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University students' reflections on suicide
ideation and crisis

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Relevance of the study

- The last decade has seen an unprecedented raise in suicide across university campuses, making the mental health of university students a public health issue.
- In recent years, suicide has been identified as one of the top five mental health problems among university students across the world (World Health Organization, 2019).
- Recent findings in South Africa by Bantjes et al. (2019) confirm that out of 1402 first-year South African students, 46.4% had suicidal ideations, 26.5% planned suicide, and 8.6% attempted suicide.

Headlines

- SADAG (2018): “*Are More Suicides in Universities to Be Expected This Year*”
- *Wits Vuvuzela* (2018) headlined “*Another student suicide shines spotlight on mental health support at Wits*”,

raised concerns over the psychological well-being of students after three students died from suicide within the space of a year .

- Mabasa (2018) reporting for *The Daily Maverick*, captioned “*Suicide on campus: Spate of deaths raises alarm*”

covered the protest of more than 100 students from the University of Pretoria who held a #SPEAKOUT march in response to the 23 suicide attempts that had taken place at their institution, with two students ultimately losing their lives (Mabasa, 2018).

- *Times Live* reignited the issue of suicidality on campuses after students held an anti-depression vigil following the suicide death of two prominent students at Rhodes University within a year (2019).

Emerging Adulthood

- University students must adapt to environments plagued by rapid change, ambiguity, uncertainty, and depleted support systems.
- The traditional aged student typically presents developmental, career, and adjustment issues and crises.
- Identity development, sexuality, intimacy, relationships, substance use, grief and loss, family dysfunction, time management struggles, financial stress,
- Issues such as racism, discrimination, marginalization, and academic and social integration.
- Small percentage present with chronic mental health issues which often manifest around 18 years of age

Methods

- Qualitative design
- Focus on the 15 individual interviews
- Semi structured interviews were employed to excavate the personal narratives and lived experiences that motivate students to conceal their suicidal thoughts, feelings, and intentions.
- The data was analyzed using thematic content analysis.

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- (a) they indicated that they had seriously considered attempting suicide in the previous twelve months,
- (b) they indicated that they did not tell anyone about their suicidal thoughts, and
- (c) they responded to an open- ended question asking why they chose not to tell anyone about the suicidal thoughts.

Suicide Concealment

The literature

Denmark, Hess & Becker (2012)

- “Why did you choose not to tell anyone about these thoughts?” generated nine reasons:
 - (a) perceived low risk,
 - (b) concern for others,
 - (c) dispositional privacy,
 - (d) pointlessness of help-seeking,
 - (e) others' negative reactions,
 - (f) personal negative reactions,
 - (g) repercussions,
 - (h) interference, and
 - (i) perceived isolation.

Self Concealment vs Non-Disclosure

- Suicide risk is commonly assessed by way of suicide ideation (i.e., thoughts, intentions, plans). Much research has examined past behaviours and risk and protective factors.
- Larson and Chastain (1990) defined self-concealment as “the predisposition to actively conceal from others personal information that one perceives as distressing or negative”.
- Self-concealment is not synonymous with a lack of disclosure. The lack of disclosure involves withholding information that an individual perceives as private.
- Whilst self-concealment is the intentional act of hiding information and involves behavioural secrecy, emotional suppression, and cognitive preoccupation efforts to keep information hidden.

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- Self-concealment reflects processes of
 - (i) possessing negatively evaluated secrets,
 - (ii) hiding secrets from others, and
 - (iii) avoiding or being apprehensive about self-disclosure.
- Self-concealment can lead to decreases in well-being through secret-keeping and maladaptive emotion regulation (Larson, Chastain, Hoyt, & Ayzenberg, 2015).
- Self-concealment is a substantial factor in lowering the need for help-seeking behaviour.

Findings: What is different in this SA cohort from an Elite University

- Studies indicate important emotional and behavioural consequences of self-concealment, they do not illuminate reasons for concealing one's suicidal thoughts.
- Three primary themes were identified in the self concealment stories of students who experienced suicide ideation:
 1. Identity explorations
 2. Family of origin dynamics
 3. Social support

Identity Explorations: Attitudinal Barriers

- The qualities that matter most to emerging adults in their subjective sense of attaining adulthood are: i) accepting responsibility for oneself, and ii) making independent decisions, focus of identity issues: love, work & worldviews (Arnett, 2000).
- Suicide: human right, act of independence and autonomy and ability to make decisions.
- Low levels of mental health literacy and struggles with understanding and interpreting one's own feelings and emotions.
- University exposure leads to changes in worldview, rejection of religious values related to suicide, contesting the medicalization of suicide eg. Escapism and psychopathology.

Identity exploration (cont)

- Suicide ideation considered a normal response to psychache/emotional pain, which abates in time...resulting in stress related growth. Enduring this demonstrates strength of character.
- This phase results in an intensification of risk taking (eg. Unprotected sex, substance use) or social withdrawal and depression.
- Disclosure would lead to stigma, social isolation, stigma and embarrassment and a poor sense of self.

Family of origin dynamics

- First generation university students' narratives can help us understand the complex nature of familial support, which sometimes is a double-edged sword that can either encourage or hinder educational and personal development.
- Many parents cannot provide the type of academic involvement and support due to many factors: lack of resources, lack of knowledge about the education system, financial difficulties, expectation or faith in education as the key to breaking the familial cycle of poverty, low levels of mental health literacy and emotional autonomy from parents.



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- Stigma associated with mental health was apparent in a cultural ideology that devalues mental health and a in widely held belief that mental health symptoms are a result of weakness or the lack of fortitude to “push through” the distress.
- Cultural stigma was highlighted as contributing to psychological distress, reluctance in seeking help, social isolation, and internalization of stigma.
- Students whose familial communication norms were generally opposed to disclosure of negative events, participants indicated that their family members’ attitudes and perceptions influenced their tendency to disclose or conceal their distress, as learned from the general culture and implicit communication styles of sharing in the family.
- Fear of rejection, disclosure carries the risk of being ostracized and misjudged, and considered as bewitched or mentally unstable and constructed as a sign of potential that cannot be realized.
- Concealment, together with the constant performative work of projecting a false image, is the way to regain the strength and self-confidence lost by the distress experienced.

Lack of Social support: Avoidance of informal sources of help

- Mental health problems are an embarrassing weakness inconsistent with being a university student.
- Inability to disclose linked to privacy, shyness, lack of trust, fear of burdening others.
- Suicide is difficult to talk about.
- Lack of available confidants, social loneliness, absence of intimate relationships or close attachments.

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- Use of the internet mainly satisfies people's need for emotional catharsis, social communication and entertainment.
- Psychological needs met through internet gratification refers to the satisfaction of specific psychological needs of individuals through the internet.

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- Fragile sense of belonging to the institution.
- Cancel Culture has become central to the discourse of the youth in 21st Century society as part of counterculture, steeped in the rhetoric of #FeesMustFall, where young people strategically plan the fall of their peers. The idea is that if you do something that others deem problematic you will be publically shamed on social media platforms.
- Cancel culture alienates the recipients to the point of breakdown and sometimes suicide.

Thank you for you attention





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