

Community studies of mental health in South Sudan

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South Sudan



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Background

As a part of a 5-year project in 2007-2012 on capacity building in mental health in South Sudan, two community studies of mental health were conducted in the province of Bahr el Ghazal. The main collaborating partners were the University of Bahr el Ghazal and the University of Oslo. Ahfad University for Women in Sudan, Stellenbosch University in South Africa and SINTEF Health in Norway also participated in the project.

General objectives

To develop research, teaching- and clinical competence in the field of mental health at Bahr El Ghazal University, in order to ensure sustainable capacity building in higher education institutions in South Sudan.

Scholarships for a psychiatric resident, for PhD-, master- and bachelor students, in-service training for clinical and administrative staff and research seminars were also included.

Research objectives



To investigate the prevalence of psychiatric disorders and related mental health problems in relation to exposure to potentially traumatic events and other relevant risk factors in the general population

Design

- Two cross-sectional community surveys
- Greater Bahr al Ghazal region of South Sudan
- Multistage random cluster sampling method
- Interviewed by local health personnel
- n= 1200 (in 2010) and n=464 (in 2012)

Bahr Al Ghazal states



Sør-Sudan og Greater Bahr El-Ghazal regionen



Methods: Measures

- Psychiatric disorders:
 - MINI International Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI)
- Trauma event exposure and PTSD
 - Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ)
- Disability
 - Washington Group Short Measurement Set
- Psychological distress
 - The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28)
- Daily hassles
 - HESPER
- Attitudes towards people with mental illness
 - Social distance
 - 12 questions used by Stuart and Arboleda-Flórez



Interview and translation

- The interviewers were health personnel from the region who were familiar with the cultural traditions and fluent in the relevant local languages
- They participated in training workshops in using the survey instruments
- The cultural acceptability of the interview protocol was discussed with the interviewers

- The research instruments were available in English and Arabic, but the main language used was Arabic
- The key terms were translated (back and forth) into the indigenous languages of the area ensuring semantic equivalence, that same concept was being measured (conceptual questionnaire) and that we addressed the social norms of the society (normative equivalence)

Overview of results

The results have been published in a series of scientific papers.

- PTSD only was for example found in 28% and depression only in 6.4% of the study population, while 9.5% of the participants had PTSD-depression comorbid diagnosis
- Exposure to traumatic events and socioeconomic disadvantage were significantly associated with having PTSD or PTSD-depression comorbidity but not with depression
- Exposure to traumatic events and socio-economic disadvantage were also significantly associated with having one or more anxiety diagnoses other than PTSD

Needs assessment and community attitudes

- The most frequently expressed needs were related to drinking water, problems with alcohol and drug use in the community and access to sanitation facilities
- However, despite decades of civil war and great poverty the alcohol use in this population was at the same level as other countries in Southern Africa
Traumatic events were not related to risk of problem drinking
- There was a high level of stigma towards the mentally ill

Psychotic-like experiences (PLEs)

- PLEs are frequent in general populations
- Research on the PLEs in war-affected populations is scarce
- The estimated prevalence of lifetime psychosis-like experiences (PLEs) was 23.3 % and the rate of PLEs which were evaluated as bizarre was 9.5 %

Some methodological reflections

- Lack of proper infrastructure
- Uncertainty related to the source of population data
- Generalizability
- Self-reported measures
- socio-cultural adaptation of the instruments
- Additive scale of traumatic events
- User involvement/participatory research



Another challenge: Traditional Healing



- Frequently used in South Sudan
- Data collected in this study, but not yet analyzed
- Collaboration between traditional healers and formal health services?

Conclusions

- The studies revealed frequent and complex mental health problems in this severely traumatized population
- Potentially traumatic events (PTEs) were associated with most, but not all, mental health problems
- The North-South institutional collaboration worked quite well, in spite of unequal resources, also in the South-South collaboration

- The project also contributed to academic collaboration between South-Sudan and Sudan through institutional collaboration in education and joint research seminars
- The educational objectives were mostly fulfilled

Challenges

- The subsequent political situation and civil war situation, as well as funding issues, have so far prevented further activities to address these issues in the field
- Sharing and dissemination of the results
- Implementation of interventions based on the findings?

Publications

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