

THE EXPLANATIONS AND TREATMENT OF MENTAL ILLNESS BY
TRADITIONAL HEALERS IN THULAMELA MUNICIPALITY, LIMPOPO
PROVINCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

By

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ABSTRACT

Mental illness is a serious illness that can affect everyone. Mental illnesses are defined as behaviours or thoughts that are unusual in a given society and these behaviours are maladaptive. Other researchers define mental illness as psychological dysfunction associated with distress or impairment in functioning that is not culturally expected. In traditional healing, the treatment of mental illness is done by traditional healers. Studies show that a number of people in South Africa consult traditional healers before they go for western treatment.

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the traditional healers' perceptions of mental illness in Thulamela Municipality. The objectives of this study were to explore the traditional healers' view of mental illnesses; identify the symptoms of mental illness which are traditionally treated; describe traditional healers' explanations of the causes of mental illness; describe the diagnostic and treatment methods used by traditional healers when dealing with mental illness; and identify and describe the prevention methods of mental illness used by traditional healers.

A qualitative approach was used to conduct the study. One of the reasons for conducting a qualitative study is because the study was exploratory, meaning that not much has been written about the topic or population being studied. I, therefore, sought information and built a picture based on participants' ideas. The study was conducted at three villages, namely, Tshisaulu village, Ngovhela village and Sokotenda village. These three villages are within the Thulamela Municipality which is under the Vhembe District in Limpopo Province. The population in this research comprise of traditional healers who are located in Thulamela Municipality.

The study was explorative and descriptive in nature. The explorative design allowed an in-depth study of the phenomena and helped me to determine priorities for future research. I explored traditional healers' perceptions of

mental illness, without wanting to know what caused those traditional healers' perceptions. The descriptive design helped me to get in-depth information about the topic being studied. It gave me an opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews with the participants.

Purposive sampling was used to select six traditional healers, made up of three female and three male traditional healers. The researcher used an interview guide, which indicated the kinds of topics to be covered in the interview. I had a list or a series of questions that she asked during the interview. Although I was using an interview guide, additional questions were used to explore the research question and objectives. This list of questions helped me to remember the important questions that I wanted to cover. The interview guide consisted of two sections. The first section included the participants' demographic information, such as gender, age, educational level and number of years in practice. The second section contained questions that sought to find out traditional healers' views of mental illness, the causes of mental illness, diagnosis of mental illness, treatment and prevention of mental illness.

I used semi-structured interviews. I posed major questions in the same way to all participants, but also probed for more information being guided by the participants' responses. The questions were open-ended; this allowed the participants to discuss the issues more freely than in closed-ended questions.

All interviews were audio taped. The interviews were conducted in Tshivenda, transcribed and translated into English. Face to face interviews were used to collect data. Face to face interviews also enabled me to observe the behaviour of the participants. In-depth interviews allow me to gain insight into people's experiences and it also enables the participants to speak freely.

To analyse collected data, I used thematic content analysis. The following ethical considerations were followed: informed consent, privacy of individual/anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and no harm to the participants

The findings of this study showed that mental illnesses are behaviors that are unusual to a given society. Traditional healers showed that people who are mentally ill usually suffer for the rest of their lives. The study revealed the following symptoms of mental illness: running away from home without a reason, complete non-communication, taking off clothes without a reason, seeing things that other people are not seeing, talking alone and hearing voices, and chasing and beating up people.

Dream analysis and bone throwing was revealed as the diagnosis methods used by traditional healers. The findings also showed that the causes of mental illness includes: disturbances in the person's blood flow and blockage of oxygen, conflict and disturbed social relationships, witchcraft as a cause of mental illness, ancestors as the cause of mental illness, Pollution and Auto mobiles.

Traditional healers indicated that there are different types of treatment which are used to treat mental illness. This depends on the cause of that mental illness. Some of the treatment used includes: herbal remedies, steaming, and vaccinations. The prevention of mental illness is done by performing various rituals.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made: Since traditional healing is an alternative health care provider, traditional healers must register with Traditional Healers' Associations. This will help them because they will be recognised as health providers. The Department of Health and Social Development must support mental illness awareness campaign programmes and research on the treatment of mental illness.

To conclude, mental illness is a serious problem in South Africa. Although Western trained doctors are minimising the symptoms of mental illness on people who are mentally ill, the number of people who are mentally ill is increasing. This is why it became important to know about other alternatives that can be used to treat mental illness. It was found that 45% of black patients that attended a community mental health clinic had consulted a traditional healer for their problems. This shows that traditional healing is important in South Africa.