembedzi, Limpopo province where approximately 15% of adolescent males indicated drug dependence due to peer influence and poverty. With specific reference to the narratives of P9, it was clear that parental monitoring of grandparents was inconsistent. Thus, teenagers start using substances especially when they live in the outside rooms. Onukwufor and Chukwu (2017) agree that when the caregivers are uninvolved in guiding their children, they, in turn, become delinquent. They may lose courage to attain educational goals, skip classes and display conduct disorder through having multiple sexual partners, abducting their girlfriends, which may result in allegations for statutory rape. Conduct disorder is a by-product of inconsistent parenting and adolescents may be unruly, oppositional and engage in perjury (Groenman, Janssen, & Oosterlaan, 2017).

Social workers indicated that adolescent males engage in substance abuse because there is accessibility of illicit drugs in their communities and the caregivers would send them to buy marijuana for them. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory confirms that modelling and witnessing of an anti-social behaviour by adults in the community could have ripple and detrimental effects on adolescent males' overall well-being. No wonder some of the participants attended the liquor outlets (i.e taverns) long before they reached 18 years of age and carried drugs (cannabis, cigarettes) to schools. The social workers further highlighted the need for security systems especially at schools located in poor communities dominated by drugs. The implication of this finding is that violence is likely to erupt when substance abusers are intoxicated. Since P15 expressed the need to have sex when under the influence of drugs, Groenman et al., (2017) indicate that chemical substances (whether injected, inhaled or swallowed) enable individuals to derive temporary euphoric feeling and owing to poor thinking, they and disregard the rights of women and engage in unsafe sex. Given that hegemonic masculinity legitimizes social relationships that generate dominance and patriarchy over women (Leddy, Chakravarty, Dladla, de Bruyn & Darbes, 2015), psycho-educational programmes for adolescents at schools are essential (Kheswa, 2017). In this regard, Masilo and Makhubele's (2017) opinion is that the school-based social workers should be employed to develop psycho-educational programmes for adolescent males and create a conducive atmosphere for such youth to access the male condoms from them, male bathrooms or designated educators to prevent sexually transmitted

infections. This would enable adolescent males to know the risks of using substances and unsafe sex since in the current study some of the participants contracted gonorrhoea.

Finally, the findings point that the social workers need a specific training and on regular basis as Mahlangu and Geyer (2018) stress that social workers should have necessary techniques and skills to engage effectively with clients who have substance abuse problems. Missing of sessions by adolescent males made it difficult for the social workers to gauge their effective programmes on the clients with drug-dependence.

8. CONCLUSION

Although the new knowledge has emerged regarding the need to have school-based social workers especially in rural areas, where community members negatively influence adolescents, this study found that social workers do not cope and the Department of Social Welfare and Development do not provide as much training as it should. In other words, South Africa would have cases of teenage parenthood, intimate partner violence, juvenile imprisonment and HIV/AIDS because there is no collaboration between the schools, communities, caregivers, South African Police Services and social workers.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Social workers facilitate support groups for school learners with range of behavioural problems especially when their well-being is at risk. Therefore, the government should ensure that schools identify learners whose families are dysfunctional and receive immediate psychosocial support. To achieve this, school-based social workers are a necessity for promotion of positive communication between the caregivers and adolescent males using substances. Most importantly, the government should improve the infrastructure of the schools in rural areas and put in place well-trained security officers to monitor the school surrounding (i.e sports ground, toilets) during breaks or lunchtime.

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